Moral Encroachment as Interest-Dependent Contextualism

Abstract: In recent years, a growing number of authors have endorsed moral encroachment—the view that epistemic status depends partially on moral factors. The theoretical framework, however, after scrutiny is underwhelming. This paper endorses a novel theoretical framework for moral encroachment. I argue that interest-dependent contextualism—the view that interest holders can shift the epistemic context—offers a framework by which to understand moral encroachment. After first formulating interest-dependent contextualism. I then contrast it with a competing position: subject-sensitive invariantism. After analyzing novel pairs of cases, I argue that my view makes better sense of these cases. I then demonstrate how interest-dependent contextualism allows for framework for moral encroachment: any morally impermissible interest-undermining—occurring in virtue of belief—is harder to justify epistemically because those interests shift the epistemic context such that it is more difficult to achieve justification. I finally answer several objections to the account of moral encroachment.

1. Introduction

The literature on moral encroachment has, for the most part, been theoretically underwhelming. In response, this chapter will build novel theoretical machinery for conceptualizing the phenomenon of moral encroachment. Following John Greco (2008), I apply interest-dependent contextualism to explain moral encroachment. According to this view, the interests of others can generate a high stakes context in which epistemic standards are more demanding. When a belief undermines the interests of a stakeholder, that belief may be harder to justify. When the stakes are high according to this account, one must answer increasingly stringent objections that the stakeholder would raise. Since morality often tracks interest undermining, interest-dependent contextualism generates a novel account of moral encroachment. Unlike other positions in the literature, I construe interest-dependent contextualism as a thesis about justification. When the epistemic context will affect another’s interests, justification is more difficult to achieve.

I, first, formulate interest-dependent contextualism. After an initial formulation, I make the account more precise by entertaining several counterexamples. I then turn to consideration of a rival account: subject-sensitive invariantism. I then motivate interest-dependent contextualism by contrasting it with subject-sensitive invariantism. I argue that subject-sensitive invariantism runs into several problems. I show that my contextualist view is consistent with the *subject-sensitivity* of subject-sensitive invariantism by arguing that the subject’s stakes can create a context in which (1) it is harder for the subject to know p qua attributor of their own knowledge and (2) third-person attributors are in a context where it is harder to make true knowledge ascriptions, i.e., the stakes of the subject affect attributor context. In the fourth section, I show how interest-dependent contextualism generates a novel account of moral encroachment. This account has more plausible theoretical foundations than popular views in the literature, e.g., views focused on doxastic wronging as the central motivation for encroachment. This position also reconciles the tension between camps of moral encroachers: “belief itself” encroachers and “downstream” encroachers. I show how my position makes use of both downstream and belief itself considerations—namely beliefs can undermine our interests, both at the belief itself and through the actions and dispositions that follow from belief. In the last section, I respond to several objections to interest-dependent contextualism.

1. Justification’s Dependency on Stakes and Attributor Context

This project is addresses epistemic justification—specifically, whether justification rides on practical circumstances. Traditionally, authors have argued shown that justification is purely an epistemological concept.[[1]](#footnote-1) Justification depends on either an agent’s ability to reconstruct her evidence or on some feature of the agent’s belief formation processes, etc. Regardless of whether justification depends on internal or external features of an agent’s circumstances, these authors agree that justification is determined by one’s available evidence. In this project, I dissent to this general account of justification.

Why focus on epistemic justification in this project? Epistemically justified beliefs, I think, are sufficient for action.[[2]](#footnote-2) If I am epistemically justified in believing that the grocery store is open until 9:00 PM, then I ought to act consistently with that belief, e.g., I am justified in arriving at 8:00 PM. Given this feature of justification, namely the intimate connection between epistemic justification and action, I think that justification importantly depends on an agent’s practical circumstances. Whether the stakes are high for the agent (or, as I will argue in this project, for other stake holders as well), partially determines whether an agent is justified epistemically.

Subject-sensitive invariantism is the view that the agent’s practical stakes matter for justification, but knowledge or justification claims do not vary across speaker contexts. Variations of this view state that justification or knowledge are gained or lost in virtue of the practical stakes for the agent. And I agree. However, I argue that subject-sensitive invariantism is misguided because it rejects the view that knowledge-attributions (or justification-attributions) vary across speaker contexts. In response, I offer a *contextualist* account of how interests and stakes undermine justification.

Consider the following distinction from Derek Parfit (2011) between fact-relative sense of ought and evidence-relative sense of ought. His example is saving yourself from a poisonous snake. Suppose that you falsely believe that you must run away from a snake to save yourself, but in fact, the only way to save yourself is by staying still. Given your belief, it would be irrational for you to run away. But given the fact that staying still will save you, you ought to stay still in the fact-relative sense. In this case you are evidence-relative justified in running away, while also being fact-relative unjustified.

Borrowing from Parfit’s distinction, I show that epistemic justification has a similar distinction. We may be epistemically justified in two different ways, relative to the available evidence and relative to the facts. Once we accept this distinction, I argue that subject-sensitive invariantism is in trouble. Why? I think that stakes can affect whether justification attributions are true or false. When the stakes are high for an attributor, it can affect whether her justification attribution is true.

Consider the following scenario: after Agnes embarrassingly addressed John Hope Franklin as a wait staff member. Two club members argue about whether she was reasonable when addressing him as a wait staff member, i.e., whether she was justified. Suppose that one of the club members knows that Agnes addressed Franklin because he was black and the other falsely believes that Agnes addressed Franklin because he was dressed similarly to a wait staff member. I think that—when the former club member attributes justification to Agnes—she says something false, and—when the latter club member attributes justification to Agnes—she says something true. This is because they each believe something differently about the stakes of the situation. The low-stakes attributor is evidence-relative justified in believing that Agnes was justified in her assessment, while the high-stakes attributor is also justified in her claim that Agnes was justified. This is because the latter attributor has more evidence about the stakes available.

The problem for subject-sensitive invariantism is that the truth of their justification attributions would have to be the same. However, I think that relative to their available evidence, one speaker gets it right while the other does not—that is, one speaker says something true, while the other does not, and subject-sensitive invariantism misses this.

1. Interest-Dependent Contextualism Formulated

In this section, I motivate a certain form of contextualism. Contextualism, generally, is view that

knowledge attributions are indexicals, or true in some contexts and false in others. This chapter

argues that interests affect epistemic context. When beliefs undermine others’ (or our own) interests,

the epistemic context is changed such that those beliefs are harder to justify. I call this position

interest-dependent contextualism. Consider an initial formulation of interest-dependent

contextualism:

*First Stab Interest-Dependent Contextualism*: The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sensitive to the interests and purposes of the subject and others who have a stake in the subject’s belief, as a matter of the attributor context.

First, following David Annis (1978), interest-dependent contextualism is a thesis about justification.[[3]](#footnote-3) The core idea here is that the believer’s interests *and* the interests of other people, insofar as they have a stake in the belief, affect the context of the justification-attributor—in short, stakes matter for justification. If correct, this position (1) makes it harder to hold a justified belief for the believer in a high stakes situation and (2) makes it more difficult for attributors to truly claim that S’s belief, p, is justified. I claim that the believer, as a justification-attributor, will have a harder time holding a justified belief in a context that is either high stakes for herself or another person. Other people’s interests, in short, affect the context of the justification attributor. I will also claim later that interest-dependent contextualism can maintain the “subject sensitivity” of subject-sensitive invariantism.

The account of interests I have in mind is broad: I think that we have interests that are not necessarily connected to our well-being. We might be interested in something simply for its own sake, and not because of its relationship to our well-being. It is, for example, in my interest that my nieces and nephews flourish, even if I do not get to see their flourishing or, more radically, if I am dead. This account leaves open the possibility that some interests lie outside of our well-being. If, however, the reader rejects this broad account of interests, interest-dependent contextualism is compatible with any account of interests.

