Moral Encroachment as Interest-Dependent Contextualism: New Arguments in the New Ethics of Belief

1. Introduction

Does morality affect epistemic status? Or must we sometimes choose between moral goodness or epistemic rationality? Tamar Gendler (2011) thinks the latter. She argues that evidence sometimes favors racist or sexist beliefs. Local base rates often favor stereotypical or other morally problematic beliefs. If we abide by strict epistemic norms, we end up with at least some racist beliefs. Sometimes these beliefs are true—consider a sheriff who correctly makes an arrest just because he thinks that black men are more likely to commit crimes. But such beliefs—some authors argue—are immoral, even if they are sometimes accurate! It, therefore, appears that epistemology can demand immorality. Call this conflict between epistemic norms and morality Gendler’s Dilemma. There is a quickly growing literature on responding to the dilemma. This project attempts to alleviate this dilemma.

Moral encroachers deny that there is such a dilemma.[[1]](#footnote-1) According to them, morality can undermine epistemic status. Specifically, positive epistemic status—like justification, rationality, knowledge—bends to the moral considerations of a situation. Morality, according to moral encroachers, demands I do more epistemic work before I obtain positive epistemic status. In this project, I flesh out the theoretical backing of moral encroachment. To do this, I endorse a new account of moral encroachment, *interest-dependent contextualism*. According to this view, epistemic justification rides on an agent’s ability to answer objections from those who have some stake in her belief, i.e., an interest in here belief, where the interest has sufficient strength and is not outweighed by other, stronger interests or considerations.

Over the course of this project, I present five papers all connected to moral encroachment. The first chapter argues that moral encroachment is best understood within a contextualist epistemic framework. I outline interest-dependent contextualism, which offers a novel account of moral encroachment. After clarifying the position, I argue that it makes better sense of pairs of cases that subject-sensitive invariantism. I then argue that so long as one endorses interest-dependent contextualism, one also endorses moral encroachment.

In the second chapter, I question the dominant epistemic mechanisms of moral encroachment. Using the contextualist framework outlined in the first chapter, I argue that the “objection mechanism” can capture elements of the dominant mechanisms in the literature—the sphere-expanding mechanism and the threshold-raising mechanism. Here I show that the relevant objections can both raise the threshold of evidence required for positive epistemic status *and* introduce error possibilities as relevant for positive epistemic status.

Then in the third chapter, I shift my attention to doxastic wronging—the view that we wrong one another in virtue of our beliefs. I present cases to show that the dominant accounts of doxastic wronging are theoretically deficient. In response, I claim that we have an interest in what others believe about us; we have an interest in our reputation and having functional relationships, both of which require certain beliefs. According to an interest theory of rights, this generates a moral right that others can violate. In short, we have a right that others do a thorough inquiry when we form beliefs that undermine their interest in reputation or relationships, which, I believe, precludes many positive beliefs formed on insufficient evidence. Call this right the *degree of inquiry right*. A violation of the degree of inquiry right, I argue, amounts to a doxastic wronging. According to this account of doxastic wronging, belief themselves do not wrong, rather beliefs formed on insufficient evidence wrong.

I then, in chapter four, present an argument against dominant views of doxastic wronging. Such views identify diminishment as a central wrong-making feature of beliefs. In response, I substantiate meaningfulness encroachment as a novel concept. According to meaningfulness encroachment, epistemic status can depend on the effects the belief will have on the meaningfulness of our lives: such effects can diminish our sense of autonomy. Meaningfulness encroachment, however, is *prima facie* implausible as I argue. I then offer a contextualist account of meaningfulness encroachment that is more plausible than the “diminishment” view of meaningfulness encroachment. After developing this contextualist account, I draw out an implication for the philosophy of religion and respond to objections.

In the last chapter, I discuss wokeness. Supposing that readers have not found the preceding accounts of doxastic wronging and moral encroachment plausible, there is still space for a robust ethics of belief. This chapter lays out an account of wokeness that is consistent with what I call *the standard view* in epistemology, i.e., the broad demand to believe in accordance with one’s evidence. To establish this conclusion, I argue that wokeness is epistemic partiality shown to marginalized groups. Part of being epistemically partial, I argue, involves neglecting base rate data when forming beliefs about individuals and doing a more thorough investigation than one would have done with a non-marginalized person. These epistemic behaviors are motivated, I claim, by value-reflecting reasons, namely commitments to equality and social justice. Following Sanford Goldberg (2019), I argue that these behaviors are “epistemically innocuous” (2225).

1. Moral Encroachment as Interest-Dependent Contextualism

This chapter lays out and motivates a contextualist account of moral encroachment.[[2]](#footnote-2) I call this position interest-dependent contextualism. According to this view, the interests of others can generate a high stakes context in which epistemic standards are more demanding. I first argue that subject-sensitive invariantism runs into several problems that interest-dependent contextualism avoids. I show that this 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. I then motivate interest-dependent contextualism.

Consider interest-dependent contextualism:

*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.[[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. 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.[[4]](#footnote-4) 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.

This formulation of interest-dependent contextualism, however, is still in need of further clarification. Consider several counterexamples. 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, I’m in a morally high stakes situation, and interests are on the line. Or suppose that an evil doer has attached probe attached to my brain that will launch a missile when I believe that the Utah Jazz is the best team in the NBA. Do the evil doer’s interests create a context in which my belief—that the Jazz is not the best team—is harder to justify. (After all, it is in his interest!) I need a more precise account of what interests and purposes are relevant for interest-dependent contextualism. Account for this, consider a second formulation of interest-dependent contextualism.

*Interest-Dependent Contextualism*:[[5]](#footnote-5) The truth of justification-attributing sentences is sometimes sensitive to the interests and purposes, where those interests and purposes (1) have a sufficient strength and (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.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The conditions on interests here, I think, avoid the above cases. The evil doer clearly has an interest that conflicts with other people’s interests in continuing to not be blown up. Given the strength of his targets’ interests, they override his interest in doing evil. The CEO, moreover, does not likely have a strong enough interest in my belief to shift the context of my belief. (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 tentative and demands more thought and precision.[[7]](#footnote-7)

First, I argue that we should favor interest-dependent contextualism over subject-sensitive invariantism, i.e., the view that knowledge is contingent on the interests of the subject plus the denial of contextualism. The following trio of cases, if intuitively different, demand for a theoretical explanation. To see this, 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.” Little does she know 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. 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*. One point of contrast in these pairs of cases is that you seem to lose justification when you state your belief aloud.[[8]](#footnote-8) This may be one reason why we might 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. 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.[[9]](#footnote-9) 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*?

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.[[10]](#footnote-10) 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?

I find it intuitive that Tony knows in *Bank 1*, but he does not know 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). [[11]](#footnote-11) 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*.

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. 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*.

Interest-dependent contextualism, finally, gives us an account of moral encroachment. 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 section, 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 moral objections in high stakes situations in order to achieve justified belief—everything the encroacher wants!

1. Encroachment Mechanisms

In this chapter, I define a novel account of the epistemic mechanism of moral encroachment as interest-dependent contextualism. The focus here is the epistemic mechanism of moral encroachment. I first outline what I call the objection mechanism and discuss how *morally significant* interests play in epistemic justification. I then distinguish three dominant ways to understand the mechanism and how those mechanisms affect the epistemic status of some beliefs. The mechanisms are the *Threshold-Raising Mechanism* and the *Sphere-Expanding Mechanism*.[[12]](#footnote-12) This chapter then argues that the objection mechanism is superior to these mechanisms, since it can more elegantly explain how both mechanisms work in an account of moral encroachment. This discussion will further clarify how the objection mechanism works.

First, consider the objection mechanism. David Annis (1978) outlines a contextualist account of epistemic justification.[[13]](#footnote-13) According to Annis, a subject achieves a justified belief only if she can answer the objections to her position that occur in a given “issue-context.” Annis’s example is a non-medically trained person must answer less demanding objections for her belief that polio is caused by a virus than a medical student who is going up for an exam to receive her M.D. To be justified, each person must answer objections, the strength of which is determined by the “issue-context.” Annis’s account is stakes sensitive. He writes, “The importance (value or utility) attached to the outcome of accepting [proposition] h when it is false or rejecting h when it is true is a component of the issue-context” (215). Stakeholders influence the degree of epistemic demandingness that one must answer before one is justified in holding or acting on a belief. Objections become more demanding in virtue of the higher moral stakes.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Before continuing, let’s think about what I have in mind by *objections*. By “objection” I mean a reason or consideration that undermines the truth of a proposition or, simply, reasons for doubt. Objections can take many forms. Objections can pose alternate explanations that support not-p. They can also reveal that p is evidentially under-supported, e.g., “You believe geocentrism just because it seems like the sun moves? You need to look at a science book.” I also claim that objections can rule out *types* of evidence, e.g., “evidence type x is generally unreliable; given this fact, you should find different evidence for p if others are to be convinced.” Bringing up alternative explanations of the evidence or alternative error possibilities will, I think, amount to an objection too: “How do you know that “zebra” isn’t a cleverly disguised mule?”[[15]](#footnote-15) I also think that question asking will, often enough, amount to an objection, since questions reveal limitations in reasoning that we have not yet considered. Questions can function as considerations for the truth of p.[[16]](#footnote-16) I think all these considerations fall under the broad umbrella of reasons that undermine the truth of p. (I should be clear that stakes-raising does not in itself constitute an objection.)

