

On Epistemic Responsibility for Undesirable Beliefs

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Responsibility for beliefs is a heavily debated topic within epistemology. The received view is that we have limited control over the formation of beliefs, but control nonetheless. As in the moral case, if we have control over our beliefs, then we have some responsibility for our beliefs. However, many of our beliefs are understood to not be within our direct control and are ones that we cannot be said to be responsible for or blameworthy for holding. Rarely, however, do discussions of epistemic blameworthiness or blamelessness include so-called undesirable beliefs, such as racist beliefs. In this paper, I explore the possibility that there may be knowers who are epistemically blameless for holding racist beliefs precisely because they have limited doxastic control. First, I consider Nikolaj Nottelmann's account of blameworthy belief, including his discussion of what makes a belief undesirable. I then consider the case of two different White men who hold similar racist beliefs. I argue that the social dimension of knowledge and the reality of socially constructed ignorance, like White ignorance, can affect the epistemic control we have over our beliefs and can make some people epistemologically blameless for holding certain undesirable beliefs. Finally, I argue that to be epistemically blameless for holding an undesirable belief does not mean we are blameless *simpliciter* and that there remain consequences for holding an undesirable belief.

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When are we and when are we not responsible for our racist beliefs?¹ The topic of epistemic responsibility has been a popular one in recent philosophical literature,² but the emphasis in that literature usually focuses on beliefs in general

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¹In the interests of simplicity, I'm intentionally leaving out sexist beliefs, homophobic beliefs, classist beliefs, anti-Muslim/anti-Jewish/anti-Christian beliefs, and so the list goes on. I am simply incapable of addressing every form of objectionable belief in one essay, and racism seems a particularly timely choice.

²While no one seemingly claims that we are responsible for all of our beliefs, many philosophers defend the idea that we control our beliefs enough to at least incur some blame for them. See Smith, 2005, Nottelmann, 2007, Hieronymi, 2008, McCormick, 2011, McHugh, 2013, Peels, 2017. James Montmarquet (1992) states the case perhaps best when he says "Recent discussions seem largely to agree that we bear at most an indirect responsibility for our beliefs since we have at most an indirect control (via the evidence that comes our way through our intentional actions) over what we believe" (p. 331).

and not on specific beliefs with specific social consequences. In the case of racist beliefs we aren't just talking about some insignificant undesirable belief (like, I should burp at the dinner table); rather, we are talking about beliefs that have consequences for other people's lives and the opportunities they are afforded in life. The argument I wish to make in this paper walks a narrow and difficult tight-rope. On the one hand, I accept that we normally have some responsibility and even a limited autonomy when it comes to holding specific beliefs, but on the other hand, I want to argue that there are less normal times when our beliefs, and specifically our racist beliefs, are literally not our own fault. That is, it is possible to be *epistemically* blameless for holding a racist belief.³

Now would be a good time to mention what I am not arguing in this essay. I am not arguing that those with racist beliefs, even if epistemically justifiable, can or should be held morally blameless. Nor am I arguing that epistemically blameless beliefs (i.e., beliefs that I have good justification for holding) can be held with impunity — in fact, I think quite the opposite. There are indeed consequences for holding undesirable beliefs. That we may be unaware of our own biases or the undesirability of our beliefs does not mean that we should receive “get out of jail free” cards for the moral and epistemological consequences of those beliefs. It also does not mean that we fail to have an obligation to seek out more evidence for our beliefs.⁴ The problem is, however, establishing the grounds for which I can legitimately be held responsible for something out of my control. The conditions under which we hold undesirable beliefs and the consequences that holding those beliefs have on us is what is at stake here.

Responsibility for Belief

When are we and when are we not responsible for our own beliefs? Ultimately, this is probably a question that does not admit of an answer with necessary and sufficient conditions capable of fully defining such responsibility. Not that there haven't been some attempts made at such conditions. One such an account that is surely worth a mention offers a good starting point for thinking about the issue of epistemic blameworthiness. Nikolaj Nottelmann (2007) argues that

An agent is **epistemically blameworthy** for holding the belief that p if, and only if,

1. (Belief). She **believes that p**.
2. (Epistemic Undesirability). Her holding of the belief that p is **epistemically undesirable**.

³Epistemic blamelessness or blameworthiness is different than the moral variety. From the perspective of knowledge, we can form beliefs in ways that are truth-conducive (or not), that have an adequate basis (or not), and that have good rationalizing reasons (or not). These reasons can be in principle, although probably not in practice, separate from the moral considerations of holding beliefs. For the purposes of this paper, I will do my best to hold these considerations to be separate.

⁴See Hall and Johnson, 1988.