I need to say something about what interests matter for interest-dependent contextualism and what feature of beliefs matter for interest-dependent contextualism. First, as I argue in chapter three, some beliefs, in and of themselves, undermine our interests. For instance, my reputation is partially constituted by other people’s beliefs. Insofar as I have an interest in my reputation, I have an interest in at least some of your beliefs about me. Thus, when you form a belief that undermines my reputation, you have undermined my interests directly with your belief, and, according to interest-dependent contextualism, that belief will be harder to justify. However, we primarily have interests in other people’s beliefs insofar as they lead to actions that will undermine our interests. In either case—if the belief itself undermines my interests or the actions that follow from it—we have a context-shifting consideration.

This initial formulation of interest-dependent contextualism, however, is too strong. According to this formulation, any interest will shift the epistemic context. Consider several counterexamples that press on this feature of the account. Suppose that the CEO of Pepsi has a vested interest in my beliefs about Pepsi. Would my belief *I prefer Coco-Cola to Pepsi* be harder to justify? After all, there is an interest at stake here, though the stakes are not quite as high. It seems odd to think that corporate interests should affect our justification. Or suppose that some racist person or a group of racist people have a stake in my beliefs. They want me to be a racist too. Do the racist’s interests create a context in which my own anti-racist beliefs are harder to justify epistemically? (After all, it is in their interest that I conform to their racist agenda!) Such implications are bugs in the account so far, so I need a more precise account of what interests and purposes are relevant for interest-dependent contextualism.

To account for this, consider a second formulation of interest-dependent contextualism.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Second Stab Interest-Dependent Contextualism*:[[5]](#footnote-5) The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sensitive to the interests and purposes, where the strength of the interests and the sum of all interests in the environment determines the degree to which the epistemic context shifts.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Consider a few words about *Second Stab*. First, all interests do matter for setting the stakes about what one ought to believe. According to this formulation, the racists’ interests in my belief are factored in, along with all the potential victims of that racist belief. We might reasonably think, however, that the sum of all the relevant interests bend the context away from racists’ interests and toward all the potential victims. Secondly, epistemic context can shift in degrees, according to this formulation. So, with regards to the CEO above, the context may only slightly shift in virtue of her interest in whether you prefer Pepsi over Coke. Given these slight variations on the epistemic context, I think we can ignore those marginal interests. (But suppose that the CEO *really* wants me to believe that Pepsi is better than Coca-Cola. Groveling before me and through his tears, he begs me to reconsider. At this point, I think I ought to rethink my soda preferences, even if I ultimately do not change them.) Thus, I think the conditions on interest above at least avoid some subset of counterexamples, although this suggestion is tentative and demands more thought and precision.[[7]](#footnote-7) The above formulation, I think, helps sidesteps the above cases.[[8]](#footnote-8)

But this formulation is still in need of further development because it has problematic implications. Consider two implications of this formulation of interest-dependent contextualism. Interest-dependent contextualism implies that (1) very remote stakeholders can shift epistemic context for a believer or a third-person attributor and that (2) the epistemic context is shifted so long as some one believes that there are stake holders. But these implications are subject to vicious counterexamples, as Stephen Grimm (2015) notes with the *Whose Stakes? Problem*. According to Grimm, the *Whose Stakes? Problem* undermines pragmatic encroachment because there is no certain way to determine which stakes matter for pragmatic encroachment. Following Grimm (2015), consider a counterexample to (1):

*Remote Interest-Holder:* After Angie completes her PhD, her hometown’s local newspaper runs a story on her success. The story mentions several of her peer reviewed publications. Given the state of the job market in Angie’s field, she must move far from his hometown to get an academic job. Little does she know that a childhood acquaintance, Johnny, develops an obsession with her work and in fact everything that Angie believes. Johnny downloads all of Angie’s publications and follows her closely on social media. Johnny will adjust any belief of his based on what Angie thinks, no matter how trivial.

Given that Johnny has an interest in all of Angie’s beliefs, my position suggests that Angie is in a higher-stakes context. And this means that her beliefs will be more difficult to justify. But this seems like a problem. Why think that epistemic status hangs on features that are almost impossible for an epistemic agent to understand? They shouldn’t.[[9]](#footnote-9)

[[10]](#footnote-10)

Consider another counterexample:

*Epistemic Big Guy*: Arjun believes himself to be *very* important. (His psychologist has used the word “narcissist” before, but this cannot be right according to Arjun.) In addition to believing that he is the best-looking person around, he thinks that everyone else thinks he’s the best-looking person around too. Arjun soon considers all the things he believes, “People must care about what I think too.” He comes to believe that everyone else genuinely cares about his beliefs, no matter how trivial. Thus, when thinking though anything at all, Arjun thinks about all the people with a stake in his belief and what they will think.

This case reveals a problem with interest-dependent contextualism. The above formulation suggests that Arjun is in a high-stakes epistemic context and, therefore, his beliefs will be harder to justify. Because he merely believes himself to be in a high-stakes context, he is in one. (Note that if Arjun were correct about everyone else’s stakes in his belief, then the epistemic context would plausibly shift.) But this is counterintuitive; whether we are in a high-stakes situation should not be a matter of our own opinion. Consequently, interest-dependent contextualism needs some accuracy condition to avoid this counterexample.[[11]](#footnote-11) Based on the previous counterexamples, here is a new formulation of interest-dependent contextualism:[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Interest-Dependent Contextualism*: The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sensitive to the interests and purposes, where the strength of the interests and the sum of all interests in the environment determines the degree to which the epistemic context shifts and the attributor is aware of actual interests or the subject *should* have known of the actual stakes at play.[[13]](#footnote-13)

According to interest-dependent contextualism, epistemic justification not only partially rides on whether someone has a vested interest in your belief but also in whether you are aware of those interest.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, by appealing the notion of *should have known* of the interests at play, I preclude blameworthy negligence from protecting ill-willed epistemic agent’s justification. This means that there will be some cases in which an epistemic agent finds herself in a high stakes epistemic context without knowing about all of the interests. But, given that she should have known about such interests, the possible world where she knows about other people’s actual interests is not remote.

Thus, when you know (or can be reasonably expected to know) that someone has an interest in what you believe, then the epistemic context shifts such that those belief are harder to justify to a third-party justification attributor. (In the next chapter, we will see precisely how this works.) For now, let’s make a distinction between different kinds of relevant interests. First, other people might have an interest in me *getting things right with my belief* and/or, secondly, an interest in *agreeing with them on an issue*. I think both interests will affect epistemic status, but in slightly different ways. First, if someone has an interest in me *getting things right*, that will, I think, raise the evidential threshold for both p and not-p. Suppose that I am a source of testimonial evidence for a group—they care about me getting things right. If interest-dependent contextualism is correct, then the evidential threshold raises for both p and not-p. However, if someone has an interest in me *agreeing with them on an issue*, then that will raise the evidential threshold for either p or not-p, whichever position that this person disagrees with.[[15]](#footnote-15) I think that interest-dependent contextualism, for better or for worse, will imply that either of these interests generate a high stakes epistemic context. For instance, in the race-related cases above, the relevant interest seems to be in *agreeing on an issue*, where the *Remote Interest-Holder* seems to be an interest in the truth. This is a helpful distinction; nevertheless, I find that both interests increase, and potentially decrease, the standard for justification.

In the next section, I contrast subject-sensitive invariantism with interest-dependent contextualism to claim that interest-dependent contextualism better captures some of our intuitions about cases.

1. Interest-Dependent Contextualism and Subject-Sensitive Invariantism

I now argue that we should favor interest-dependent contextualism over subject-sensitive invariantism. Subject-sensitive invariantism is the conjunction of two positions: the view that knowledge is contingent on the purposes and interests of the subject plus the view that knowledge attributions are true across contexts. This section offers two lines of critique against subject-sensitive invariantism. I, first, argue that subject-sensitive invariantism cannot make sense of cases where other people’s interests are at stake. According to this position, the focal point is the interest of the subject—all other interests set aside. I then show that interest-dependent contextualism can both show that one’s own interests and the interests of other can shift epistemic context. The second line of critique points to cases where knowledge attributors disagree about the epistemic status of the subject (because one is unaware of the stakes) but are nevertheless each correct about the subject’s epistemic status. What changes the context is knowledge of the stakes for the subject or stakes relative to his or her environment. But first, a word on subject-sensitive invariantism.