My claim, following Annis, is that facets of morality create an issue-context. The objections of those who have an interest at stake must be answered before one has justification. We can see this by looking at interest-dependent contextualism. Annis’s view can capture both stakes-sensitivity for the subject and the attributor.

On Annis’s account, contextualism states that a subject is not justified in believing something is true, *unless she can answer her own objections*. In high-stakes situations, the subject must address more demanding objections. Specifically, the subject’s own circumstances will determine the strength and number of objections she must entertain before she is justified. Annis’s account models how stakes affect epistemic status for subjects who attribute knowledge for themselves.

Third-person attributors, moreover, will also have to address these objections. When I claim that Sam knows that the bank is open on Saturday when the stakes are high for him, I must be able to address increasingly far-fetched objections—Is Saturday a holiday? Perhaps the bank changed its hours recently? Maybe the bank is short staffed?—in order for my knowledge ascription to be justified.

According to interest-dependent contextualism, the issue-context will include those who have a stake in the subject’s belief too. For instance, if Sam goes to the bank on my behalf, he will need to address *my* far-fetched objections. If he can address my objections, then he achieves justification. We must answer the objections of those who have a relevant stake in our belief and the actions that may follow from the belief.

Morality naturally and elegantly fits into epistemic justification. Some of the objections we must answer are moral objections. By moral objections, I mean that we must answer objections where there are *morally significant* interests at stake, e.g., the interest in one’s life or one’s wellbeing. But shouldn’t the objections the knower must answer be epistemic—or truth-related—objections? Consider knowledge-action link principles. Fantl and McGrath put forward the following principle: “If you know that p, then p is warranted enough to justify you in X-ing for any X” (2009, 66). According to Fantl and McGrath, known propositions are practical justifiers—justifiers for action—as well as theoretical justifiers—justifiers for belief.

Suppose that S competently deduces an impermissible act from his belief p, i.e., an act that undermines a morally significant interest of another person. If this moral fact—namely the impermissibility of acting on p—imposes a reason not to act on p in practical deliberation, then, according to this knowledge-action link principle, S fails to meet a necessary condition for knowledge. Thus, distinctly moral objections—or at least objections about other people’s morally relevant interests—affect epistemic status.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To see why it is that we must answer such moral objections, recall *Bank 2*. Suppose that instead of his mortgage, Charles needs the money in his account to pay for an emergency operation for his daughter. When he says this to you, he raises the stakes for your belief that the bank is open on Saturday. Given the rise in stakes, you must answer more stringent objections that bear on the truth of your belief, e.g., you must rule out error possibility that are increasingly far-fetched. He may ask, for instance, if you have considered the possibility that the bank is closed because Saturday is a holiday of a religion (that you do not observe). This consideration also demands that you seek out more evidence and that you consider error possibilities. At the very least, calling attention to this demands that you have complete confidence in your belief.[[18]](#footnote-18)

I then move to the two more widely held views in the literature: the Threshold-Raising mechanism and the Sphere-Expanding mechanism. I offer a survey of the literature on each mechanism. In short, “Threshold-Raisers” argue that moral encroachment increases the threshold of evidential probability sufficient for some positive epistemic status (like justification or knowledge).[[19]](#footnote-19) Where we place the threshold in low stakes epistemic contexts is a contentious debate. But regardless of where it is placed, the Threshold-Raiser will argue that the threshold of evidential probability is *even higher* in high stakes situations.[[20]](#footnote-20) If, for instance, the evidential probability for justified belief is .85, then a threshold-raiser could argue that, in high stakes situations, the threshold raises .95. Thus, we need *more evidence* to justifiably hold the belief in question.

This mechanism deals most closely with the concept of credence and belief formation. Credence is the probability that one ought to assign to a proposition p in light of one’s evidence, where 0 is certainly false and 1 is certainly true. We form beliefs somewhere between 0 and 1. The threshold-raising mechanism moves the evidential threshold up, such that we need a higher credence before we form a belief and thereby close inquiry.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Some object to this account of the mechanism of moral encroachment. They argue that the threshold raising mechanism fails to distinguish good evidence from bad evidence. Consider Bolinger on this point: The threshold-raising mechanism “is the right sort of tool to deal with problems stemming from having too little evidential justification, given the stakes, but it won’t address problems with the type of evidence or its failure to address specific kinds or sources of error” (17). For instance, if we think that beliefs formed on the basis of racial stereotypes are morally problematic, the threshold-raising mechanism cannot *rule out* this kind of evidence. We, critics point out, just need more stereotype-related evidence in order to hold a justifiable belief. We merely add more evidence to the beaker, regardless of whether that evidence is problematic.

The objection mechanism chapter avoids this problem. When answering objections, one must attend to the particular concerns of the objector. Thus, it is not the case that more problematic evidence will be sufficient to answer the objector’s issue. If the objector is not convinced by, say, base-rate data, she will demand evidence of a different sort.

The Sphere-Expanding view can, unlike the threshold-raising view, make sense of this problem. Sphere-Expanders take their cue from the relevant alternatives analysis of knowledge. According to this analysis of knowledge, one must rule out all error possibilities to *p.* Failing to rule out certain error possibilities precludes my belief from having positive epistemic status, like knowledge. The sphere-expanding mechanism for moral encroachment makes more—or in some cases fewer—alternatives relevant.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Let’s go into more detail about the objection mechanism. I have said that, according to interest-dependent contextualism, justification requires that an epistemic agent address certain objections to her position. I also said that, in particular, those who have a stake in the belief pose appropriate hypothetical objections, and depending on the degree of the stake, they pose more or less demanding objections. But what is it exactly that makes some objection relevant?

I think that epistemic agents must be in a position to address objection that are *appropriate in a given issue-context*. The epistemic agent’s and the objectors’ goals determine what is appropriate. There are two kinds of goals—and consequently two kinds of appropriateness—I have in mind here: evidential and non-evidential appropriateness. Annis says that the goal of justified belief is truth, and this is right. Thus, one dimension of appropriateness is truth-related: imagined objectors raise objections for the goal of true belief. However, appropriateness is also determined by non-evidential factors of the agent and the objectors as well: Their non-evidential goals will determine the number of appropriate objections and how demanding those objections must be. Those who stand to lose quite a lot if I am wrong about p appropriately pose more stringent objections against p (not in virtue of the risen stakes but because they demand that more distant error possibilities be answered). Thus, to have a justified belief, according to my view, I must answer more difficult objections, given the stakes for others.

Why think that appropriateness is stakes sensitive? 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). Epistemic status is partially determined by one’s confidence on acting as if p is true. This principle supports the notion that appropriate objections are stakes sensitive, i.e., the stakes of one’s belief that p track with more stringent objections required for justification. Given that non-evidential objections will undermine epistemic status according to knowledge-action link principles, the objectors who demand answers to non-evidential objections appropriately do so, as they ultimately undermine my *epistemic* status.

The objection mechanism can accommodate both the sphere-expanding mechanism and the threshold-raising mechanism. This is because objections within a given issue-context can present increasingly far-fetched error possibilities and demand that more evidence be entertained. That is, the form of some of the relevant objections can target both error possibilities and the attributor’s degree of evidence.

Consider the following case:

*Heels*: You are applying for a job at a pharmaceutical company. You know that the number of male researchers is vastly greater than the number of female researchers. You also know that all of the administrative assistants at the company are female. While you are waiting in the office, you hear the clicking of high heeled shoes. As you know the demographics of the company, you form the belief that the person walking is an administrative assistant.