3. (Doxastic Control). She enjoyed some mode of **doxastic control** M belonging to the set M^* over her holding of the belief that p and it is either the case that
 - a. The epistemic undesirability of her belief that p was caused by an exercise of M. Or
 - b. The epistemic undesirability of her belief that p was caused by a failure to exercise M.
4. (Intellectual Obligation). By performing the action or omission P constituting either the exercise of M mentioned in 2a [sic?] or the failure to exercise M mentioned in 2b [sic?], she violated an **intellectual obligation** incumbent upon her, and did this with either
 - a. A relevant **foresight**.
 - b. A relevant **blameworthy inadvertence to risk**.
5. (Lack of appropriate excuse). She had no **appropriate excuse** for performing P under the above circumstances. (p. 203)

That this list, which clearly attempts to define some necessary and sufficient conditions for blameworthiness, is so long and rather complicated is a fairly good illustration of how difficult it is to come up with such conditions. Ultimately, I believe this list will not suffice (simply because I doubt the possibility of finding necessary and sufficient conditions for any complex and socially situated epistemological concept). Still, it is an excellent place to start thinking about racist beliefs and what makes them blameworthy or blameless or something in between.

The first two items on this list are rather straightforward: one must hold the belief in question, and it must be a belief that is epistemically undesirable. For example, I might hold the belief that White skinned people are inherently superior to Black skinned people. This belief is clearly morally objectionable, but we can additionally ask what it is for a belief to be undesirable on an epistemic dimension. Here Nottelmann (2007) offers a further list of properties that make a belief undesirable from an epistemic perspective:

1. Lack of formation by a truth-conducive process: It is epistemically undesirable that a belief is not formed and (causally) sustained by a reliable process.
2. Inadequate basing: It is epistemically undesirable that a belief based on reasons is not based on good basing reasons (adequate evidence, adequate grounds).
3. Unreasonableness: It is epistemically undesirable that an agent holding a belief does not have good rationalizing reasons (adequate grounds, adequate evidence) for holding that belief. (p. 70)

These conditions clearly indicate why racist beliefs would be epistemically undesirable in addition to being morally undesirable: at the very least, racist beliefs are not formed and sustained by a reliable process.⁵ I return to this point shortly.

⁵ What I mean by this is not necessarily that every single racist belief may be unreliable (there may be the odd exception that I have not yet considered) but that, as a whole, believing, say that Whites are superior to Blacks, will be formed by processes that tend to be unreliable.

The next requirement here is the third on Nottelmann's list, doxastic control. This is the one that is in all likelihood the most difficult to determine. The question really is: To what extent, if any, do we have control over our beliefs? To take the simplest of examples, I can look out my window as I write and notice that it is a sunny spring day. Do I have any real control over my belief that it's a sunny spring day? What about what I was taught in school, such as $2+2 = 4$? Descartes' hypothetical doubt aside, can I truly be said to have any control over this belief? Even Descartes, while doubting these beliefs, pointed out that he was inclined to actually believe all his former beliefs and that it was hard work keeping up his method of doubt. The evidence, as some have notably argued, is that we do not appear to have the same sort of control over our beliefs that we do over our actions.⁶ Beliefs appear to be something we do not voluntarily control. So how can we be responsible for them? Many philosophers have countered this position with various takes on doxastic responsibility.⁷ The idea that appears most plausible in my estimation is that when it comes to beliefs, we have indirect control of them insofar as we can take or omit to take actions which lead to responsible belief.⁸ This ties into a virtue conception of epistemology in which beliefs are responsible or not insofar as certain character traits like open mindedness or intellectual honesty are instantiated by those holding the relevant beliefs. In other words, we are capable of regulating our beliefs insofar as we control not just the activity of judging but the ways we comport ourselves toward the evidence available to us and the ways we put ourselves in a position to have our beliefs influenced. For example, if I take in one and only one news source, I encounter fewer points of view and less evidence than I would should I choose to engage several forms of media. My beliefs may suffer for the lack of perspective that comes about from my choosing to only take in one source of news. The way I interpret Nottelmann's third condition, then, is that we have the ability to exercise or to refrain from exercising certain behaviors that will lead to responsible beliefs. This will be key to the argument that follows.

The final two of Nottelmann's conditions follow along the line of doxastic control but focus on our obligation to perform certain actions that put us in a responsible position with respect to belief but that we can be excused for not performing in certain circumstances. If I were to live in an area with limited television and internet access, if I were to fail to have a local paper to which I could subscribe, if I were unable even to read, then I could be epistemically excused for my seeming lack of open-mindedness in my choice of news outlets as I would have no choice but to take what I could get. This would surely not count against

⁶See W. P. Alston, 1989.

⁷Millar, 2019; Montmarquet, 1992; Corlett, 2008; Origgi, 2008; Fernández, 2013; Steup, 2000; Gale, 1980; McHugh, 2013.

⁸See Montmarquet, 1992, pp. 332–333.

my character as an epistemic agent, that is one who formulates beliefs in a way that should seek truth and shun falsity. Each of us has access to only limited information when we form beliefs. This is part of the human condition.