Subject-sensitive invariantism is the view that epistemic standards raise with the practical stakes *for the believer*. That is, when I am in a high-stakes situation, i.e., my own interests are on the line, it is more difficult for me to have a justified belief that p. It is also the view the knowledge ascriptions are true across all contexts, i.e., the denial of contextualism. Consider Hawthorne (2004):

For suppose instead that the kinds of factors that the contextualist adverts to as making for ascriber-dependence - attention, interests, stakes, and so on - had bearing on the truth of knowledge claims only in so far as they were the attention, interests, stakes, and so on of the subject. Then the relevance of attention, interests, and stakes to the truth of knowledge ascriptions would not, in itself, force the thesis of semantic context- dependence.

Here is the picture. Restricting ourselves to extensional matters, the verb ‘know’ picks out the same ordered triples of subject, time, and proposition in the mouths of any ascriber. However, whether a particular subject-time-proposition triple is included in the extension of ‘know’ depends not merely upon the kinds of factor traditionally averted to in accounts of knowledge - whether the subject believes the proposition, whether the proposition is true, whether the subject has good evidence, whether the subject is using a reliable method, and so on - but also upon the kinds of factors that in the contextualist's hands make for ascriber-dependence. These factors will thus include (some or all of) the attention, interests, and stakes of the subject at that time. (*Knowledge and Lotteries,* 157-8)

One line of critique I pursue here is the claim that *only the subject’s stakes matter for knowledge or justification*. Before this critique, however, consider a formulation of the position:

*Subject-Sensitive Invariantism*: The truth-value of knowledge attributions does not vary across contexts of use, yet the truth-value of a knowledge attribution depends importantly on features of the attribution’s subject’s environment that are not paradigmatically epistemic features. (adapted from Fritz (2017, 643))

A subject’s interests affect positive epistemic status. Subject-sensitive invariantism, however, entails rejecting contextualism. I argue now that subject-sensitive invariantism underexplains key cases that interest-dependent contextualism gets right. These cases demonstrate when the stakes for another person ought to affect the epistemic context. If my analysis of these cases is correct, then it is intuitively plausible that epistemic status does not merely ride on the subject’s interests but also everyone else interests as well. The following trio of cases, if intuitively different, demand for a theoretical explanation. Such cases should theoretically support interest-dependent contextualism. Consider a trio of cases:

*Climate Reading*: Susan is a thoughtful, diligent graduate student, but she is no expert in climate science. She does not understand how climate modeling and the number of many variables present in a wide range of studies. So Susan turns to popular articles written by journalists instead of scientists. Such articles are more or less accurate renditions of the conclusions of various studies, but they miss the fine-grained detail and nuance of a lot of the real studies. On the basis of these popular articles, she forms the belief that there is good science to support the claim that the climate is changing and that she ought to reduce her own person emissions.

*Incarceration Reading*: Susan is also *no* sociologist, and so she reads sociological studies too. Like the articles on climate change, these sociological articles are written by non-experts, and so some of the nuance and detail gets lost in translation. After reading several articles on disproportionate incarceration rates between blacks and whites, she reads that data supports the claim that blacks are more likely to commit dangerous crimes than whites. She forms the corresponding belief.

*Dinner*: While visiting her rural hometown, Susan has dinner with several of her childhood friends, most of whom have not been to college and none to graduate school. At the dinner table with her friends, Susan shares what she has read online. She says that some new climate models show that temperatures rise more greatly in densely populated cities, something she learned from an online article. As the conversation moves, Susan also shares what she has learned about incarceration rates. “Blacks are more likely to commit dangerous crimes, you know.” She does not see, however, that an African American waiter is within earshot of their discussion.

Susan strongly seems to be justified after reading the unsophisticated article on climate change. How many articles have *you* read like the one in *Climate Reading*? Aren’t the beliefs you form in these contexts justified? This gives us reason to think that her belief in *Incarceration Reading* is justified too. But something changes in *Dinner*. We have good reason to believe that the waiter will feel wronged by Susan’s claim. I feel less confident that she is justified in her belief. To see this, imagine that the waiter confronts Susan about her belief. Wouldn’t *she* feel less confident about her belief? She needs more thorough evidence to make this statement. The best explanation here, I think, is that moral features—the waiter’s feelings about their discussion—of *Dinner* change the epistemic features of Susan’s belief.[[16]](#footnote-16) She is no longer justified, even though she is the epistemic authority in the context. The moral dimensions change the attributor context, such that we do not want to ascribe justification to her.

Consider another pair of cases:

*Grading*: In your class, you have a remarkably poor student, Mark. Mark sincerely tries to get a grip on philosophy (but Hume’s account of impressions and ideas has him stumped). His papers reveal that he has deep misunderstandings of the course material, even though he puts forth a concerted effort. After grading his second paper of the course, you conclude that Mark is a mediocre philosophy student. You, consequently, believe that he would not make a very good major and that he ought not waste his time taking more philosophy classes. Are you justified in believing this?

*Office Hours*: After receiving the grade on his second paper, Mark meets you during office hours. You learn that Mark is genuinely excited about philosophy. Though his ideas are far- fetched and opaque, he shares them liberally with you, and he asks what classes you are teaching next semester. As a hardened and emotionally distant instructor, you value honesty and do not much care about hurting anyone’s feelings. So, holding firmly your evidence of his horrendous first two papers, you say, “Mark, you’re a mediocre philosophy student and don’t bother taking any more classes with me. You’re just not cut out for a philosophy major.” Are you justified in believing this?

I think that you are justified in *Grading* but not justified in *Office Hours*. There’s something epistemic that seems to change between these two cases. One point of contrast in these pairs of cases is that you seem to lose justification when you state your belief aloud.[[17]](#footnote-17) Or we might say that you shouldn’t state aloud what you’re epistemically justified in believing—perhaps merely as a matter of courtesy. These may be the reasons why we think we are justified in the first cases but not the second cases. But I think the real difference is that there is an interest that’s violated in the latter cases but not in the former cases.

The subject-sensitive invariantist, I think, is problematically committed to a justification-attribution in all the above cases (supposing a subjective account of interests). If the subject-sensitive invariantist agrees that Susan knows—and is justified in believing—that Blacks are more likely to commit crimes in *Incarceration Reading*, then it seems like she will have to say that Susan knows in *Dinner* as well. And if the subject-sensitive invariantist thinks that you are justified in believing that Mark is a mediocre student in *Grading*, then I think she must also claim you are justified in *Office Hours*. This is because the stakes for you and Susan remain the same between the pairs of cases.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, interest-dependent contextualism need not accept this conclusion: Susan may know in the first context, but not in the second context. But how can contextualism account for the discrepancy between *Incarceration Reading* and *Dinner* and between *Grading* and *Office Hours*?

The subject-sensitive invariantist can likely account for some of the cases I offer below. *According to objective accounts of interests, the characters in these cases will likely have interests in whether they insult other people, regardless of whether they care or not*. If there are such interests—that exist regardless of whether we believe them to or not—then the subject-sensitive invariantist has a response to these cases: look, the stakes are high for the *believers* in these cases, not just those who are believed about or those who are insulted. Given that the stakes are high *for the believers*, they lack justification *according to subject-sensitive invariantism*. And so, we lose motivation for interest-dependent contextualism.

In response, I do not find this to be a satisfactory account of these cases. Consider a slightly analogous discussion: whether consequentialism can give us a satisfactory account of the special obligations that stem from friendship. Many theorists argue that consequentialism and deontology cannot give us satisfactory accounts of duties to special relationships, e.g., friends and family members (Michael Stocker, Bernard Williams). According to some consequentialists, however, consequentialism can make sense of friendship and special relationships (see Railton, Pettit, etc.). However, a frequent line of response to these consequentialists is that their accounts of unsatisfying: they simply miss something central about friendship.

Analogously, I claim that the subject-sensitive invariantist account of how other people can affect the epistemic context is unsatisfactory. I think that other people’s interest, independently of our own, can shift the epistemic standards for justification. When we bottom out other people’s interests *as our own*, I think we miss something important about the weight of other people’s interests. We will turn to some cases to help drive this point.