Let’s suppose that the woman in the case has an interest in your belief. Given this, according to interest-dependent contextualism, her objections must be taken into consideration before you have a justified belief. Now, let’s examine two of her potential objections. She may ask, “Did you consider the possibility that I am a researcher? The chances are slim, but have you ruled that out?” The woman’s objection can take the form of an error possibility that must be ruled out, but they can also demand higher credence: “You felt *really* confident that I am a secretary but not certain, huh? What if you got it wrong? What if you addressed me as an administrative assistant when I was the head researcher, which I *am*? How embarrassed would you be?” I know that I’d lose confidence in my belief if I were faced with this objection. In fact, I would want to be *nearly* certain before acting on that belief.

The point here is that objections undermine our beliefs and out credence in a variety of ways. We have seen that two of the ways that objections work is by identifying error possibilities and by undercutting credence. These two kinds of objections, I think, capture the dominant mechanisms available in the literature: the threshold-raising and sphere-expanding mechanisms. With the objection mechanism in our account, we can see that these two mechanisms seamlessly cohere around one single epistemic phenomenon, answering objections. We can, consequently, have both of these powerful epistemic mechanisms at work in a theory of moral encroachment.

1. Doxastic Wronging and the Degree of Inquiry Right

Chapters 1 and 2 have established a connection between morality and epistemology: moral agency can affect epistemic agency. According to interest-dependent contextualism, moral agency can create an epistemic context in which it is more difficult to have a justified belief. In this chapter, I want to make a reverse claim: some epistemic agency is morally assessable, viz. what be believe (and how we come to believe) about each other. That is, we can wrong others in virtue of our epistemic agency. To demonstrate this conclusion, I develop a novel account of doxastic wronging. This chapter, first, aims to show why the accounts of doxastic wronging available are mistaken and, secondly, to show how a rights-based account of doxastic wronging avoids these problems and gives a more elegant explanation for hard cases.

First, consider Basu and Schroeder’s view of doxastic wronging. There are three conditions for doxastic wrongings. First, doxastic wrongings are directed—we wrong particular people and do not do something wrong in general. Next, doxastic wrongs obtain in virtue of belief, not how a belief was formed nor what consequences follows from the belief. And, lastly, the content of the belief is the wrong-making feature of the belief.[[23]](#footnote-23)

This account tells us that doxastic wrongings are directed and come from the beliefs themselves. Basu and Schroeder argue that relational wrongings occur when we doxastically wrong, but the view does not have much theoretical machinery. In the literature, there are at least two theoretical explanations. First, there are Strawsonian explanations of doxastic wronging.[[24]](#footnote-24) According to these accounts, beliefs wrong when they are formed from the objective stance, rather than the participant stance. When we look at others as objects to be predicted, we wrong.

Next, Schroeder (2018b) endorses what I call the Diminishment View. The idea is that belief wrong others if they falsely diminish their agency, i.e., make someone feel as though their agential contribution is less or worse than it really is.

Lastly, Basu (2019b) argues that even true beliefs can wrong others. She argues that doxastic wrongings are an instance of relational wrongings, namely the person wrongings fails to properly relate to the one who is wronged. Given that the way in which we relate to the world around us is through a nexus of various beliefs, beliefs matter for how we relate to one another. When we form beliefs that, for instance, fail to appreciate another person’s individuality, we make a relational, and consequently moral, error. She appeals to cases of true, yet clearly racist, beliefs.

Basu and Schroeder (2019) and Schroeder (2018b) argue that only *false* beliefs can constitute wrongings. Basu (2019b), by contrast, argues that true beliefs too can constitute a doxastic wronging.

So, what is the matter with these accounts? Before continuing, consider *Wronged by Belief*:

*Wronged by Belief*: Suppose that Mark has an alcohol problem and has been sober for eight months. Tonight, there’s a departmental colloquium for a visiting speaker, and throughout the reception, Mark withstands the temptation to have a drink. But, when he gets home his partner, Maria, smells the wine that the speaker spilled on his sleeve, and Mark can tell by the way Maria looks at him that she thinks he’s fallen off the wagon. Although the evidence suggests that Mark has fallen off the wagon, would it be unreasonable for Mark to seek an apology for what Maria believed of him? (Basu, 2019b, Basu and Schroeder, 2019)

Let us first consider the Diminishment View’s assessment of this case. According to the diminishment view, Maria wrongs Mark, only if her belief is false. But, I think that even if Maria’s belief is true, there may be instances where her true belief wrong’s Mark. For instance, suppose that Mark has had a single drink of beer during the dinner. But the evidence that Maria has for thinking that Mark has drank is the stain on his shirt. She has a true belief, yet the belief is based on faulty evidence. This seems like a doxastic wronging, even though she has a true belief. The problem, then, is the hasty way in which she forms a belief that undermines Mark’s character.

According to the Strawsonian account of doxastic wronging, if Maria wrongs Mark, then it is in virtue of taking the objective stance with Mark. And this may be true. But the problem is that Basu (2019b) and Marusic and White (2018) admit that it is not always wrong to view other people from the objective stance. We might imagine a surgeon viewing a patient as the object of study during surgery. The belief she forms during the surgery do not seem wrong. James Fritz and Elizabeth Jackson (2021) note that: Basu, Marusic, and White “do not attempt to explain precisely *when* it’s problematic to take up the objective stance” (1390).

Basu, Marusic, and White, therefore, may be correct that all doxastic wrongings involve taking the objective stance toward others. I do not think this is right. I think what is really going on is that the beliefs they discuss undermine our interests. The central wrong-making feature is not some instance of the objective stance but rather it is a rights violation. This suggestion needs to be fleshed out in more detail but that lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Let us now move to an objection against the true belief account of doxastic wronging. Consider now a modified version of *Wounded by Belief*. In this case, we have a true belief that, I’ll argue, wrongs.

*Wounded by* Dis*belief*: Sarah is on a third date with Jimmy. Jimmy seems to be a really interesting, genuine person. Jimmy, however, has odd beliefs. With a straight face, he abruptly tells Sarah of all of the strange conspiracy theories that he believes. It is his life’s mission to stop the committee of time travelers bent of tormenting the greater tri-county area. Sarah finds it increasingly difficult to take such beliefs seriously: revealing a face of disbelief. And Jimmy can tell. Jimmy feels wronged by Sarah’s disbelief.

This is an instance of doxastic wronging, according to Basu’s true belief account. Why is there a wronging? Following Strawson and Andre Lorde, Basu suggests that feelings like resentment are “good indicators that some moral demand has not been met” (922). Jimmy’s hurt feelings may reveal that some apology is due. To further see this, consider Basu’s explanation of why it is wrong to mistake “a white man at a Beyonce concert for a staff member rather than a concert-goer” (924). She argues that, in this case, you would fail to see the concert-goer as he sees himself, and you would “observe him in the way a scientist observes the planets” (924). Similarly, when Sarah disbelieves Jimmy, she fails to identify Jimmy as he sees himself—a hero bent on stopping time travelers—and so she relates to him as a scientist might observe planets. This would, according to the account, wrong Jimmy.

This wronging is directed. Sarah’s belief is likely something as follows: *Jimmy is wrong about these conspiracy theories*. The belief itself and its content, it seems, is what hurts Jimmy’s feelings. Moreover, Sarah’s belief is clearly true since Jimmy’s beliefs are ludicrous. If this assessment is correct, then this account gets the wrong verdict in this case. It strongly seems as though Sarah should not believe Jimmy’s strange beliefs: an implausible conclusion. Basu does not have any explanation as to why there is no wronging in this case. Without further explanation, Basu’s true view is too weak.

These views are onto something; belief *really do* wrong. However, I think that that the theoretical backing behind these views is insufficient to explain why (1) true beliefs wrong and (2) some instances of taking up the objective view are morally permissible.

Let me now shift to my own rights-based account of doxastic wronging. I call the right relevant for beliefs that wrong the *degree of inquiry right*. I argue that Joseph Raz’s interest theory of moral rights generates the degree of inquiry right. Consider his account of rights:

*Definition*: “x has a right” if and only if x can have rights, and other things being equal, an aspect of x’s well-being (his interest) is a sufficient reason for holding other person(s) to be under a duty.[[25]](#footnote-25) (195)

What are the relevant interests at stake? I argue that some beliefs—like racist beliefs and beliefs that are formed on the basis of negative rumors—undermine our interests in a good reputation and in functional human relationships. According to Raz, “If an individual has a right then a certain aspect of his well-being is a reason for holding others to be under a duty” (200). I think that these goods are sufficiently connected to our well-being, such that others are under a duty. I argue for the following formulation of the degree of inquiry right:

*Degree of Inquiry Right*: Rights-bearer, X, has degree of inquiry right if and only if X has an interest—e.g., reputation or relationship—in duty-bearer, Y’s, beliefs about X; those interests are strong enough to ground a duty for Y; and X is the sort of being that can have rights, i.e., a being of “ultimate value.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Let’s briefly examine epistemic inquiry. An epistemic inquiry is span of time where an epistemic agent entertains evidence and counterevidence for a proposition, which may include a number of activities—conducting tests, interviews, seeking out evidence, etc. She raises her credence by entertaining evidence that favors the proposition in question and lowers her credence by looking at counterevidence. My claim here is that we have a moral claim against other epistemic agents when they form beliefs that undermine our interests. They need a certain degree of credence before they form a belief that undermines our interests.