When Are We Responsible? Two Cases

Like everyone else in the world, I know many different people who come from many different walks of life. Two of the people I personally know happen, coincidentally enough, to both be named Bruce. Both are aging White men, but their similarities taper off from there.⁹ The first Bruce is a construction worker, specifically a day laborer who specializes in demolition. His job is to bring in a sledgehammer or a reciprocating saw and to tear stuff apart, leaving a somewhat blank canvas upon which tile setters and painters, plumbers and electricians can do their more skilled work. This particular man is rather unlike those often seen on home improvement shows that appear on television. He's not young. He's not muscular. Rather, he's an arthritic, aging man, who struggles somewhat to get around. He drives an equally aged van which, like him, has seen far better days. The van is decorated with graphics of scantily clad women. By all appearances, he shows up to work every day not because he enjoys his profession but because he needs the money. His education level is by all appearances not especially high, and a good day for him is one in which there's work to be had, which he will readily tell you, along with many of his political opinions.

The second Bruce, a man of the same age as the first, is a retired rocket scientist, someone who worked as a highly paid engineer, on rockets or missiles or both. This man probably had top secret security clearance as a necessary part of his employment. He is clearly highly educated, very likely possessing an advanced engineering degree. Among his hobbies, now that he's comfortably retired, is to take lifelong learning classes at the local university, including classes on appreciating the art of craft beer. At these beer drinking sessions, he, too, will readily tell you his political opinions and will very loudly assert, among other things, that he's all in favor of "standing for the flag and kneeling for the cross."

These two men are ones I have encountered in obviously different aspects of my life, but imagine if you will that these men come together and discover that they each hold very similar beliefs about a rally being planned at the courthouse in favor of equality for Blacks.¹⁰ Neither is in favor of the rally, partly due to a

⁹ One of the reviewers of this paper objected to my "stereotypical" treatment of Bruce the laborer. I strongly disagree. He is, in fact, a real person with whom I have dealt on multiple occasions. To make him into something he is not because the fact of his existence seems inconvenient is to subject him to erasure and to deny his voice, which is exactly what I am trying to argue that we should not do.

¹⁰ The ensuing discussion is another actual conversation I ended up being a part of while shopping for a rug, of all things. It just didn't involve the actual two Bruces I mention here.

threat of vandalism and partly because they see no need to march in favor of equal rights. Neither thinks there's any inequality to begin with and each is sick and tired of all the advantages Blacks get in our society. They are especially fearful of the destruction that these demonstrators might wreak on downtown businesses and believe that the police should use whatever means necessary to break up the demonstration, which is, in their estimation, ultimately utterly unnecessary because Blacks already are fully equal with Whites.

A few questions can be asked here. First, are their beliefs epistemically desirable ones? Second, do they have doxastic control over their beliefs? Third, do they have an intellectual obligation to believe otherwise? The answers are, I argue, not necessarily the same for each individual. In fact, I would go as far to say that Bruce the day laborer may be epistemically blameless in holding the racial beliefs that he does, while Bruce the rocket scientist is almost certainly epistemically responsible for his beliefs. Epistemic responsibility or epistemic blamelessness exists on a sliding scale, but at least one of these men may be epistemically blameless for his beliefs concerning race.¹¹

Start with the question of whether it is epistemically desirable to believe that Black people in the United States not only have equal rights with Whites but are actually advantaged in society. The answer to this question is not as simple as some might have it be. Many “wet liberals”¹² might find such beliefs to be highly undesirable, but “we” might not be the ones who get to decide epistemic desirability. In fact, it's an open question who gets to determine epistemic desirability. The desirability of an epistemic belief, such as “Black Americans are fully equal to White Americans,” is determined by whether the belief is formed by a truth-conducive process, whether it is based on good reasons, and whether the agent has good rationalizing reasons for holding the belief. This then leads to questions about truth and goodness which are longstanding, difficult debates. Feminist philosophers in particular reject so-called objective knowledge — knowledge that comes from some dislocated, disembodied, disinterested perspective — and want us to consider whose knowledge gets counted. For example, Lorraine Code (1993) argues for a “variable construction” hypothesis that she says requires those studying knowledge to consider the “socially located, critically dialogical nature” of who gets to know anything (p. 20). Of course, this idea that we must take into account knowers and their desires and interests isn't just a feminist one as social epistemologists also ask these sorts of questions. Furthermore, historian Robert Proctor (1995) wants us to ask, “Who gains from knowledge (or ignorance) of a particular sort and who loses? Scientists and science mongers often speak royally about how ‘we’ know this or that — but who is that we and why does it know

¹¹ To repeat, epistemic blamelessness does not entail moral blamelessness.

¹² See Rorty, 1993, p. 451.

what it knows?" (p. 8). This project of asking whose knowledge is very Rortian in scope. It reduces questions of knowledge to a sort of "we-saying." And, to once again quote Code (1993), since there are very different "we's" out there, claims of "we-saying . . . of assumed or negotiated solidarity must always be submitted to critical analysis" (p. 24).