Interest-dependent contextualism can explain the discrepancy here because it expands the relevant epistemic affecting contexts from one’s own interests to the interests that others have too. In *Dinner* and *Incarceration Reading*, there are different stakes at play. When isolated as an inquirer, Susan’s belief doesn’t have any immediate effect on anyone with a relevant interest, while in the latter case, the waiter has a stake in the belief.[[19]](#footnote-19) Moreover, interest-dependent contextualism states that you may not be justified in calling your student a mediocre student during office hours. Mark’s interests pose new considerations: you are in a context in which it is more difficult to have a justified belief. And momentarily I explain how it is more difficult to hold a justified belief. But first consider a pair of cases to illustrate how stakes affect third-party knowledge ascriptions:

*Bank 1*: Your coworker, Charles, is going out of town for the weekend, so he leaves work early Friday—pay day—to catch a bus. Before leaving, he asks you to pick up his paycheck from HR and take it over to the bank for him. He does not have time to explain himself and leaves quickly after talking to you. Upon arriving at the bank, it is busy. Since just weeks before you had visited the bank on Saturday, you form the belief that the bank is open on Saturday and go home. Suppose that Tony, another coworker, is at the bank and watches you leave. Tony is also not certain about the bank’s hours on Saturday. Suppose that Tony forms a belief about you—*you must know that the bank will be open on Saturday*. Is Tony’s belief true?

*Bank 2*: Your coworker, Charles, is going out of town for the weekend, so he leaves work early Friday—pay day—to catch a bus. Before leaving, he asks you to pick up his paycheck from HR and take it over to the bank for him. He does not have time to explain himself and leaves quickly after talking to you. Upon arriving at the bank, it is busy. Since just weeks before you had visited the bank on Saturday, you form the belief that the bank is open on Saturday and go home. Unbeknownst to you, however, Charles is at risk of defaulting on a mortgage and if the money is not in the bank by Monday morning, Charles *will* default. Suppose that Tony, another coworker, is at the bank and watches you leave. He, however, knows about Charles’s situation and that he is also not certain about the bank’s hours. Suppose that Tony forms a belief about you—*you must know that the bank will be open on Saturday*. Is Tony’s belief true?

Tony ascribes a knowledge claim, so we must ask whether his belief—that *you* know that the bank is open on Saturday—is true and that he knows. I find it intuitive that Tony’s belief is true in *Bank 1*, but not in *Bank 2*. Why? Consider Fantl and McGrath’s Knowledge-Action Link principle: “If you know that p, then p is warranted enough to justify you in X-ing for any X” (2009, 66).[[20]](#footnote-20) In *Bank 1*, you are in a position to act on your belief; however, in *Bank 2*, I do not think that you would be in a position to act on your belief, even though it is not directly in your own interest. This feature of your belief—whether you should act on it—is what affects the context *for Tony’s knowledge ascription*. DeRose (2009) notes that third person attributors must adopt the epistemic standards of the people they believe about. Tony, in *Bank 2*, must adopt your own high standards for justification. And the standards are higher for you because of Charles’s stake in your belief. Charles’s interests, therefore, can affect the truth of Tony’s knowledge attribution. Thus, it strongly seems to me that Tony’s ascription is false in *Bank 2* and true in *Bank 1*.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Interest-dependent contextualism can fit this intuition. According to interest-dependent contextualism, Charles has an interest in your belief about the bank hours, whether you are aware of the stakes for him or not. Charles’s interest generates a problematic epistemic context for you and for Tony: given the high-stakes for him, third-person attributors are in a more demanding epistemic context. More specifically, you must answer your coworker’s increasingly far-fetched objections, since, according to interest-dependent contextualism, the issue-context includes his demanding objections.[[22]](#footnote-22) In Tony’s context, since he knows the relevant stakes, the epistemic standards are different.

My analysis of these cases—that Tony is right in *Bank 1* but wrong in *Bank 2*—is notably different from subject-sensitive invariantism. According to subject-sensitive invariantism, the epistemic strength needed for knowledge goes up, only when *your own* circumstances vary. However, since the relevant interest at stake is not your own but another person, subject-sensitive invariantism is committed to saying you know in both cases. It, consequently, seems like Tony’s ascription is true in both *Bank 1* and *Bank 2*.

Now, I want to introduce a second line of critique against subject-sensitive invariantism. I think that there are cases where two justification attributors—from two different conversational contexts—claiming two contradictory justification claims may, nevertheless, both be correct.

Consider the following scenario: after Agnes embarrassingly addressed John Hope Franklin as a wait staff member. Two club members argue about whether she was reasonable when addressing him as a wait staff member, i.e., whether she was justified. Suppose that one of the club members knows that Agnes addressed Franklin because he was black. The other falsely believes that Agnes addressed Franklin because he was dressed similarly to a wait staff member. They both have a sense of the base rate data that Agnes had available to her at the time. I think that—when the former club member attributes justification to Agnes—she says something true, and—when the latter club member attributes justification to Agnes—she also says something true. With knowledge of the base rate data available, but not the stakes, I think the former attributor says something true: Agnes was indeed justified in addressing John Hope Franklin as a staff member. However, the latter attributor is also correct to claim that Agnes is not justified. This is because this attributor knows about the stakes for Agnes and for John Hope Franklin. She too may have stakes in the case herself.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This is because they each believe something differently about the stakes of the situation. The low-stakes attributor is evidence-relative justified in believing that Agnes was justified in her assessment. The high-stakes attributor is correct too. Given the relevant stakes at play in the case, it is true that Agnes is unjustified in her belief that Franklin is a staff member. When it comes to attributing justification, knowledge of the relevant stakes at play is crucial for determining whether an attribution is true of false. This is because the latter attributor has more evidence about the stakes available.

If this analysis—each speaker’s sentence is true about Agnes—is correct, then subject-sensitive invariantism has a problem, namely it cannot account for both speakers’ correctness with their mutually exclusive sentence.

In the next section, I argue that interest-dependent contextualism renders the theoretical framework for an account of moral encroachment. Insofar as interest-undermining is a relevant factor for morality, epistemic justification rides on moral factors. Though this account looks a little different from prominent views in the literature, ultimately it is (1) more modest and therefore (2) more plausible. I then highlight several places in the literature where interest-dependent contextualism makes novel contributions.

1. Interest-Dependent Contextualism as Moral Encroachment[[24]](#footnote-24)

Interest-dependent contextualism, finally, gives us an account of moral encroachment.[[25]](#footnote-25) According to moral encroachment, moral stakes can affect epistemic status—e.g., by raising the threshold of evidence required for positive epistemic status. My explanation and justification of interest-dependent contextualism gives us a novel way to capture what encroachers want out of moral encroachment. In the next chapter, I argue that people with morally significant interests at stake can pose objections. This is where morality can fit into interest-dependent contextualism. We have seen that subjects and attributors must answer objections in high stakes situations in order to achieve justified belief—everything the encroacher wants![[26]](#footnote-26)

Interest undermining is a relevant fact for morality. When I negligently back over your mailbox with my car, I undermine your interests and, in virtue of this, wrong you. This is not to say that all interest undermining is morally wrong. While I’m at work, a manager might tell me to clean the underside of the grill, which undermines my interest in taking a short break. But this does not seem clearly wrong. According to my construal of interest-dependent contextualism, context shifting occurs for any interest undermining, not necessarily exclusive to morally relevant interest undermining. According to my account of interest-dependent contextualism, a broader set of considerations than morality will affect epistemic status. However, I want to claim that the subset of morally relevant interests that shift the epistemic context produces an account of moral encroachment.

My account of moral encroachment says that moral factors undermine epistemic justification. When a belief undermines a morally relevant interest, the epistemic context shifts, such that justification is harder to achieve. Specifically, the sentence *S is justified believing that p* is more likely to be false in the attributor context. For the sentence to be true, the subject must be able to address *potential* objections from those stakeholders whose interests are undermined. Insofar as we think that justification is a requirement for knowledge, this account of moral encroachment is also shows that moral factors affect what we know.