What is the degree of credence is necessary before forming belief? One suggestion is that the degree required for belief formation is contingent on the degree of importance the agent assigns the interest. If the interest is of high importance, then the degree of credence goes up. Thus, the degree of credence necessary before belief formation is sensitive to the context.

Why think that an interest in reputation and relationships is sufficiently strong to merit the degree of inquiry right? After all, I may have an interest in having a million dollars, but certainly this does not grant me a moral right to a million dollars—other people do not have to give me money.

In response, consider libel and slander. We commonly recognize duties to care for others’ reputations in various contexts. It is generally considered wrong to disseminate false information with the intention of desecrating another’s reputation or straining their relationships. If I spread a false rumor that another graduate student has gotten a DUI in the past, then I am clearly doing something wrong. One plausible explanation of the wrongness in this case is that I undermine the student’s interests in a decent reputation. It, therefore, seems plausible to think that we have an interest in maintaining a good reputation, and perhaps that I have violated his right to a decent reputation among and relationship with his peers. Thus, an interest in reputation and relationships strongly seems to generate various rights.

Consider a separate but related issue: By withholding money from me, other people seem to undermine my interests, but this interest undermining does not seem wrong. This raises a question: What kinds of “interest undermining” violate one’s rights? And what kinds of interest undermining are morally permissible?

For an answer to this question, let us return to Raz. One of the conditions of having a right is that “an aspect of x’s well-being (his interest) *is a sufficient reason* for holding other person(s) to be under a duty” (195, my emphasis). Raz argues that what makes an interest a “sufficient reason” for establishing a right may vary with one’s moral theory. However, he argues that an interest is sufficient so long as one can provide an argument showing (1) that a rights-holder has an interest in x; (2) that the interest in x is important enough to generate a duty for others; and (3) that there are no contrary considerations—e.g., the rights-holder’s interest in x violates other people’s interests. Raz is does not define precisely what makes an interest sufficiently important to generate a duty, but we might think that an interest is important if violating it ends my life, significantly disrupts the trajectory of my life, or causes me some serious inconvenience or harm. Thus, to return to the objection, even though withholding money from me may violate my interest in making a million dollars, Raz might say that either my interest is not important enough to generate a duty for others or that there are contrary considerations, e.g., other people’s interest in keeping their own money. Note that a violation of one’s relationships and reputation could interrupt my life or constitute a serious inconvenience.

I argue that my rights-based account of doxastic wronging better explains the intuitive problems of touchstone cases in the literature. The degree of inquiry right also explains why true beliefs can wrong. Recall *Wronged by Belief*. In *Wronged by Belief*, my account can make sense of why, even in a true belief modification of the case, it still seems wrong that Maria forms the belief that Mark has fallen off the wagon.

Since Mark has an interest in not being seen as an alcoholic, Maria will need a higher degree of evidence than she does in the case, lest she violate Mark’s right to a certain degree of inquiry. This is regardless of whether her belief is true. It is about Mark’s interest in having a functional relationship with his spouse. In this case, Maria simply needs more evidence: the smell of alcohol on his breath, his looking drunk, etc. What Mark is owed in this case is *more* inquiry than Maria gives, so even if her belief is true, she still wrongs Mark.

Moreover, in this case, I do not think Mark’s interests violate anyone else’s interest, especially Maria’s. If this is right, then the degree of inquiry right obtains for Mark, and Maria wrongs him by forming her belief. (Although we can imagine modifications of the case where Mark does not have the degree of inquiry right. For instance, if Mark has a tendency of abusing Maria while he’s drunk, (3) is not met.)

Recall *Wounded by* Dis*belief*. The degree of inquiry right sidesteps a wronging in this case. According to the degree of inquiry right, we leave inquiry open for beliefs that matter for those believed about. However, we can close inquiry once we reach a high credence. Sarah, though, has reached this high degree of credence that Jimmy’s views are false since Jimmy’s beliefs are *so* far-fetched. Sarah can close inquiry without violating Jimmy’s rights or wronging him.

Objection: My account shows that we need more evidence to believe the victims of sexual assault and rape. Since the belief I form will undermine the reputation of the accused, it follows that the degree of inquiry right obtains for this person. Thus, I need a higher degree of evidence for this belief than I would if the belief did not undermine the accused’s interests. However, and here’s the problem, in these cases there is often no more evidence other than the victim’s testimony. Thus, I could never believe the victim without simultaneously violating the accused’s rights. In response, recall that according to Raz’s account of rights an interest generates a right only if there are no contrary considerations. In situations like this, we might think that degree of inquiry right does not obtain for the accused, as there is a clear conflict of interests happening in this context.[[27]](#footnote-27)

How much inquiry is owed when we form beliefs about one another? The last part of the chapter puts the above account of the moral encroachment mechanism—i.e., the objection mechanism—with the rights-based account of doxastic wronging. According to this account, when the three conditions are met, we owe it to another to inquire enough such that we could answer objections another may pose against us. They pose more stringent objections depending on the stakes for the person believed about, and they have a right that the believer be in an epistemic position to answer those objections before closing inquiry and forming belief.

At this point, I must say more about conflicting considerations. There’s a plethora of contrary considerations that must be weighed against one another. For instance, my crooked financier might have a deep interest in being seen as a good guy. Does this mean that I owe it to him to do further investigation when I suspect he’s burning my money away? If my account says that I must pursue further evidence in this case, then this is a problem.

Consider, moreover, a case about inquiry “trade-off.” The idea here is that my account cannot plausibly handle instances of inquiry trade-off. Instead of understanding doxastic wronging in terms of rights, perhaps we merely have moral reasons to inquire more about each other when our interests are at stake. This case may pose a problem for my account of the degree of inquiry right.

*Oncologist*: Sam is a renown surgical oncologist. When he is not meeting with patients or performing surgeries, he is reading the latest studies and journal in his field. Keeping up with the research better helps him perform life-saving tasks. It’s clear that nearly all his epistemic space is occupied with research relevant to oncology. Suppose that at the end of a long surgery Sam overhears gossip that a new resident in the hospital, James, slept with one of the other residents. Sam, exhausted from his day, forms the belief that James slept with the other resident.

Given Sam’s limited—and vitally important—epistemic resources, it seems as though he’s got overriding reasons not to go about investigating whether James has slept with the other resident. However, if believing this involves violating James’s degree of inquiry right, then it might be wrong of Sam not to seek out more evidence. But this does not seem plausible. A better explanation here, the objection goes, is that we have mere moral reasons to inquire about others, moral reasons that do not amount to moral rights. If this is right, then Sam has an overriding reason not to inquire more, where on the rights view it is not as clear that he does have an overriding reason.[[28]](#footnote-28)

As a tentative response, I contend that rights can conflict with other duties. This shows that, sometimes, the duties following from the degree of inquiry right might be defeated by some other duty, e.g., the doctor’s duty to his patients. One reason to think this is that patients have a stronger interest in having a doctor who is up to date on the most cutting-edge literature than I have in having a solid reputation. Moreover, I have a stronger interest in keeping my finances than my crooked financier has in his reputation. By *stronger interest* I mean that a greater degree of my well-being rides on the interest. For instance, my interest in not dying is greater than my interest in friendship because dying undermines my wellbeing much more than, say, losing a friend. Thus, our interests in reputation and relationships—the interests I’m arguing ground the degree of inquiry right—compete against a number of other (stronger and weaker) interests.[[29]](#footnote-29)

1. Moral Encroachment, Diminishment, and Meaningfulness Encroachment

This chapter has two goals: I raise an objection to the dominant views of moral encroachment, and I motivate a new kind of encroachment: meaningfulness encroachment. Meaningfulness encroachment is the view that the epistemic status of a belief depends on the effect it has on the meaningfulness of an agent’s life. Before arguing directly for meaningfulness encroachment, I raise an objection against prominent arguments for moral encroachment. These arguments have “meaningfulness analogues.” That is, if one accepts Basu and Schroeder’s (2019) and Schroeder’s (2018b) arguments for moral encroachment, then they must also accept the analogous “meaningfulness” version of the argument as well, which I show is a problematic implication of their views. I then offer an alternative contextualist account of meaningfulness encroachment that avoids the initial account’s problems. Lastly, I draw out an implication of meaningfulness encroachment for the philosophy of religion.