For feminists, the idea of solidarity or "we-ness" is something that is supposed to be inclusive to the greatest extent possible — until that inclusion requires us to take seriously the bald faced White supremacist or even the more nuanced racist. Inclusion and intersectionality are all fine and good until the intersection runs into the so-called oppressor whose epistemic standing must also be considered.¹³ The demolition worker and the rocket scientist may have beliefs that are far from truth-conducive, but these men exist in social settings that reinforce and offer warrant for their beliefs and claims to knowledge. Bruce the laborer forms as many beliefs as those more socially advantaged or more broadly educated. In fact, he's likely an expert in demolition after so many years in the industry. Yet some of the beliefs he holds (e.g., that Blacks are treated just as justly — or even more justly — than Whites) are more germane to my argument here. What is clear is that in many circumstances Bruce the laborer's racist beliefs may be strongly held and well supported within his knowledge community. Such communal support may or may not attend the same belief held by Bruce the rocket scientist — that all depends on the latter's knowledge community. However, Bruce the rocket scientist appears far more culpable for his beliefs given his different social and epistemological position in life. Very likely, he has had more epistemic resources at his disposal. Surely these differing epistemological perspectives and their arguments for the truth of their views cannot simply be ignored, if for no other reason that they are attached to great power structures that support them.¹⁴

Why is it that these powerful views somehow count as epistemically undesirable? Many answers have been given to this question, many of them based on moral considerations. I do not wish to discount these arguments, but I do wish to point out that the "we's" who find epistemic beliefs undesirable are not objectively determined by some all-encompassing "we" or by some God's-eye point of view that clues us into what "real, objective" Truth ultimately is. There are different epistemic communities with different epistemic standards. In fact, many Whites will find beliefs about the lack of need for social justice to be fully desirable. That a view is held communally doesn't make it necessarily right, but we do need to ask questions about which community (if any) determines the "rightness" of a belief. Who is to say, for instance, whether a Confederate monument should be removed?

¹³ Standpoint epistemology does an excellent job of dealing with the epistemic standing of those at the epistemic center, but I will not address these arguments here.

¹⁴ As Foucault (1982) tells us, power relations are often invisibly built into the system by being "rooted in a system of social networks" (p. 793).

In my own community, these debates have many, many proponents on both sides of the question, and what answer you get is going to depend a great deal on which “we” you ask. Whose view gets to be the “desirable” one will often depend on whom you ask. Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that racial equality is lacking in our society and that this is a situation that stands in need of remedy. Here the moral considerations that I have deliberately excluded matter greatly and lend credence to the claim that the day laborer and rocket scientist share a belief system that is lacking in truth-conduciveness. So, assuming the beliefs about Blacks already having racial equality are epistemically undesirable, are these men epistemically blameworthy for their beliefs? I argue that *certerus paribus* Bruce the day laborer is, at least in some iterations, not epistemically blameworthy for his racist beliefs while Bruce the rocket scientist does carry epistemic blame.

Doxastic Control and Socially Constructed Ignorance

Central to whether we have responsibility for our beliefs is our ability to control those beliefs. The general consensus in epistemological circles is that beliefs are rather unlike actions in that we have much less control over our beliefs. If we want to hold people morally responsible or cast moral blame for beliefs this is a bit of a problem for we cannot be held culpable for that over which we have no voluntary, autonomous control.¹⁵ This is, of course, why Nottelman adds a doxastic control condition to his criteria of epistemic blameworthiness. Nottelmann adopts a fairly typical approach that we can at least control actions that influence our beliefs.¹⁶ These actions, however, must be autonomous in some reasonable sense of “autonomous.” Autonomy, which does not show up in Nottelman’s list, is then another factor that is often considered. One reason for this is that it is a rather complex condition, especially as there is less and less agreement about the nature of autonomy as Cartesian concepts have been undermined. In another discussion of epistemic responsibility, Miguel Ángel Fernández (2013) argues that

to be truly mine, the settling of a question [i.e., the coming to have a belief] has to manifest my cognitive competences during the deliberative and executive episodes that constitute the epistemic agency involved in that settling, and those competences I possess must have the right kind of history: they have to be *developed within a single, sufficiently cohesive, history of cognitive interaction with the world.* (p. 127)

In this account, responsibility requires not only that my own epistemic agency — that is my own coming to hold beliefs — be “deliberative and executive” but that it occur within the right sort of cognitive interaction with the world.

¹⁵I leave open the question of whether the control needs to be direct or indirect.

¹⁶See Millar, 2019; Peels, 2017, pp. 61–66; Kornblith, 1983.

This condition says something not only about the autonomy with which we should formulate beliefs — or at least put ourselves in position to formulate beliefs — but the way that autonomy is supposed to work. We must have some doxastic control if we are to be responsible for our beliefs. As I already indicated, not every person who holds racist beliefs is epistemically responsible for holding those beliefs. The reason is specifically a lack of doxastic control. More broadly, there is room for some of us to be epistemically blameless for our undesirable beliefs.

The question at this point is whether it is possible to lack autonomy or doxastic control in the holding of racist beliefs. If so, such beliefs would fail to be “deliberative and executive.” While there is no way for me to do justice to the vastness of the literature on autonomy, a literature that extends at least as far back as Aristotle and his discussion of the “voluntariness” of action, I have sympathy with the more recent view that autonomy has a relational component and that it is affected by oppression.¹⁷ To make the case for the role of oppression in autonomy, McLeod and Sherwin (2000) specifically appeal to the role of relational or contextual autonomy, which they describe as involving “the explicit recognition of the fact that autonomy is both defined and pursued in a social context and that social context significantly influences the opportunities an agent has to develop or express autonomy skills” (pp. 259–260). They continue by claiming that in relational autonomy we have to explore the agent’s social location in order to evaluate properly and respond appropriately to one’s exercise of autonomy.