One theoretical strength of analyzing moral encroachment using the framework of interest-dependent contextualism is that it does not depend on the plausibility of doxastic wronging.[[27]](#footnote-27) Doxastic wronging is the thesis that beliefs can wrong others merely in virtue of being held. Though I give an account of doxastic wronging in chapter 3, I merely note that interest-dependent contextualism can generate an account of moral encroachment without conceptually depending on this controversial view. A belief may undermine another’s interests without wronging someone in and of itself, e.g., interest-dependent contextualism is compatible with claiming that the actions that follow from a risky belief is what matters for a context shift. This strikes me as a theoretical strength of the view over accounts of moral encroachment that depend on doxastic wronging.

Now, I argue later (chapter 3) that some beliefs undermine our interest, simply in virtue of being held by another person, e.g., our interest in a good reputation is undermined, in part, by what others believe about us. This feature of my account, I argue, reconciles a debate in the moral encroachment literature, i.e., whether beliefs themselves motivate encroachment or whether actions and dispositions that follow from the beliefs motivate encroachment. Moral encroachment as interest-dependent contextualism is most like Sarah Moss’s (2018) account of moral encroachment. According to Moss, the morally relevant feature of belief is whether a belief risks a wrong action. For Moss, belief do not wrong in themselves, rather it is the consequences that follow from acting on some beliefs. However, as will be discussed in chapter three, other people have interests—no matter how weak—in our beliefs *themselves*. Other people have interests in reputation, stable relationships, and the well-being of our social groups. Even though most interest undermining occurs downstream of belief, there’s still space to say that beliefs themselves can undermine interest, and therefore, some beliefs—even though we won’t likely act on them—will change the epistemic context.

What I want to claim here is that moral encroachment as interest-dependent contextualism offers a synthesis between two families of moral encroachment, i.e., the “downstream” set of positions and the “belief itself” set of positions. Since interest undermining can occur both at a belief itself *and* in virtue of the actions that follow from a belief, interest-dependent contextualism can make use of both kinds of moral considerations. Thus, these two families of views do not necessarily have to be at odds with one another.[[28]](#footnote-28) The idea here is that we often have interests in other people’s beliefs *themselves*. Even though it is the undermined interest that shifts the epistemic context—a downstream consideration—it is that belief itself—rather than the risk of acting on that belief—that shifts the context. This account of the affect that beliefs have on interests, I think, should satisfy the “belief itself” theorist. [[29]](#footnote-29)

It is, moreover, worthwhile to note that moral encroachment as interest dependent contextualism handles most motivating cases for moral encroachment.[[30]](#footnote-30) Let us examine several of these cases. Consider, for instance, the *Social Club* case:

*Social Club*: Historian John Hope Franklin hosts a party at his social club, The Cosmos Club. As Franklin reports, “It was during our stroll through the club that a white woman called out to me, presented me with her coat check, and ordered me to bring her coat. I patiently told her that if she would present her coat to a uniformed attendant, ‘and all of the club attendants were in uniform,’ perhaps she could get her coat”. Almost every attendant is black, and few club members are black. This demographic distribution almost certainly led to the woman’s false belief that Franklin is a staff member.[[31]](#footnote-31) (Gardiner, forthcoming, originally from Gendler (2011))

In this case, the woman’s belief strongly seems to undermine Franklin’s interests. If he has some interest—either in not being mistaken for a server on racist evidence or being seen as the historian he is or even a general interest in feeling respected during social interactions—then the woman finds herself in a high-stakes epistemic context. Given that there’s an interest at play in this case, it seems like, according to interest-dependent contextualism, the woman’s belief will be more difficult to justify. However, recall that being aware of an interest is key to my view. So given that she did not know that Franklin had an interest in her belief, perhaps she was justified in her belief. I think this is a case where she *should have* *been* aware of an exception to the local based rate. That is, she should have been aware of the interests at play in this environment.

Similarly, interest-dependent contextualism prevents justification from occurring in the *Rational Racist* and *Racist Hermit* cases. Consider, first, the *Rational Racist*:

*The Supposedly Rational Racist:* Suppose you read the following comment on a social media post about race relations in America: “Although it might be ‘unpopular’ or ‘politically incorrect’ to say this, I’m tired of constantly being called a racist whenever I believe of a black diner in my section that they will tip worse than the white diners in my section.” The user posting the comments, Spencer, argues that the facts don’t lie, and he helpfully reproduces those facts. For example, he links to studies that show that on average black diners tip substantially less than white diners. The facts, he insists, aren’t racist. If you were to deny his claims and were to believe otherwise, it would be *you* who is engaging in wishful thinking. It would be *you* who believes against the evidence. It would be *you*, not Spencer, who is epistemically irrational. (Adapted from Basu 2019a)

First, Spencer the server forms the belief that a black person in his section will tip less than average on the basis of statistical evidence of about how black people tip compared to white people. The diners, I assume, have an interest in not being stereotyped. [[32]](#footnote-32) When forming a negative belief based on statistical evidence, interest-dependent contextualism we must answer objections *from the individual* in this issue context. Spencer has failed to consult the possibility that the diner will tip an average amount. Unless Spencer can first address this objection from the diner—how do you know I won’t deviate from the statistical evidence?—he is not yet justified in holding his belief.

Next, consider another motivating case for moral encroachment.

*Racist Hermit:* Suppose a racist hermit in the woods discovers trash containing an alumni newsletter from Sanjeev’s university, which includes Sanjeev’s photo. The hermit immediately concludes that the pictured person—Sanjeev—smells of curry. Suppose also that Sanjeev happens to have recently made curry, sin in this instance the hermit’s belief is true—Sanjeev *does* smell of curry. Has the hermit wronged Sanjeev? (Basu 2019c)

The case challenges interest-dependent contextualism because of the remote possibility that the hermit will ever meet or interact with Sanjeev. It’s not clear what interest is undermined, nor how strong such an interest will be. Interest-dependent contextualism states that the epistemic context shifts when beliefs undermine others’ interests. But Sanjeev likely has some relevant interests here—interests that, in sum, may amount to an epistemic context shift. First, Sanjeev likely has an interest in not being stereotyped (even when it won’t affect him). Stereotyping undermines our particularity and assumes that we are merely one of the group with few or no individualized features. Secondly, Sanjeev has an interest in the welfare of his social group. Stereotyping problematically undermines the members of one’s social group. Thus, Sanjeev, even if it isn’t for his own sake, should have some interest in what the hermit thinks. Now, given these two candidate interests, I think, I think Sanjeev’s interests in the hermit’s belief will, however slightly, shift the epistemic context. Consider again the objection mechanism. Given these interests, Sanjeev likely has something to say about the hermit’s racist belief formation processes, i.e., the hermit must be able to address Sanjeev’s objections in this issue context.

This section has fleshed out moral encroachment as interest-dependent contextualism. First, I showed that moral encroachment—contrary to other positions in the literature—is confined to morally impermissible interested undermining. However, we may, as I’ve argued, undermine other people’s interests merely with our beliefs. This feature of the account, furthermore, synthesizes two camps in the literature, the belief itself family and the downstream family. Finally, I discussed how interest-dependent contextualism makes sense of popular cases in the literature. Some of these cases show the limitations of moral encroachment as interest-dependent contextualism. I now move on to objections.

1. Objections

Consider several pressing objections to interest-dependent contextualism. In this section, I articulate and respond to three difficulties with interest-dependent contextualism. Such objections help clarify the position and show where interest-dependent contextualism can make contributions to the literature.

1. Obliviousness

Consider the first objection: my position makes *obliviousness* an epistemic virtue. If epistemic context is partially determined by accurate awareness of other’s interests, then so long as one is unaware of such interests, then obtaining a justified belief is more easily done. One way to obtain justified belief is to systematically ignore all stakeholders. So, obliviousness is a way to obtain more justified beliefs.