I borrow my account of meaningfulness from Susan Wolf (2007). Wolf argues, importantly for my purposes, that “meaningfulness” reasons—keeping a garden even if it hurts your knees, sewing a Halloween costume until late at night—are a distinct domain of normative reasons independent of both self-interest and morality. This feature of her account shows that pragmatic encroachment and moral encroachment cannot fully capture meaningfulness reasons. Given this shortcoming of moral and pragmatic encroachment, I argue that there is a need for a kind of encroachment for distinctly meaningfulness reasons.

I argue that if one accepts some of the most prominent arguments for moral encroachment, then one must also accept meaningfulness analogues of those arguments. Specifically, Basu and Schroeder (2019) and Schroeder (2018) argue that doxastic wrongings are problematic, in part, because they “bring us down.” That is, the belief has a diminishing effect on our agency: the beliefs show us that we have either lesser or a worse contribution than we formerly believed. When a belief falsely diminished another’s sense of agency, a wrongings has occurred, according to these authors.

A belief that damages the meaningfulness of one’s own life, I think, has a similar kind of diminishment. Consider this case:

*Publishing High Stakes*: Matthew—a graduate student in the same philosophy department as Dr. Pinkerton—has been working on an article to send off for publication for roughly the whole summer. Matthew’s paper is on the moral wrongness of economic exploitation, one of Matthew’s most deeply held moral convictions. After months of waiting and a hefty R&R, Matthew successfully publishes his article on economic exploitation in a mid-tier philosophy journal. While attending Dr. Pinkerton’s graduate seminar, Dr. Pinkerton says, “As far as your term papers go, I won’t help any of you groom your papers for publication. There’s already too much literature out there, and the last thing the disciple needs is for you to take up more of that space. And if you do, by some miracle, get your term paper published, then it won’t really matter.” Should Matt form the belief that his own article does not matter?

I think that Dr. Pinkerton has—in the same way Basu and Schroeder mention—diminished Matthew’s sense of agency. What Matthew takes to be a meaningful accomplishment is undermined by Dr. Pinkerton’s testimony, i.e., Matthew takes himself to have made a less or worse contribution than he actually did, and that belief undermines the meaningfulness of his life. Matthew can diminish his own agency by forming the belief on the basis of Dr. Pinkerton’s testimony.

Beliefs that diminish produce—according to Basu and Schroeder—the following kind of principle:

*No Conflicts*: If an epistemic attitude is epistemically impeccable, it must be morally permissible.

Given that we can diminish our own agency relative to the meaningfulness of our lives, we get a principle like the following:

*No Conflicts\**: If an epistemic attitude is epistemically impeccable, it must be consistent with a meaningful life.

The problem with *No Conflicts\** is that it is too strong and so *prima facie* implausible. Why think this principle is too strong? Well, consider the inevitable heat death of the universe. This plausible scientific claim can be, I think, existentially troubling for someone considering the contributions of their own life. It seems like—for some people—the inevitable heat death of the universe is inconsistent with the meaningful life and, therefore, is epistemically tainted.

The implausibility of meaningfulness encroachment spells trouble for moral encroachers who buy Basu and Schroeder’s diminishment argument. They must, I conclude, either find different arguments for moral encroachment *or* they must show why meaningfulness encroachment does not follow from the diminishment argument.

The last part of this chapter offers a solution: a more plausible, weaker account of meaningfulness encroachment. This account of meaningfulness encroachment comes from *interest-dependent contextualism*, the view I argued for in the first chapter. Rather than proceeding from a *No Conflicts\** sort of principle, this account says that knowledge is context sensitive, which, according to interest-dependent contextualism, includes contexts where our beliefs can reasonably be expected to undermine other people’s or our own interests.[[30]](#footnote-30) Specifically, in contexts where an epistemic agent is deliberating about the meaningfulness of her own life, she will need to answer her own, increasingly far-fetched objections. When reflecting on her own achievements and meaningful activities, she may be epistemically careful to ensure that (beliefs like) universal heat death does not undermine her own meaningfulness, while in contexts where such deliberation does not take place, she may have a justified belief in universal heat death. I call the application of interest-dependent contextualism in such cases meaningfulness encroachment, i.e., meaningfulness encroachment *just is* interest-dependent contextualism, when applied to interests connected with the meaningfulness of one’s life.[[31]](#footnote-31)

I then draw out an implication of meaningfulness encroachment: arguments against God’s existence carry less evidential weight for theists whose lives are meaningful in virtue of their belief in God. According to many theists, belief in God makes life meaningful. When presented with evidence against God’s existence, the theist—who finds that her beliefs make her life meaningful—is in a high stakes situation because to lose her belief would make her life less meaningful. Consequently, evidence against God’s existence or features of God, e.g., God’s involvement in human affairs, is harder for them to justify in virtue of the loss of meaningfulness. More specifically, the believer, due to her own interest in her belief in God, raises more strenuous objections against atheistic arguments that she must answer.

Consider an objection to meaningfulness encroachment: meaningfulness encroachment leads to many strange implications. Suppose someone—Randy—takes solace in the fact that criminals are punished severely, yet proportionally, in America. This fact not only helps him to sleep at night, but it also informs the meaningfulness of his life—society is structured by law and order. For this person, data about unjust mass incarceration and racially disproportionate incarceration won’t hold as much evidential weight, if meaningfulness encroachment is right. Consider, moreover, people whose meaningfulness involves having cake after every meal. Would evidence that suggests that eating cake is unhealthy carry less evidential weight? These implications, the objection goes, are implausible.

This objection demands I make my account more precise. First, I’m not arguing that it is impossible for Randy or the theist to conclude that their respective views are false. Rather, what’s happening is that in contexts where Randy or the theist think about the meaningfulness of their lives, certain arguments—either against God’s existence or that establish flaws in the justice system—do not count as much as in other, “non-meaningful” contexts. It is important, however, to note that even in these “meaningful” contexts, Randy or the theist can conclude that they are wrong—it just takes a little more evidence and effort to come to that conclusion.

1. Wokeness Without Encroachment: Wokeness as Group Partiality

Moral encroachment and doxastic wronging are deeply controversial concepts. In this chapter, I argue that even if we reject moral encroachment and doxastic wronging, we can still have robust ethics of belief. To do this, I give an account wokeness in terms of epistemic partiality.[[32]](#footnote-32) Other views of wokeness available in the literature presume the truth of moral encroachment, doxastic voluntarism, and doxastic wronging.[[33]](#footnote-33) However, such views cut against the grain of standard epistemology. Wokeness as epistemic partiality, I argue, is consistent with the *standard view* in epistemology. The standard view, following Sanford Goldberg (2019), involves the endorsement of “ordinary epistemic standards of justified belief and/or responsible belief formation” (2225). More specifically, the standard view is the broad epistemic standard that “one ought to believe in accordance with one’s evidence” (2225). Following Goldberg’s arguments against epistemic partiality in friendship and against pragmatic encroachment, I argue that wokeness—understood as the joint mechanisms of Stroud’s account of partiality in friendship—too does not require any epistemically bad behaviors.

Though I have endorsed wokeness as conceptually dependent on the non-standard view in previous work, I outline an account of wokeness here that less controversial. I conceptually divorce moral encroachment and other tenants of the new ethics of belief from wokeness as an epistemic practice. I instead argue that wokeness is epistemic partiality shown to members of underprivileged groups.

Wokeness understood as “group epistemic partiality” consists of six epistemic mechanisms: *Serious Scrutiny, Different Conclusions, Interpretive Charity, Reason, Inquiry Degree,* and *Base Rate Neglect*.[[34]](#footnote-34) The first four mechanisms are the very same mechanisms required for Sarah Stroud’s (2006) epistemic partiality in friendship.[[35]](#footnote-35) The latter two—*Inquiry Degree* and *Base Rate Neglect—*are necessary for epistemic partiality directed at groups. Following Bolinger (2020), I argue that part of epistemic partiality involves doing a more thorough degree of inquiry when our friends—or member of marginalized groups—are concerned. Bolinger notes that, in advance of performing some inquiry, we choose how much to inquire, e.g., how much evidence to entertain, how much counterevidence, etc. The woke person, according to my view, opts to entertain more counterevidence with inquiring about a member of some marginalized group.