So, what initial observations can be made about the social location of a day laborer and a rocket scientist? This particular construction worker likely has a far more limited world and far fewer opportunities in front of him than does a retired engineer. Like many poor Whites, he often works, when he can get work, out of necessity and at physically demanding jobs that leave little room for contemplative time. While in college one summer, I worked light manufacturing — not heavy demolition — and at the end of usually ten hour days I had energy left for little more than eating dinner and watching tv. That was not my most intellectually productive summer, although I learned a great deal about how factories work. Yet it’s not only time and energy that keeps some people from pursuing wider outlets. I once conversed with some floor installers who needed work but who hadn’t the means to actually get to a job site. They were struggling so much financially that they had no transportation. While these young men may have had the time to pursue an education, they lacked the resources necessary. More than that, their communities may disapprove of them pursuing an education as many of my first generation students will tell me. Their parents do not always support them. In fact, while at a children’s museum, I heard a son say to his father that he wanted to be a doctor. The father replied, and I quote, “Don’t be silly. That takes too much

¹⁷ See, in particular, Friedman, 2000. Also see McLeod and Sherwin, 2000.

education.” That’s the message this child was hearing from a young age. Many people in our world are in similar positions with families and communities that don’t support their aspirations.

By contrast, engineers and rocket scientists must, by necessity, be highly educated. They have more epistemic control as a result of having broader educations than those lacking in education. Another advantage Bruce the rocket scientist has over those whose families reside in the same geographical area is that his children live in all parts of the world and this motivates him to travel and to see the world, so to speak. In poor, rural communities such as the one in which I live, I see families who stay in one place for generations and who have limited resources for travel, even if they want to do so. These differing social locations make a difference to what sort of position each can put himself into with respect to the acquisition of knowledge. The trained engineer has more ability and obligation to put himself in positions to expand his beliefs and to see the world from a variety of different perspectives. He is also less ignorant, not only in the typical sense of this term but in the growing understanding of manufactured or socially constructed ignorance.

In traditional accounts of autonomy one of the ways autonomy can be compromised is ignorance.¹⁸ Again, this goes back to Aristotle. In *Nichomeachan Ethics*, Aristotle (1941) writes, “Everything done through ignorance is not voluntary” (p. 1110b). This starts a rather long discussion of how ignorance affects our responsibility for actions. Of course, what Aristotle takes ignorance to be boils down to largely a lack of information or an absence of truth and knowledge, which until recently is how philosophers mostly treated ignorance. Times have changed. There is a decided sense in which ignorance is more than a passive lack of information. Rather than being something of a benign liability, many philosophers concerned with oppression have begun focusing on a form of ignorance that has powerful social forces behind it. As many, including Charles Mills and his notion of “white ignorance,”¹⁹ have pointed out, ignorance can be an active force that is embedded in our social practices. On Mills’ (1997) account,

white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years. . . . And these phenomena are in no way accidental, but prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (p. 19)

Elsewhere, Mills (2007) explains that our society is one in which “Sexism and racism, patriarchy and White supremacy, have not been the exception but the norm” (p. 17), but what makes this especially problematic is that the pervasiveness

¹⁸ See Young, 1986.

¹⁹ See Mills, 2007.

and normalcy of these ways of marginalizing others makes it difficult for those who benefit from the marginalization to acknowledge it even when they do see it. Others who have built on Mills' work on ignorance include Allison Bailey and Miranda Fricker. For Bailey (2007) an important feature of White ignorance is "the ability to ignore people without white privilege" (p. 85). In other words, White people can live their lives never paying attention to the plight of others who are not White. Fricker (2016) adds her own take on White ignorance claiming that it "names a certain kind of collective *interested* or motivated cognitive bias in what social interpretations and/or evidence for such interpretations a racially dominant group attends to and integrates into the rest of their beliefs and deliberations" (p. 170).²⁰ In fact, ignorance more broadly is increasingly understood as "a practice with supporting social causes [which are] as complex as those involved in knowledge practices" (Tuana, 2004, p. 195).

Socially constructed ignorance, which includes White ignorance, affects our views of knowledge, and it affects our capacity to autonomously know. In adopting an epistemic viewpoint, we also adopt expectations about what can and should count as evidence for and against claims. In other words, our epistemic principles guide what counts as evidence or data within the perspective we adopt. Now, the typical argument is that socially constructed ignorance, like White ignorance, allows those within the dominant perspective to fail to see evidence that may be available to those more on the epistemic margins.²¹ The focus of these arguments is usually on the effects of socially constructed ignorance on those with epistemic power, like how the dominant perspective of Whites allows them to fail to see the evidence that may be more readily available to those on the epistemic margins. However, Whites do not always exist in the epistemic center. It all depends on where one looks.