In response, recall that my construal of interest-dependent contextualism does not merely include interests that the subject knows about. It also includes interests that *she should have been aware of*. Thus, an interest that is obvious, yet overlooked, can shift the context for the knower. Moreover, even if this is a plausible implication of my view, this is a cost common amongst positions in epistemology. Consider that according to the relevant alternatives framework, obliviousness may also be an epistemic virtue, e.g., David Lewis (1996).[[33]](#footnote-33) So long as we ignore error possibilities, we maintain positive epistemic status. Consider Lewis’s view here:

What is an what is not being ignored is a feature of the particular conversational context. No matter how far-fetched a certain possibility may be, no matter how properly we might have ignored it in some other context, if in *this* context we are not in fact ignoring it but attending to it, then for us now it is a relevant alternative… If it is an uneliminated possibility in which not-P, then it will do as a counter-example to the claim that P holds in every possibility left uneliminated by S’s evidence. That is, it will do as a counter-example to the claim that S knows that P. (559)

When we examine our knowledge—entertain error possibilities—they become relevant. Thus, one implication of this view is that obliviousness is an epistemic virtue since we gain more knowledge by ignoring error possibilities.

1. Disagreement

Next, consider that interest-dependent contextualism may have some odd implications in cases of disagreement. Consider a case:

*Atheism*: Monique is an undergraduate who’s new to atheism. After taking a few philosophy classes, she comes to realize that her evidence for evidence for God’s existence is faulty at best. Monique’s parents, however, are deeply religious, and they worry that Monique’s atheism will likely land her in hell when she dies.

Is it plausible that Monique’s parents’ interest in her belief shift the epistemic context? My view likely implies that Monique will be in a high-stakes context, in which it is harder to hold a justified belief. If it is really important to her parents, then Monique will need more evidence. I don’t think that Monique *must believe* in their religion. She will simply need *more* evidence for believing that God does not exist, say an additional argument from evil or a more precise version of Gaunilo’s best-of-all-possible-islands objection.

Though this may seem curious, I think this is right, but let me note one feature of the case. Let’s suppose that Monique has an interest in her parent’s religious beliefs: she thinks that her parents are better off without their religion, in part, because she thinks they will be less ashamed of themselves. Both Monique and her parents have an interest in each other’s beliefs. Let’s call this mutual interest in mutually exclusive beliefs “evening out.” I like the term *evening out* because the epistemic stake even out across two different knowledge attributors. Monique and her parents are each in a high-stakes context in which it is harder to hold a justified belief, i.e., the epistemic burdens of interest-dependent contextualism are evenly distributed. In such a situation, both Monique and her parents need to have more evidence in order to have a justified belief.

Evening out is interesting because it is strongly conducive to openminded, engaged dialogue. If epistemic status rides on interests, then epistemic agents must hold their views more loosely when they encounter interlocutors and opposing views. As one encounters dissent, one loses justification (or weakens justification) for her own view. This helps some solve some pressing puzzles from the philosophy of disagreement literature.[[34]](#footnote-34) For instance, philosophers question how it is that reasonable, well-read people can disagree about fundamental issues. In virtue of such disagreements, some argue that we must forsake our positions (e.g., Kornblith (2010)). I think that this position is reasonable, but interest-dependent contextualism more plausibly reaches this conclusion. Since justification is stakes-sensitive and interest-dependent and since reasonable disagreement is often paired with a raise in the stakes, then epistemic justification will partly depend on whether there’s a disagreement. Thus, even though *Atheism* seems like a counterintuitive case for interest-dependent contextualism, it more plausibly reaches several conclusions from the literature on the philosophy of disagreement.

1. Million Dollar Prize

My position is open to another odd case: Suppose that Jeff makes a bet. If I believe p, then he will win a million dollars. And if I fail to believe p, then he will lose a million dollars. It strongly seems as though his interest in my belief will produce an epistemic context where it is more difficult for me to justifiably believe not-p. This, the objection goes, is implausible.

In response, note that Jeff has an interest in me *agreeing with him that p*, not an interest in *me getting it right*. I have already said that both interest matter with regard to epistemic status, and, therefore, a high stake epistemic context strongly seems to be an implication of interest-dependent contextualism. Jeff’s interest produces an epistemic context where I will need more evidence for justification.[[35]](#footnote-35) But perhaps this is not implausible. Imagine Jeff tells me of the stakes that ride on my believing p. Depending on how plausible p is, I might seek out more evidence in favor of p.

1. Against Taking an Interest in Belief

Consider another objection: one is blameworthy for taking an interest in what other’s think in the way I’m suggesting above. We often praise people for acting in spite of what others think of them, especially in unjust contexts. For instance, someone’s coming out as gay is admirable, even though one does so in a conservative context, and many will think less of them. What matters here is *not caring what other people think* or, rather, *taking no interest in others beliefs*. We, moreover, think less of those who care too much about what others think of them, perhaps for being shallow or disingenuous. From these common practices, the objection goes, we ought not take an interest in other’s beliefs.

Before responding, consider a separate, but related, objection: We ought to take an interest in other people’s actions and dispositions, not their beliefs. It does not matter, for instance, what others believe about us—whether we smell—rather, what matters is that they treat us well, e.g., with respect or in a manner that optimizes our wellbeing. Thus, what ultimately matters is *how* we treat one another and not what we think.

In response, an inordinate concern about what others think of us is shallow, and sometimes we need to act in spite of what others think about us. However, it does not follow that we ought never to take an interest in what others believe. This is because actions will follow from beliefs: violent hate crimes follow the hateful beliefs about other social groups. Taking an interest in other people’s beliefs about social groups, I think, is appropriate. (I also mentioned above that we have an interest in a good reputation, which involves an interest in others’ belief.) So, just because it’s sometimes inappropriate to take an interest in other’s beliefs, it is not always inappropriate.

1. Conclusion

This chapter argued that epistemic context—and consequently epistemic justification—is partially dependent upon the interests of those who the belief may negatively affect. When a belief undermines a subject’s interest—either the belief itself or the actions that follow from the belief—the context for the justification shifts such that it is more difficult to hold a justified belief. After entertaining several counterexamples, I showed that interest-dependent contextualism comes with some qualifications—only interests that a subject is aware of (or should be aware of) shift the epistemic context.

I then drew out an implication for the epistemology of gossip—interest-dependent contextualism helpfully distinguishes the epistemic problems with interest-undermining gossip, while leaving positive or neutral gossiping epistemically permissible. This view also helps us make sense of the philosophy of disagreement. When two parties disagree with one another—about something that they both find important—both parties will lose justification for their views.

Such an account of the relationship between epistemic justification and third-party interests, finally, generates a theoretically robust account of moral encroachment. So long as there is a deep connection between morality and interests, then morality will affect epistemic justification. I found that this account of moral encroachment—as interest-dependent contextualism—is more theoretically satisfying than other accounts in the literature, which I will show throughout the rest of this dissertation.

In the next chapter, I show exactly how interests undermine epistemic status in high stakes situations by introducing a (somewhat) novel mechanism of moral encroachment: the objection mechanism. According to the objection mechanism, justification rides on answering the reasonable objections of those who have some stake or interest in the belief. I show that this mechanism reconciles two camps in the moral encroachment literature: the “threshold raisers” and the “sphere expanders.” Objections can both raise the threshold of evidence required for justification *and* expand a sphere of relevant alternatives one must eliminate to have justification.