Similarly, *Base Rate Neglect* states that the woke person does not use base rates when forming beliefs about members of marginalized groups. Neglected relevant base rates ensures that the woke person does not form beliefs on the basis of stereotypes—either positive or negative stereotypes. Part of this chapter argues that the woke person will not form beliefs on the basis of positive or neutral stereotypes. Thus, in these cases, the woke person will withhold belief:

*Intelligence Prediction*: Today is Christian’s first day as a high school history teacher. As his principle takes him on a tour of the school, he informs Christian that a rather small number of students scored above average on math portion of standardized testing. Christian then sees an Asian male student, Xi, and forms the belief that he is one of the few students that scored above average on math. *Christian’s belief is true*.

*Soda*: Sara is at a department picnic. Her academic department is quite large, so she has only been acquainted with a small subset of people. She becomes acquainted with Tyree, a black gentleman in her department. After a small chitchat, Tyree asks Sara to grab him a soda from the cooler while he goes to the bathroom. Sara notes that there are many different sodas in the cooler and that Tyree did not express a preference. Among the sodas are Coca Cola, Dr. Pepper, Pepsi, and generic grape soda. Sara recalls a marketing article which suggested that black people buy more grape soda than any other kind of soda. She grabs the grape soda.

In these cases, the belief in question is positive or neutral. It is controversial whether there are positive or neutral stereotypes, so my claim is that *if* these are examples of positive or neutral stereotypes, then the woke person will still avoid belief formed on the basis of base rates.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is also noteworthy that authors doubt whether belief formed merely on base rates are epistemically safe.[[37]](#footnote-37) If this is true, then there is an epistemic problem with beliefs formed merely on base rates. The combination of these epistemic mechanisms makes claims like the following more difficult to justify for the woke person: *Person* x *(who is a member of a historically oppressed group)* *has some negative feature (e.g., has done something wrong or possesses or has demonstrated some negative character trait) for reasons other than membership in group* p.

When someone exhibits the epistemic mechanisms toward member of marginalized groups, she is woke. The six mechanisms outlined above are constitutive of wokeness. One strength of the view I outline in this chapter is that it is consistent with the *standard view* among epistemologists. Following Goldberg (2019), the standard view involves the endorsement of a range of “ordinary epistemic standards of justified belief and/or responsible belief-formation.” I show that wokeness is consistent with the broad demand to *believe in accordance with one’s evidence.* Given the general mainstream resistance to non-standard views, wokeness as group partiality will be appealing to epistemologists who are skeptical of the “new ethics of belief.”

Consider a worry: epistemic partiality, as Stroud (2006) notes, involves epistemically bad behaviors. I have claimed that epistemic partiality is consistent with the standard view and so epistemologists who reject the non-standard view can more readily accept my account of wokeness. However, if epistemic partiality—and thus wokeness—requires epistemically bad behavior, then this is problem because it is ultimately inconsistent with the standard view.

In response, I turn to Sanford Goldberg’s (2019) argument against epistemic partiality in friendship. “Epistemic partiality,” in his discussion, refers to the thesis that friendship requires irrationality, which is notably different from how I have used the term. Goldberg denies this thesis. According to Goldberg, friendship generates value-reflecting reasons. Such reasons are, in short, epistemically assessable, such that the epistemic demands of friendship become “epistemically innocuous” (2225).

But what are value-reflecting reasons? Value-reflecting reasons “capture the practical reasons we have in virtue of our values—deriving either from the values themselves, or from our valuing them” (2225-26). Values produce, in short, their own practical reasons. Goldberg claims that we have value-reflecting reasons for the mechanisms of epistemic partiality, e.g., we value the friendship. The woke person, like the good friend, adopts the mechanisms of epistemic partiality as the result of value-reflecting practical reasons, like a commitment to social justice.

Goldberg (2020) rejects pragmatic encroachment—the view that thresholds for justification are stakes sensitive. He notes that we commonly have practical reasons for reopening inquiries and adjusting credences. The practical reasons for reopening inquiry are *mere* practical reasons, i.e., do not raise the threshold for epistemic justification, according to Goldberg, and as such are consistent with what I call the standard view. Consider high stakes bank cases. When it is strongly in our interest to get to the bank, we might leave inquiry open and pursue more evidence, even though we already have a sufficient degree of evidence for justifiedly believing that the bank will be open on Saturday. More specifically, we have practical reasons to inquire further, consider various alternatives, and get more evidence. If we do not do so, then we are subject to a “normative downgrading” (1650). Goldberg, however, rejects that knowledge/justification is/are sufficient for practical action. Sometimes we need *certainty* before acting. Thus, we can have positive epistemic status—justification or knowledge—and still have practical reasons to pursue more evidence.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Similarly, the woke person’s value-reflecting reasons generate practical reasons to leave inquiry open when thinking about the interests of various oppressed groups. The woke person’s values, much like the friend who is faced with evidence that her friend has done something unsavory, provide reasons to leave inquiry open, pursue more evidence, or consider more alternatives. The woke person’s reasons for partiality, if Goldberg is correct, end up being mere practical reasons: she has practical reasons to enhance her epistemic position in light of the stakes. Thus, like the epistemic demands of friendship, wokeness appears to be “epistemically innocuous” (2225).

I entertain several powerful objections. Consider the following high-stakes case.

*Terrorists*: Suppose that you, a professor, walk into your lecture hall to find a team of right-wing domestic terrorists holding all 100 of your students hostage. The terrorists tell you that 10 of your students are engineering majors and 10 of your students are early childhood education majors. You must sort them into two groups, and 6 of each major must be in each group. If you fail to sort your students out correctly, then the terrorists will kill you and all your students. Suppose further that 50 of your students have a stereotypical masculine appearance and 50 of your students have a stereotypical feminine appearance. You cannot speak to your students or communicate with them in any way, else you forfeit the game. What is the most effective way to win the game?

This is a problem case because it seems like the best way to win the game is to stereotype your students. Given the base rate of males in engineering programs and women in early childhood education, it seems that the best way is to win the game is to for beliefs about individuals based on these base rates. This, as I have said above, is a wronging, according to the accounts of wokeness offered here. So what is the woke person to do? A brief response says that it’s good to be woke…most of the time. Just like many of the virtues—honesty, care, temperance—they are good most of the time but not necessarily all the time. For instance, it’s good to tell the truth to the IRS tax agent, but not so good to be honest to Benjamin Constant’s murderer at the door.

Consider another objection to wokeness: *the problem of bad actors* (and no I’m not talking about Leonardo DiCaprio). According to the problem of bad actors, people with ill intent will take advantage of those that are woke. For instance, if we give minorities the benefit of the doubt, say, in legal contexts, then it seems reasonable to think that authorities will let off some guilty people, but nevertheless they will continue doing their bad behaviors. The question here is how does the woke person refrain from being taken advantage of, without compromising her wokeness.

Consider, before responding, a word on these objections. These objections place the woke person in *very* high stakes circumstances. They help bring out a feature of my account, what I have in mind by wokeness is more mundane than these sorts of situations. I have in mind situations that are much more common, e.g., water cooler gossip. So even if my account fails to give guidance in the high-stakes circumstances, it’s not clear why we ought to give up wokeness in lower stakes contexts. I, nevertheless, respond accordingly.

Here are two responses to the problem of bad actors and *Terrorists*: the sub-suboptimal response and the suboptimal response. The sub-suboptimal response says *oh well!* Given the injustice in the world, the woke person *just will* be in the position to be taken advantage of. She ought to be woke, even if she is taken advantage of. According to the suboptimal response, we can discriminate in high stakes circumstances. That is, in high stakes contexts, such as a court case terrorist situation, the woke person ought to set aside her wokeness and form beliefs, say, consistent with the base rates.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Here is what I take to be a better response to the problem of bad actors. Understanding wokeness as epistemic partiality does not mean that the woke person *cannot* form negative beliefs about minorities. Recall that Stroud says that epistemic partial good friend “is not a stubborn denial of obvious incontrovertible facts about the friend but something more subtle” (522). In a similar way, when a minority has clearly done something morally wrong or problematic, the woke person can form beliefs consistent with this evidence, in a manner similar to the epistemically partial friend.

Now, I claim that Stroud’s account of partiality is consistent with the standard view in epistemology. We might think, with Stroud, that epistemic partiality requires “bad epistemic behaviors,” “epistemic irrationality,” and “beliefs that do not accord with the evidence.” These are, epistemically speaking, blameworthy behaviors. Consider her constraint response. Like Michael Stocker (1976)—who argues that “modern ethical theories” pose too rigorous demands—she suggests that epistemology too poses rigorous demands. She thinks: “If standard epistemological theories condemn as irrational something that is indispensable for the good life—so that we have compelling reason *not* to comply with the demands of those theories—then perhaps we should question whether those theories offer an adequate account of epistemic rationality after all” (522). We, in short, adjust epistemology to accord to requirements for the good life, like friendship. How is this consistent with the standard view?