Return once again to the two Bruces. Both are White. Both share in a so-called White ignorance that makes them insensitive to not only their own Whiteness but to how Whiteness is constructed and the historical accident that has led them to possess Whiteness. Both are in some ways victim to the social forces that make their Whiteness invisible to them. Each, however, possesses a different level of doxastic control over their beliefs about race because each occupies a different social position.

Assuming that we do not directly control our beliefs about race (or anything else), the question is what do we control? What is that "mode of doxastic control M" that Nottelman mentions in his criteria for epistemic blameworthiness? One thing that we clearly have some potential control over are the epistemic environments into which we put ourselves or the actions that will influence our beliefs. I

²⁰ Fricker also notes that White ignorance is normally epistemically culpable, which I agree with broadly. My concern here is with the less normal case.

²¹ See Chapter 2 of Heikes, 2019.

can, for instance, choose to watch or read more than one news outlet. I can choose to talk to my neighbors and members of my community. I can open my lines of evidence accumulation. And, in principle, I have some epistemic obligation to do these things. It may not be easy for me to make these choices, but responsibility is not a matter of what is easy or even convenient for me. I should put myself in a state of cognitive awareness about my beliefs so that I can seek truth and avoid error, and should I fail to do this, I am a less responsible epistemic agent. As Angelo Corlett (2008) points out,

Those cognizers who typically do not exercise high states of cognitive awareness are not highly epistemically responsible in at least the virtue and duty senses. Other things being equal, the extent to which one is in a constant state of cognitive awareness is the extent to which one is in a good position, intellectually, to guard against epistemic error. (p. 181)

The problem is, however, that we are not all equally capable of guarding against epistemic error. This is a point made by Boyd Millar (2019), who suggests

when an individual is blameworthy for holding some beliefs she is blameworthy in virtue of the fact that *there were steps she could have taken that would have prevented her from forming or maintaining her problematic belief*. This proposal suggests that such an individual ought to have performed or omitted certain belief-influencing actions precisely because doing so was required for her to achieve epistemic success — that is, she had an epistemic obligation to perform or omit these belief-influencing actions [emphasis added]. (p. 3)

What's more is that Millar actually argues that cognitive biases, which we have precious little influence over, make it impossible for individuals to avoid forming and maintaining problematic beliefs. In fact, "a given individual can't do very much about the information environment she happens to occupy . . ." (p.12). If this is true for a highly educated rocket scientist, it's going to be all the more true for a day laborer, who has far fewer intellectual resources. Insofar as anyone lacks the capacity to be the author of his or her own beliefs, he or she will lack epistemic responsibility.

In order for me to be epistemically responsible for believing p at t_n . . . it would seem that I ought to "own" (or be the "author" of) the belief in question . . . This does not mean that the belief *originates* with me, say by way of my cognitive belief-forming processes. But what, then, does it mean to say that a belief is "my own"? To say that a belief is "mine" is to say, first of all, that I sincerely assent to that p at t_n , and do so without ambiguity. . . . It must also be the case that I am an intentional epistemic agent, e.g., that my wants and/or desires cause (at least in some significantly contributory sense) my belief-formation in regard to that p at t_n . Moreover, my belief-forming process must be voluntary, at least to some significant degree. (Corlett, 2008, p. 184)

Another way to put this is that we must have autonomy in the formulation of our beliefs. This is what the day laborer may lack in some (nonculpable) instance. If he's raised in an all White community that believes, even implicitly, in White supremacy, he'll most likely turn out to hold White supremacist beliefs, at least initially. Conversely, the trained engineer most likely does not lack autonomy, or at least he does not lack it in the same way since he has much greater control over his epistemic environment.

Of course, these two men are merely examples. Autonomy and doxastic control over our beliefs are not all-or-nothing. They exist on a sliding scale with these two men occupying not necessarily extreme ends of that scale but certainly opposing ends of it. Assuming both were raised in environments where racist beliefs were evident, one of these men has more epistemic resources available to him through both education and a greater opportunity to travel, both of which allow him to critically consider or challenge his beliefs. The other may not, at least not to the same extent and thereby is without the same level of epistemic responsibility. And it is the level of epistemic resources one has that is the critical factor here: if one does have access to more resources, then that person's responsibility increases, regardless of who that person is. As Millar (2019) points out, "For an individual to be epistemically responsible for some belief is for that individual to deserve epistemic praise or blame (or neutral appraisal) for that belief" (p. 2). The poorest and worst off economically, those who probably inherited their beliefs from those around them, those who work with others sharing similar beliefs, those who lack the resources (whether economically or intellectually) to put themselves in a different epistemic position, those who may even lack in his self-reflective capacity — such men and women accrue less epistemic blame for their beliefs than does the man or woman who has more resources available to him or her. They may also suffer an injustice when we blame them for such beliefs. After all, many of their beliefs will be those over which they have no doxastic control. Still, despite this epistemic blamelessness, the epistemically less powerful do have some obligation to believe other than they do with respect to race.