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1. See, for instance, Feldman and Conee (1985), BonJour and Sosa (2003), and McCain (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an argument against this view of justification and action, see Goldberg (2020). He argues that justification is not sufficient for action. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Contextualism is often construed as a thesis about knowledge, i.e., knowledge claims are indexicals that are true or false depending on the epistemic context. I have construed interest-dependent contextualism as a claim about justification for a couple of reasons. First, in the next chapter, I draw heavily on the work of David Annis (1978). Annis lays out a contextualist account of epistemic justification, where epistemic agents must address objections from real or imagined objectors to one’s belief. I also think, secondly, that justification is sufficient for action. If I am justified in believing p, then it is appropriate for me to act as if p. Given the connection between action and epistemic justification (which is upstream from knowledge), it makes sense to construe interest-dependent contextualism here because actions will undermine interests. Lastly, insofar as justification is a condition of knowledge, interest-dependent contextualism will have something to say about knowledge. In a high-stakes contexts one will have a harder time knowing because one will have a harder time holding a justified belief. A peculiarity of interest-dependent contextualism is that I have identified contextualism as a thesis about justification and not about knowledge. Keith DeRose (2009) says that for contextualism about justification “the standards for justified belief that a subject must meet in order to render true a sentence describing a belief of hers as ‘justified’ vary with context” (21). I opt for contextualism about justification for the following reason: this project is concerned with actions that follow from our belief and how they affect the interests of those who hold a stake in the belief. I think that both knowledge and justification are sufficient for acting on one’s belief. Thus, I want to target justification, since justification and knowledge, presumably, track with one another closely. If justification is context dependent, then, so long as justification is a requirement for knowledge, knowledge too is context dependent. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Sandy Goldberg for pressing me with these counterexamples. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Another question moving forward is whether I want to appeal to the actual interests affected by a belief, or the expected interests that will be affected by a belief. The difference is whether the epistemic agent knows the belief will undermine other people’s interests. For instance, we can imagine an unknown—and not soon-to-be known—interest-holder. Should their interests affect my justification? I don’t think so. In favor of the expected interest-affecting account, we can never know all the people who have a stake in our belief, so it does not seem clear that we’d ever know if we are justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I could also appeal to legitimacy. The idea here would be that only morally legitimate interest shift the epistemic context. The idea is that the only interests that can shift epistemic context are interests that are justified in themselves or not morally wrong. This would avoid the racist case, but nevertheless this move would demand I provide some account of legitimacy. Thus, the only interests that matter for justification are legitimate interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Another feature of my account that may be relevant for the CEO case is that I target actual interactions between people. Given that I won’t have any interactions with the CEO, his stake in my belief does not shift the context. We can imagine a case where the CEO, who has a small interest in my belief, does shift the context.

   *Wine*: You’ve taken a summer job as a server in the Hamptons. One requirement for this job is to have some taste for wine, all of which are local to the area. After a staff-wide wine tasting, you find out you prefer Sparking Pointe Brut to Wolffer Estate Vineyard Rose. One night at dinner, two guests—a man and a woman—ask you what your preference is for the wine on the menu. After telling them that you prefer Pointe Brut, you notice a change in the woman’s demeanor. She continues to press you about *why* you prefer the Pointe Brut to the rose. Hard pressed, you find it difficult to answer her questions. Later, the man at the table comes up to you and tells you that he is the CEO of Wolffer Estate Vineyard. His girlfriend got a kick out of figuring out why you do not like his wine. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Another alternative account that might be worth pursuing in other work goes as follows:

   The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sensitive to the interests and purposes, only if those interests and purposes (1) have a sufficient strength and (2) do not conflict with other stronger relevant interests of the subject and others who have a stake in the subject’s belief, as a matter of the attributor context.

   This account would avoid some of the issues laid out above. However, it leads a couple of problems. First, the strongest interest is going to trump all other interests, according to this formulation. If the racist mentioned above has the strongest possible interest over all the potential victims, then his interest determines the epistemic context, and that does not seem right. The other issue is answering what a *sufficiently* strong interest looks like. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. But I might also argue here that one ought to reasonably expect stake holders for many beliefs, even if the identity of these stake holders is not precisely known. For instance, there are many people who have an interest in my belief that human life matters morally and that I ought not needlessly harm others. Though I may not identify each person who has this stake, I can be reasonably expected to know that there are *some* interest holders with regard to this belief. The problem with *Remote Interest Holder*, however, is that Johnny takes a stake in *all* of Stanley’s beliefs. Thus, Stanley cannot be reasonably expected to consider unidentified stake holders for, say, his beliefs about his own pancake preferences. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. That probably won’t work for some of your initial examples – the one where a server overhears a conversation about criminality, for example. Also, you’d want to specify what the subject or attributor needs to believe for the interests to count. And finally it might be worth considering whether justified works like morally right seems to – that is, whether there is what Parfit calls ‘fact-relative’ and evidence-relative senses of ‘justified.’ (I think Charles suggested this option to you in the defense.) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. One response is that Arjun’s own interests shift the context. For him, every time he forms a belief or considers new evidence, he’s in a very high-stakes context. My position is compatible with an epistemic agent’s own high-stakes context shifting the standards for justification. Arjun may, therefore, be in a high-stakes context, even if he does not get the stake-holders correct. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Alternatively:

    *Interest-Dependent Contextualism*: The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sensitive to the interests and purposes, only if those interests and purposes (1) have a sufficient strength, (2) do not conflict with other relevant stronger interests, of the subject and others who have a stake in the subject’s belief, as a matter of the attributor context, and (3) the attributor is aware of actual interests or the subject *should* have known of the actual stakes at play. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Let’s think a little more about how justification-attributing sentences are sensitive to interests. I have merely said that some propositions, according to interest-dependent contextualism, are harder to justify epistemically. But does interest-dependent make it *easier* to have justified beliefs than it would in low-stakes contexts? Does interest-dependent contextualism merely raise the standards for justification or can it lower the standards as well? Not only is it our interest for others to withhold negative beliefs about us, it is in our interest that they believe well about us. For instance, a student may want to be seen as a good student and not as a bad student. Does the proposition *S is a good student* now become easier to justify, according to interest-dependent contextualism? Or is interest-dependent contextualism merely make it some propositions more difficult to hold justifiedly hold?

    Firstly, this question is relevant for any account of moral encroachment (Gardiner, (forthcoming); Bolinger (2020)), and the notion that some propositions are easier to believe in virtue of encroachment is mostly met with resistance. Moral encroachment accounts that center on doxastic wronging are, I think, only raise the threshold of justification, rather than lower it. I’m inclined to agree with this resistance. However, it seems to me there isn’t a clear principled way to make this move for interest-dependent contextualism. It seems like the “sensitivity” of the account can both raise and lower justification. Thus, to believe that, say, a student is a good one takes less evidence if it matters to them than it would if it did not matter to them. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Here I think there are some scenarios where an epistemic agent can be reasonably expected to take note of some interest, but nevertheless won’t or doesn’t acknowledge such interests. These are cases where the agent should have known that there was an interest before forming a belief. In such cases, this is a context-shifting consideration according to interest-dependent contextualism. For example, in the popular John Hope Franklin case, the woman who approaches Franklin because of his skin color *should have known* that it was not in his interest to form the belief that he was a staff member. Even if she does, in fact, not acknowledge this Franklin’s interests, one can reasonably expect her to have known. Perhaps the better formulation is:

    *Interest-Dependent Contextualism*: The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sometimes sensitive to the interests and purposes, where those interests and purposes (1) have a sufficient strength, (2) do not conflict with other relevant stronger interests, of the subject and others who have a stake in the subject’s belief, as a matter of the attributor context, and (3) the subject is aware actual interests *or the subject can be reasonably expected to be aware of the interest*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Many thanks to Casey Doyle for pressing me on this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Interest-dependent contextualism can make sense of the intuition here: Given that epistemic subjects should know about relevant interest-holders, justification becomes more difficult to achieve. Susan should have known about the possibility that an interest holder would have been within earshot of her conversation. The state of affairs where she knows about the interest-holder is, I think, not remote, i.e., she could easily have known about the interest-holder. Thus, the evidence she has for her belief—in virtue of the interest-holder—fails to justify her belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Consider an alternative possibility: these cases track norms on speech and not norms on belief. This concern comes up again for *Publishing High Stakes* in chapter four. According to explanation, your belief that Mark is not a good philosophy student is justified across cases. The problem is simply your utterance that he is not a good philosophy student. If this is right, then my cases fail to motivate interest-dependent contextualism. Much more needs to be said about this concern; however, consider a couple of responses. First, we might modify *Office Hours*. Rather than the explicit statement that Mark is a mediocre student, suppose that, when Mark asks what you think about becoming a major, he can tell that you do not believe in him. Your hesitancy, your shifting in your chair, your lack of eye contact, while justified bodily actions, reveal that you do not really think he’s cut out as a major. And that hurts. As another tentative route, I could argue that there is a connection between epistemic justification and what you are willing to say. This is a “speech version” of the Knowledge-Action Link principle. While interesting, I suspect that motivating such a principle will lie beyond the scope of this project. This route, in addition, is not likely promising because there are any number of considerations that might bear on whether or not you should say something aloud, e.g., courtesy. However, I might be able to argue that, even though there are such considerations on speech, they do not obtain in the above cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. We might think that the stakes *do* vary between *Incarceration Reading* and *Dinner*. After all, Susan presumably has an interest in not offending other people needlessly or, at the very least, not embarrassing herself in front of her friends. In response, we can imagine that Susan is a little racist and really has no interest in refraining from insulting the waiter. Regardless of whether she has an interest at stake, my point here is that subject-sensitive invariantism is too narrow in its scope about interests that are relevant for knowledge. My view of interest-dependent impurist contextualism better captures both the “subject-sensitivity” of subject-sensitive invarianism and also captures why the fact that you might act contrary to another’s interests raises the bar for your being justified. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. What is at stake for the waiter? There are at least two things. First, Hilde Lindemann (2016) argues that how we shape one another’s identity—which we shape by recognition and our consequent responses—has moral significance. When we recognize others on the basis of stereotypes, our responses reinforce that the individual should conform to the base rates, and therefore, the individual’s autonomy is in some way limited because of recognition and response. Susan’s belief, according to this framework, presumably undermines the waiter’s interests in autonomy. Secondly, Rima Basu (2019c), following Stephan Darwall, argues that we avoid certain epistemic attitudes when we form beliefs about other people. This problematic epistemic attitude is that we treat people as something to be studied and predicted. Basu uses the example of Sherlock Holmes. The way Holmes looks at other people is problematic. He attempts to figure out, deduce, and examine facts about people and then make predictions based on the available data; we generally do not like to be studied and then predicted, e.g., as a scientist might study a lab mouse. Stereotyping people makes us culpable of these bad epistemic practices. In this case, Susan’s sentence wrongs the waiter by treating him more like a laboratory frog than a human being, presumably undermining his interest in autonomy. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This formulation, as it stands, is quite broad. They argue that what you know is “warranted enough to justify you in believing, doing, feeling, wanting, liking, hating, or intending anything at all” (66). Fantl and McGrath account for this broadness by distinguishing two ways in which we might critique reasoning: we can evaluate the truth of the premises, or we can evaluate the inference from the premises to the conclusion. For instance, suppose you know that your car’s battery is dead. Does this justify you in concluding that “there is water under the surface of Jupiter’s moon Europa”? In this case, the truth of what you know, that your car battery is dead, is not the issue; rather, the inference is problematic. There is, according to Fantl and McGrath, no weaknesses in your epistemic position with respect to p. Fantl and McGrath, therefore, conclude that “knowing that p, as we shall say, makes p warranted enough [i.e., there is no epistemic weakness with respect to p] to justify you in believing any q” (66). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Consider an objection: *Bank 2* actually undermines Fantl and McGrath’s knowledge-action link principle, the very principle I use to establish the intuitions behind these cases. The idea there is that Tony would know the proposition, *you know that the bank is open on Saturday*, even though he would not be justified in action as though the bank were open on Saturday. [This does not seem right. I’m not actually sure what Charles’s objection was here.] [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I flesh out the details of the objection mechanism is chapter two. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. There’s a distinction I need to make here: the attributor’s stakes in the subject’s beliefs and the attributor’s knowledge of the subject’s stakes. What’s going to be relevant for our purposes, I think, is the attributor’s knowledge of the subject’s stakes. If it’s the latter, then subject-sensitive invariantism can just make sense of the attributor’s justification claim. But perhaps not without a cost. If facts about the attributor can affect whether her attribution of a subject is justified or true, then this seems like a cost for the subject-sensitive invariantist. This is because knowledge claims can vary across attributor context, and this is because the attributor’s own stakes affect whether the attributor says something that is justified about some subject’s knowledge. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Notes: connection between justification and knowledge. Moral encroachment is most often a thesis about knowledge, though there are neutral accounts, focused on “positive epistemic status.” Renee Bolinger writes: “The most common approach has been to say that while it does not affect the justification the agent’s evidence provides, it *does* change whether that degree is sufficient for justified belief in the context, and hence affects whether their belief counts as knowledge” (12). The formulation of interest-dependent contextualism I’ve offered here is about epistemic justification. I focus on justification in this project, in part, because justification is thought to be sufficient for action (cite). By focusing on justification, my formulation on justification still affects knowledge, since, according to dominant views, justification is necessary condition for knowledge. But if the reader wants a more direct connection between moral encroachment and knowledge, there is likely a plausible version of interest-dependent contextualism that focuses exclusively on knowledge instead of justification. In chapter 2 though, I argue that a necessary condition of epistemic justification is the ability to answer objections there are specific to the social context. This means that knowledge too rides on the ability to answer such objections. The number of objections and kind of objections one must answer include the stakes of the interest holders. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For arguments against moral encroachment and encroachment views, see Gerken (2019), Jackson (2019), Goldberg (2020), Osbourne (2021), Gardiner (Forthcoming-a, Forthcoming-b, draft). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I do not explain, in this section, how interest-dependent contextualism is more plausible than other accounts of moral encroachment. This section merely explains how interest-dependent contextualism can generate a plausible account of moral encroachment. In chapters three and four, I go on the offensive—I show that predominant accounts of moral encroachment are subject counterexamples and other problems. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For accounts of doxastic wronging, see Basu and Schroeder (2019), Schroeder (2018a), Basu (2019a, 2019c), Atkins (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. One avenue for further research is to explore interest-dependent contextualism’s implications for the philosophy of gossip. I think that interest-dependent contextualism will, generally, render much gossip epistemically impermissible, i.e., insofar as those gossiped about have interests in our views, their stakes change the epistemic context for justification attributors. For arguments for the permissibility of gossip, see Bertolotti and Magnani (2014), Robinson (2016), Radzik (2016), and Alfano and Robinson (2017). For arguments in favor of believing well of others, even in spite of the available evidence, see Keller (2004), Stroud (2006), Hazlett (2013), Goldberg (2019, 2020), Atkins (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For instance, *Social Club* (Gendler 2001), *Racist Hermit* (Basu 2019c), *Rational Racist* (Basu 2019a)*, Wounded by Belief* (Basu and Schroeder 2019), *Heels* (Gardiner 2020), and *Concert Goer* (Basu 2019c). One common feature of all these cases is that the characters have some stake in what another believes. Any case where there is a relevant interest is going to shift the epistemic context such that it is harder to be justified, according to interest-dependent contextualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For instance, *Social Club* (Gendler 2001), *Racist Hermit* (Basu 2019c), *Rational Racist* (Basu 2019a)*, Wounded by Belief* (Basu and Schroeder 2019), *Heels* (Gardiner 2020), and *Concert Goer* (Basu 2019c). One common feature of all these cases is that the characters have some stake in what another believes. Any case where there is a relevant interest is going to shift the epistemic context such that it is harder to be justified, according to interest-dependent contextualism. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gendler (2011) proposes *Cosmos Club* as an example of irreconcilable tension between morality and rationality. She concludes that there is such a conflict. Schroeder (2018a), Basu (2019a), Bolinger (2018), and Basu and Schroeder (2019) disagree, as each of them uses *Cosmos Club* as motivation for moral encroachment. Gardiner (2018) also discusses the alleged conflict. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. One noteworthy feature of the case is that the diner may not care about Spencer’s belief. If this is true, then interest-dependent contextualism probably won’t make it more difficult for Spencer to justify his belief. The issue-context is dependent upon the stakeholder’s attitudes and beliefs. See Basu (2019a, 2019c). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. For more about the relevant alternatives framework, also see Dretske (1970), Stine (1976), Goldman (1976), Cohen (1999), Dutant (2016), Gardiner (forthcoming-a). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For more about the philosophy of disagreement, see Kornblith (2010), Feldman and Warfield (2010), Christensen (2007, 2009), and Buchak (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In the next chapter, I’ll return to this objection. After laying out the objection mechanism for interest-dependent contextualism, I will argue that Jeff is limited to evidential or evidence-based objections to my belief that not-p. Given his interests, he gets to ask me more stringent objections, and justification requires I answer those objections. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)