Many have tried to deflate the tension Stroud has posed between friendship and epistemic norms. One method has been to explain away the tension by arguing that partiality is consistent with standard epistemology.

Sanford Goldberg (2019, 2020) argues that many value-reflecting reasons to inquire are consistent with normal standards for epistemic justification. Goldberg (2019) rightly claims that Stroud assumes that “beliefs formed through [the mechanisms of Stroud’s epistemic partiality] fail to be warranted by one’s total evidence” (2225). He argues, however, that this claim is false because the reasons friendship gives us are “value-reflecting” reasons. Value-reflecting reasons, according to Goldberg, make the demands of friendship and epistemic partiality “epistemically innocuous” (2225).

But what are value-reflecting reasons? Value-reflecting reasons “capture the practical reasons we have in virtue of our values—deriving either from the values themselves, or from our valuing them” (2225-26). Values produce, in short, their own practical reasons. Goldberg claims that we hold different values for epistemic reasons, and consequently that value-reflecting reasons are in some way subordinate to epistemic norms. Given that the mechanisms of epistemic partiality are value-reflecting *epistemic* reasons, epistemic partiality is subordinate to and explained by epistemic norms. I take Goldberg’s argument here to deflate the objection that my account of wokeness requires irrationality. I examine Goldberg’s argument in greater detail in the last section, when I argue that the partiality view is consistent with the standard view.

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1. See Michael Pace (2011), James Fritz (2017), Rima Basu (2018a, 2018b, 2019a, forthcoming-a), Renee Bolinger (2018, 2020), and J. Spencer Atkins (forthcoming). Georgi Gardiner (forthcoming-a) also gives, but does not endorse, an account of moral encroachment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A word on contextualism: Contextualism is, roughly, the view that “the semantic content of knowledge attributing sentences varies with the context of use” (Fantl and McGrath, 2008, 65). The truth of knowledge attribution sentences will vary across differing contexts. Contextualists argue that concepts like “tallness” are sensitive to the speaker’s present context, e.g., I am tall when compared to an infant, yet not tall when compared to a mountain. The truth of the proposition *I am tall* varies across these contexts. Knowledge attribution claims work similarly for contextualists. Contextualism focuses on the context of the knowledge *attributor*. For instance, you and I might both say that “Larry Underwood knows he is a big pop star” but, given our different conversational contexts, that claim might be true when I say it and false when you say it. Contextualists tend not to focus so much on the subject’s context but the attributor’s context. Impurism—the view that the strength epistemic status is partially dependent upon your circumstances—identifies the subject’s “circumstances” or “context” as vital for epistemic status. Jeremey Fantl and Matthew McGrath suggest that contextualism—the view the attributor context matters for epistemic status—and impurism—the view the subject’s context matters for epistemic status—are not mutually exclusive. John Greco (2008) gestures toward a position like this as well: There is logical space for a “version of attributor contextualism, i.e., one that allows the attributor context to be sensitive to the interests and purposes of the subject” (424). Greco thinks that the subject’s stakes and interests can affect the truth of the *attributor’s* knowledge ascription. For instance, the truth of our knowledge ascription of a third party—*Sam knows the bank is open on Saturday­—*is partly determined by the stakes for Sam. He calls this family of views “interest-dependent contextualism” (424). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Contextualism states that the attributor’s context determines the truth of a knowledge ascription. However, Keith DeRose (2009) argues, “There is nothing in contextualism to prevent a speaker’s context from selecting epistemic standards appropriate to the practical situation of the subject being talked about, even when the subject being discussed is no party to the speaker’s conversation—which is good, because speakers often do select such standards when their conversational purposes call for it… Not only does contextualism allow for the possibility that the speakers’ context will select standards appropriate to the practical situation of the subject, but, in the relevant cases, it would actually lead us to expect that the speakers’ context will select such standards, because the speakers’ own conversational purposes call for such subject-appropriate standards in the cases in question… So, supposing contextualism, it’s no surprise at all that when [high stakes] interests are in play, the speaker’s own context will select standards appropriate to the practical situation faced by the subject.” (240). The idea here is that the interests and practical stakes of the subject of knowledge attribution can affect third-person attribution. Attributor context can vary with the knower’s practical circumstances. My position in this project furthers DeRose’s claim: attributor context can also vary with those who have an interest in the knower’s belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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-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 whether the belief will undermine other people’s interests. 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. Moving forward, 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 evil-doer case, but nevertheless this move would demand I provide some account of legitimacy.

   Either move will, I think, will be open to the following problem: 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. Does his interest in winning this bet count as a legitimate stake in my belief? This, the objection goes, is implausible. In response, I may have to bite the bullet on this case. 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. [↑](#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. 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-8)
9. 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 it is wrong to undermine others’ interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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-10)
11. 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-11)
12. I borrow Renee Bolinger’s (2020) nomenclature for the epistemic mechanisms of moral encroachment. I also bracket the *Direct Influence Mechanism* for my discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am making a claim about the structure of justification is this project: justification involves being able to answer objections to your position (or the position of someone else). DeRose (2009) argues that contextualism, strictly speaking, is neutral about the structure of either knowledge or justification. Contextualism is the position that “knowledge” or “justification” are indexicals, claims of which true or false in differing contexts. I, however, want to be able to explain how exactly justification is undermined by one’s context, which will be important for fleshing out interest-dependent contextualism as moral encroachment. Thus, my position is compatible with other accounts of justification and how context may affect justified beliefs. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I should say further that Annis’s account not only shows how demanding the objections we must answer are, but also shows that context determines *which* objections are relevant. For instance, shopping at Boscov’s with my girlfriend, she looks at me and says she’d like to buy this glove, but she has two hands and so needs two gloves. If I object by saying, “Well, honey, how do you know that you’re not a brain in a vat and have no hands at all,” then my objection is not relevant in this context. And she can call me silly and move on. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44968509#:~:text=A%20zoo%20in%20Egypt%20has,Cairo's%20International%20Garden%20municipal%20park>. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This claim puts me in disagreement with Annis (1978). He writes: “Merely uttering a question… does not make it an objection S must answer. To demand a response the objection must be an expression of real doubt. According to Peirce, doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves. Such doubt is the result of some ‘surprising phenomenon, some experience which either disappoints an expectation, or breaks in upon some habit of expectation…’ Thus for S to be held accountable for answering an objection, it must be a manifestation of a real doubt where the doubt is occasioned by a real life situation” (214). I think that the mere asking—or perhaps the pressing—pressing of a question can stir the doubt that’s sufficient for an objection. When I ask my students why they think they ought to switch the lever, I prompt them to examine their reasons. If the question cannot be answered, then they have a reason to doubt their view of the trolley problem. In virtue of this doubt, I think that I’ve posed an objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I want to claim that if you would not act in a morally impermissible way on the basis of your belief p, then p is not warranted, i.e., there is an epistemic weakness with respect to p. But recall Fantl and McGrath’s distinction between assessing an inference in one’s reasoning versus assessing the truth of a premise in your reasoning. It may be that your belief that p can be warranted but an impermissible action is faulty because of the inference. For instance, the proposition, *I know that the sky is sometimes blue*, justifies me in committing murder. The problem here is not that my reason for action—my knowledge claim—is false; it’s that the inference is ridiculous. However, there is space logically for sound inferences in which we competently deduce an impermissible action from p. I want to claim that this possibility will undermine my knowledge that p, i.e., it reveals that p is not warranted. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. My analysis of the relationship between morality and epistemic status is constrained in one significant way: it cannot make sense of doing wrong generally, only direct violations of morally relevant interests. This somewhat narrow scope, I believe, captures the relevant features at play in an account of moral encroachment, e.g., wrongings that are directed, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Worsnip (2021) gives a comprehensive summary of this mechanism. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Basu and Schroeder (2019); Fritz (2017); Guerrero (2007); Pace (2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Not exactly; credence is a partly-mental, partly-epistemological notion. One’s credence in a proposition is typically characterized as the probability one ought to assign it on the basis of one’s evidence. (One can also use ‘credence’ in a purely descriptive way, as in: the probably one does in fact assign to a proposition. But most epistemologists don’t use it in this way.)