Intellectual Obligations and Epistemic Injustices

Even though some of us may fail to be epistemically responsible for our undesirable beliefs, this does not mean that we are not morally responsible for them — and it does not mean that we avoid epistemic harm for holding them or that we should not seek to change our beliefs when we can. The moral harm is significant, but it is the epistemic harm that interests me here. The epistemic harm that accrues to us may be just or unjust, depending upon whether we are responsible for our undesirable beliefs. This means that a just epistemic harm may befall the

rocket scientist who holds racist beliefs but that an unjust epistemic harm may very well befall the epistemically worst off of the day laborers. After all, if epistemic agents are social agents, if our knowing is relational, and if our relational knowing occurs within racist social contexts, some members of that group may be harmed for beliefs for which they have no epistemic responsibility.

Epistemic injustice is a far reaching phenomenon which in many ways acts like a Wittgensteinian language-game: it exists in a context of social practices that are difficult to encapsulate in any rudimentary or straightforward manner. Making the matter even worse is the fact that knowing is increasingly understood, at least within feminist and social epistemology circles, as intertwined with social groups and social values. When we consider epistemic injustice, we must also consider the community to which that injustice attaches. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions that can get at what it is to experience epistemic injustice. As an initial description, Gaile Pohlhaus (2017) identifies *epistemic* injustice as something that “not only wrongs a knower as a knower, but also is a wrong that a knower perpetrates *as* a knower and that an epistemic institution causes in *its* capacity *as* an epistemic institution” (p. 14). For an injustice to be suffered, to be an *epistemic* injustice, it must harm the knower as *a knower*. Such injustice occurs most often when someone is not listened to because that person occupies a position within a less dominate social class, such as being a woman (of whatever color) or being a man of color — or being a man who lives on the edge of poverty and who holds racist views that are undesirable in other epistemic communities.

To see how such injustice plays out, we can follow Miranda Fricker’s (2007) groundbreaking work, which claims that one can suffer epistemic injustice testimonially or hermeneutically, or both. In the case of testimonial injustice, the harm tends to be done to an individual who is denied epistemic standing. In the case of hermeneutical injustice, the harm tends to be more group based. The epistemic community, of which that knower is a part, can itself suffer a wider dysfunction in its epistemic practices by limited participation in the community. To use one of Fricker’s examples, Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird* suffers clear testimonial harm insofar as the jury fails to listen to his side of the story, favoring instead the version told by his White accuser. However, he also suffers a hermeneutical harm as a Black man in the American south since the experience of Blacks includes wide-ranging social injustices such as the inability to express one’s experience. This is the sort of thing that counts as a specifically hermeneutical injustice, or “the injustice of having some significant areas of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding . . .” (Fricker, 2007, p. 158). The key to this sort of thing is that one is “prevented from generating meanings pertaining to some areas of the social world” (pp. 153–154). While the focus of Fricker’s work and much of the literature surrounding it has rightfully been on those suffering unjust oppressive social practices, practices like sexual harassment or “White ignorance,” socially constructed ignorances work not just

in these contexts. Ignorance can also work in contexts in which those perpetrating harms on others can suffer harms themselves. What of a poor White laborer, who is surely privileged insofar as he is White but who, in another incarnation, is also clearly a member of a less privileged social group? Such men (and women) can suffer a specifically epistemic injustice insofar as their already tenuous epistemic credibility may be undermined by factors over which they would appear to have little control. Put differently, if we look at the larger picture, such a worker can, as a poor White, indeed suffer from his or her own lack of voice, both testimonially and hermeneutically.

The easier argument is, of course, that we are morally and epistemically responsible for our beliefs and that we ought to avoid undesirable beliefs. This is where the rocket scientist cannot be said to suffer undue epistemic harm when he is judged for holding racist beliefs. He is not only highly educated, which generally comes with higher development of one's critical thinking capabilities, he has probably also been exposed to more diversity in the world — and if he hasn't, it's much more his own fault having had the time, resources, and opportunity to encounter a much larger part of the world around him. If nothing else, being university educated offers real prospects for exposure to those from different backgrounds and holding different beliefs. To fail to take advantage of this exposure to think more broadly about race and equality says something about a knower in the same way that failing to take advantage of exposure to people and information in an internship in the workplace would. They both show a narrowness of mind that is not characteristic of so-called good knowers. If Bruce the rocket scientist were to suffer some testimonial dismissal, meaning that others came to judge what he said as less than reliable, it would be justified and hardly an undeserved harm.

Bruce the day laborer is a much more difficult case. Here I consider another man I know relatively well. He was raised in the piney woods of east Texas and grew up with racist beliefs instilled in him since birth. He graduates high school. What then? Get a job? Go to university? What if he stays, and what if he goes? My friend had the opportunity to go to college and to travel the world. He now describes himself as a "recovering racist." Seeing the broader world changed his perspective, and even if it had not, it would still have changed his level of epistemic responsibility. Yet what if he had stayed? After all, some people have to work. They don't have the luxury of a life of study. My grandmother was one of these people. Despite being the smartest person I've ever met, she lacked even a high school education because she was unfortunate enough to grow up during the Great Depression. She was, however, lucky enough to find a job and had to take it to support her family. Despite her great intelligence, she never quite broke free of social class and stigma, always deferring to those in a socially and epistemically more advantaged position, taking their lead in what to believe on matters that lay outside her immediate understanding. She was no racist, but that's because she lived in a world of diversity. What if she lived in the rural

south, in a heavily White community, with generations of others who suffered from White ignorance, and with leaders who promoted racial inequality in often imperceptible ways? In such circumstances, coming to believe in the equality of all might be a difficult proposition given the communally available evidence and social nature of knowledge.