    And I should say that you appear to be following the standard epistemologist’s use of ‘credence’ when you write: “The threshold-raising mechanism moves the evidential threshold up, such that we need a higher credence before we form a belief and thereby close inquiry.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Gardiner (forthcoming-a) says that her model of moral encroachment can both contract and expand the threshold of relevance. This means that in cases like Social Club, the ladies need to rule out more error possibilities than if they would in less-morally-high-stakes circumstances. However, in other cases, we might need to rule out fewer alternatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I have also given a similar account of doxastic wrongings in Atkins (forthcoming). Following Hilde Lindemann *Holding and Letting Go* (2016), I argued that some beliefs constitute “holding failures.” Holding, according to Lindemann, is the ethically significant process of recognition and response. There are better and worse ways to recognize and respond to one another. Morally problematic recognition is “recognition misfiring,” and morally problematic responses are “misshapen responses.” I argued that some *beliefs*, not just actions or dispositions, can be recognition misfires. And *that’s* what makes a belief wrong another person. I bracket this account of doxastic wronging for the time being. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Marusic and White (2018) and Basu (2019a) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Unlike Raz, I adopt a slightly broader account of what is an interest. 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. I soon appeal to an interest in reputation to motivate the degree of inquiry right, which, according to this account, may not affect our well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. One path of further inquiry may be to think through justifying the degree of inquiry right with the vector-sum approach (Wenar, 1998). According to the vector-sum approach, we must weigh all the interests affected by the implementation of a tentative right. That is, we calculate the benefits and burdens to everyone involved and make a tally. We then run that tally through our preferred moral theory, and the moral theory shows which rights are reasonable and which are not. I think that the vector-sum approach will justify a weak degree of inquiry right, i.e., a right that is overridable in the midst of stronger interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. According to the interest theory of rights, rights will be “shaped” by the relevant interests at play. This is a case where the shape of the degree of inquiry right stops at a pressing “non-right consideration,” viz. the strength of victim’s interest in being believed versus the comparative weakness in the sexual deviant’s interest in a good reputation. This sort of case will play a significant role in determining the shape of the degree of inquiry right. (Determining the precise shape requires more space that I have here or likely in the full chapter. However, I plan on using this case and the ones that follow to do some preliminary work toward this goal.) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In the full draft of this chapter, I plan to address an alternative view to the degree of inquiry right. According to this view, our interest in reputation and relationships do not generate rights; rather, they generate *prima facie* moral reasons that are (perhaps easily) overridable. One strength of this view is that it can easily explain why there’s nothing wrong in *Oncologist*. In response to this position, I’ll argue that *prima facie* moral reasons will ultimately be too weak, and instead we need a relatively weak, overridable right to a certain degree of inquiry.

    This view allows us to distinguish between two kinds of doxastic phenomena: doxastic wrongings and doxastic misbehaviors. For instance, Sam from *Oncologist* might be doing a doxastic misbehavior, rather than a wronging, in virtue of forming the belief that his residents are sleeping together. What would be a wronging in other circumstances is merely a misbehavior because of his limited epistemic capacities. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Appealing to strength of interests here will still run into objections. How strong an interest is will not always be a determining factor for whether we have a right. Consider, for instance, a general who at a moment’s notice can command a person to likely die. This is an appropriate use of his power. This general, however, cannot command that a person have sex with him. The soldier likely has a stronger interest in not dying than he does in not having sex with the general; however, the former is appropriate, where the latter is not. Thus, rights do not necessarily track strength. I do not yet have a response to this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. We can distinguish between two ways in which meaningfulness reasons are relevant for interest-dependent contextualism. First, when believing about other people, it is possible that we undermine the meaningfulness of their lives, e.g., recall *Publishing High Stakes*. We can also imagine cases, such as my personal reflection on universal heat death, where I undermine my own meaningfulness. Both contexts are relevant according to interest-dependent contextualism, and both will demand that more strenuous objections be answered. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Here I should say something about what precisely does the encroachment work on my account. What is doing the “epistemic-status-affecting” work on my account? Consider two options: we might think that the encroachment comes from either (1) the actual meaningful state of affairs that obtains from one’s activities, actions, and beliefs, or (2) a person’s mere beliefs that her life is meaningful in virtue of some activity or system of beliefs. I am inclined to go with the former because, in order for a state of affairs to be meaningful according to Wolf, one must *believe* that one’s life is meaningful in virtue of the activity or belief system. On this explanation, epistemic justification is not held hostage entirely by our beliefs about the meaningfulness of our lives, but they do play some role in determining whether a state of affair is meaningful at all.

    However, the former option is still a plausible candidate for my account. Consider a worry: this opens my account up to any number of meaningless activities counting as meaningful. Recall Rawls’ grass-counter. If he believes his life is meaningful in virtue of his grass counting, doesn’t that mean he needs extra justification to reject grass-counting? In response, it is important to note that Wolf’s account of meaningfulness combines subjective and objective elements: according to Wolf, only objective worthy activities that a subject finds deeply engaging can be *meaningful* activities. Thus, for encroachment to obtain, our beliefs must accurately track the objective worthiness of the activity or belief system in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. By “epistemic partiality” here, I do not mean the view that the epistemic demands of friendship—or wokeness, etc.—necessarily conflict with dominant epistemic standards. Rather, my use of the term refers to the joint grouping of the six epistemic mechanisms I have identified. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Basu (2019a) and Atkins (forthcoming). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I borrow this nomenclature from Sanford Goldberg (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Consider Stroud’s mechanisms of epistemic partiality in friendship. Friendship, first, requires that we seriously scrutinize accusations against our friends; call this *Serious Scrutiny*. When we hear that our friend has done something wrong, we are more likely to deny the accusation or demand more evidence. When faced with an accusation against our friend’s character, we “tend to devote more energy to minimizing the impact of unfavorable data than we otherwise would” (505). To flippantly believe that our friend has done something wrong, Stroud argues, is not what good friends do. Secondly, the good friend arrives at *Different Conclusions* about her friends than she would about non-friends. Friends treat evidence differently with friends than with non-friends: they “draw different conclusions and make different inferences than they otherwise would” (506). Friends “are simply less likely to conclude that their friends acted disreputably, or that he is a bad person, than we would be in the case of a nonfriend” (506). Thirdly, Stroud argues that partiality is “a matter of extending some interpretive charity to your friends than you naturally would to strangers” (507). Character traits and behaviors are open to interpretation: friends, therefore, treat friends with *Interpretive Charity*. They interpret bad behavior in the most charitable manner possible—unsavory claims about friends are expressions good or neutral traits and not vicious ones. Rather than interpreting my friend’s behavior as obnoxious, I might interpret it as “refreshingly forthright” (507). Lastly, according to Stroud, friends treat the fact that someone is a friend as *Reason* that that person has good character. Stroud argues: “The good friend’s reason for adopting these differential epistemic practices seems to be simply that the person in question is her friend. But that someone is your friend is not a relevant epistemic reason…to form different beliefs about him than you would about anyone else” (513). Our friends—just because they are our friends—give us reasons to think they have a good character. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For instance, Schroeder (2018b) argues that positive and neutral stereotyping diminishes agential contribution in the manner required for doxastic wronging. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See, for instance, Buchak (2014), Pritchard (2016, 2018), Gardiner (2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Goldberg’s argument also shows us that stakes-related, practical reasons to inquire are perfectly consistent with purism. I also think my account of wokeness is consistent with purism. Purism, according to Fantl and McGrath (2009), is the view that “any two subjects with the same strength of epistemic position with respect to p are such that both or neither (are in a position to) exemplify E with respect to p” (233). If Goldberg is correct that sometimes knowledge/justification are not sufficient for action, then we likely know/have a justified belief that the bank is open on Saturday in both the high stakes and low stakes context. This fact seems to be consistent with purism. The woke person may have a justified belief that a member of an underprivileged group has done something wrong, but, given her wokeness, has practical reasons to further investigate and then reassess her belief. Someone who is not woke, but who has identical evidence, would also justifiedly believe that the minority person has done something wrong. This person simply lacks the practical reasons to further investigate—or at least the wokeness-related practical reasons to investigate further. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. A slightly modified version of this objection points out that sometimes wokeness will lead to punishing the innocent. Suppose we have two suspects—one a member of an underprivileged group, the other not—whom authorities equally strong evidence of committing a crime. Since one suspect is a minority, authorities, if they are woke, will use the epistemic mechanisms of wokeness to give them a slight epistemic advantage. In virtue of doing this, they may tip the scales, such that the non-minority is charged for the crime. This opens the possibility that the non-minority is innocent and wrongly punished for the sole reason that they are not a minority. Authorities, therefore, should impartially seek out evidence, rather than show partiality. How can wokeness as epistemic partiality account for this possibility? [↑](#footnote-ref-39)