The fact of a socially constructed, willful ignorance, one not of the day laborer's own making, plays an epistemic role not only in his responsibility for his beliefs but in the justice or lack thereof with which he is treated for having racist ideas — and he is going to be judged by those outside his epistemic circles. His epistemic agency will be challenged as he “ignores” the reality of racial injustice. He will be treated by some as a less competent knower who is numb to the privilege he has in society as a White man. Yet his ignorance is not something he arrives at all on his own, without social support. It is something a particular “we” encourages and supports. Of course, “we” can ask about this epistemic group and why it knows and disseminates what it does. Yet without question Bruce the laborer and others like him, living in a community that encourages and supports his racist views, has some reason to believe his claims are permissible and defensible, even from the perspective of those who disagree with him.

This man, and many others, suffers from White ignorance, and this involves what Mills (1997) calls “an agreement to *misinterpret the world*” (p. 18). Mills also calls this epistemology of ignorance “*a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions ... producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made*” (p. 18). If it is true for the rocket scientist that he is unable to understand the world he and others around him have made, how much more will it be true of the uneducated with limited opportunities to experience a diverse world? In other words, if White ignorance is difficult to recognize even for those who have greater control over their beliefs, it will be that much more difficult to overcome for those who depend for their beliefs on others who are more epistemically authoritative. Thus, an epistemically disadvantaged person who is dismissed or judged or unheard by those who find his or her racist view undesirable can be dismissed and judged and unheard for reasons that will not always be fair. Such reasons can be ones that actually produce an epistemic injustice insofar as persons with racist beliefs may lack control over their racist beliefs.

This is, however, a hard conclusion for those of us who aspire to a morally better and equal world. How can it be that racist views are not always wrong? The case for the moral wrongness of the belief is easier than the case for the epistemic wrongness of the belief provided that the person has appropriate warrant for his or her belief — and if society is structured in the way Mills suggests with a collective “agreement to misinterpret the world” on the part of Whites, then at least some small percentage of Whites will be epistemically blameless for their racist beliefs.

On the other hand, to be epistemically blameless and blameless *simpliciter* are two different things. The racist who is blameless in his or her own social situation and epistemic perspective will not be blameless in every circumstance — and will often have an epistemic duty to seek out more evidence. What if Bruce the day laborer decided to do something about his beliefs? In this case, he decides to become a counterdemonstrator. Now he has put himself in a position to encounter those on the other side of the debate. He is, in other words, enlarging the world around him as he puts himself in relation to those who stand against his view. He is also consciously and more self-reflectively aware of his view as he comes to defend it. Now the evidence available to him and the obligations he has to respond to that evidence have shifted, if ever so slightly. To counterdemonstrate is to face another person and to have an obligation to engage in dialogue. The same would be true if he were to find himself working with a Black man at a job site and the topic of race came up. This day laborer would be obligated to listen to the testimony of the other man, and if he fails to do this, he himself commits a testimonial injustice. This is, of course, something that John Dewey (1916) understood in his conception of democracy, although he never would have framed the issue in these terms. For Dewey, we create an undesirable society when we “internally and externally . . . [set] up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience” (p. 99). That is, when we fail to allow all members of society to participate on equal terms, we undermine our very democracy and make all of us worse off. For this undermining of democracy, I can still be responsible even if my beliefs appear, from my perspective, to be warranted. But when I take action to engage another person and I fail to acknowledge that person as an epistemic peer, I do that specific person a much deeper harm — and in a way for which I can indeed have some accountability, even if my former views were thoroughly blameless in an epistemic sense.²² I become called to provide a different kind of warrant for my beliefs when faced with the reality of my relationality with others and, thus, I shift the level of responsibility I have for my beliefs.

So when exactly are we epistemically responsible for our undesirable beliefs and when are we not? The answer is: it depends. It depends on social location, on what sources of evidence we have available to us, on who is deciding the “desirability” of our beliefs, and on *whose* knowledge is permitted in our negotiated solidarity. The fact is that whatever our epistemic resources, we all have the responsibility to seek out evidence for our beliefs. We all have the responsibility to avoid undesirable beliefs. We all have the responsibility to put ourselves in a position of doxastic control.²³ Yet this responsibility is not individual. It’s collective. All epistemology

²² For more on epistemic peerhood see Piñeiro, 2021.

²³ Hall and Johnson (1998) argue that all of us, even those not engaged in knowledge pursuits, have an epistemic duty to believe all and only truths. That is, we all have an epistemic duty in the way we all have a moral duty.

is a collective endeavor. Some individuals exist in bad epistemic environments, just as some individuals exist in good epistemic environments. Some of us have more control over our epistemic environments than others, and insofar as that is true, some of us have a greater epistemic responsibility than others.

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