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Responsibility for Bad Beliefs and Moral Relativism

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In this article, I argue in defense of responsibility for bad beliefs from the perspective of ethics of belief and cognitive science, providing a classification of bad beliefs into three types. I also present arguments in support of the regulative value of truth. Metaethical moral relativism alters the understanding of the basic tenets of the ethics of beliefs and also undermines the idea of truth as a fundamental epistemic good. There are potential epistemic pitfalls associated with moral relativism, including its use to support bad beliefs, where truth becomes relative to the benefit of a group or those in power, thus undermining the very concept of truth. Although Clifford's classic principle is overly demanding, moral responsibility should be required for the way beliefs are acquired, since epistemically ill-formed beliefs tend to become morally and epistemically bad under unfavorable social conditions.

Keywords: bad beliefs, moral relativism, ethics of belief, epistemic virtues and vices, cognitive science, epistemology

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Introduction

The central question I will try to answer in this article is whether we are morally responsible for epistemically bad beliefs. I suggest that moral relativism can impede the sustainability of epistemic virtues because it diminishes the responsibility we bear for our beliefs. At least three approaches are intertwined in this issue because the topic calls for an inner philosophical as well as an interdisciplinary methodological approach. Moral responsibility and moral relativism refer to ethics or moral philosophy, the term epistemic refers to epistemology, and the expression 'bad beliefs' comes from cognitive science. I argue that none of these areas can answer this question on its own. Moral philosophy evaluates actions that are based on beliefs but not beliefs themselves; epistemology can evaluate moral evidence and beliefs but it cannot provide moral assessments; and cognitive science produces descriptive knowledge, but not normative evaluative and regulatory rules. Therefore, I consider the approach of ethics of belief, based on empirically informed philosophy, to be the most valid one. It differs from the classical ethics of belief only in that instead of armchair theorizing, I will use, along with philosophical argumentation, the results of research in cognitive science on the processes, determinants, and outcomes of belief formation, both at the individual and the group level.

The Ethics of Belief and the Problem of Responsibility

The ethics of belief as a philosophical subdiscipline emerged at the intersection of moral philosophy and epistemology and places rather strict requirements on individuals regarding the formation and content of their beliefs.[1] Even if improperly formed beliefs do not cause any harm, the behavior of an individual who accepts a statement without reliable evidence is blameworthy. Yet these demands conflict with social epistemology, tending toward value pluralism and metaethical relativism. Moral philosophy, on the other hand, claims responsibility for the harm done but often considers ignorance as a mitigating circumstance of guilt.

[1] William Kingdon Clifford. *The ethics of belief and other essays*, ed. Tim Madigan (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1999), 70–96.

However, cognitive science and social epistemology reveal that moral attitudes are socially dependent,[23] and avoidance of moral responsibility is the basis of epistemically bad beliefs because the social benefits of collective beliefs do not always require an individual conviction to be accepted, so morally uncomfortable issues can be circumvented by the principle of "ignorance is bliss."[4] Although there are researchers who argue that the ethics of belief is a part of ethics,[5] I think that it is a rather narrow, separate field and is not reducible to either ethics or epistemology because it applies assessment criteria from both fields. Since both ethics of beliefs and cognitive science are concerned with knowledge, it is worthwhile to explicitly outline the methodological differences between them. I have outlined the main features in the table below:

Research field	Type of beliefs	Normative Aspect	Contextual Aspect	Question	Epistemic Approach
Cognitive science	Doxastic, nondoxastic	Descriptive	Social, situated	What do people believe?	Empirical, third-person
Ethics of belief	Doxastic	Deontic	Individualistic	What should people believe?	Evidentialist, first-person

Bad beliefs are defined by Neil Levi as ones that are not justified, contradict relevant or more accurate beliefs expressed by epistemic authorities, and are held despite the widespread public availability of evidence supporting justified true beliefs.[6]

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[2] Miranda Fricker, *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, ed. Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 144–159.

[3] Michael Sean Brady and Miranda Fricker, "Introduction," in: *The Epistemic Life of Groups*, ed. Michael Sean Brady and Miranda Fricker, 1–8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198759645.003.0001

[4] Miranda Fricker et al., "Introduction," in: *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, ed. Miranda Fricker et al. (New York: Routledge, 2019), XVI–XXII.

[5] Trent Dougherty, "The 'Ethics of Belief' is Ethics (Period): Reassigning Responsibilism," in: *The Ethics of Belief*, ed. Jonathan Matheson and Rico Vitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 146–166. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199686520.003.0009

[6] Neil Levy, *Bad beliefs: Why they happen to good people* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), x–xi, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2319488121

The most rigorous and unconditional requirement of the ethics of belief is known as the Clifford principle.

Deontic Claim

The strongest normative requirement of the ethics of belief is expressed in the principle that we are all always obliged to have sufficient evidence for every single one of our beliefs. It is morally obligatory that you believe only things that are justified.

1. *Clifford's Principle (Principle of knowledge)*

"*It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.*"[7]

2. *Clifford's Other Principle (Principle of ignorance)*

"*It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way.*"[8]

Therefore, epistemic ignorance is blameworthy. In other words, people can be held responsible if they fail to form valid beliefs that they could have formed from the evidence available to them. An individual who complies with the requirements of the ethics of belief is responsible for both bad beliefs that have been formed inappropriately and for avoidable ignorance.

It is important to distinguish between belief and acting on the belief. "We might know one's beliefs by one's actions, but one's beliefs are distinct from one's

[7] William Kingdon Clifford, William James and Arthur J. Burger, *The ethics of belief: Essays by William Kingdon Clifford, William James, A.J. Burger*, ed. Arthur J. Burger (Scotts Valley, CA: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2008), 18.

[8] Peter van Inwagen, "It Is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence," in: *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 145.

actions," says Arthur J. Burger.[9] Moral philosophy evaluates action based on beliefs, while ethics of belief evaluates how beliefs are formed. The ethics of belief defines why we are responsible not only for actions but also for beliefs, and "what we epistemically owe to each other."[10] The ethics of belief indicates that epistemic values lead to moral requirements. This applies both to the primary requirement to form beliefs only on reliable grounds and to the derivative requirement to resist epistemic injustice if caused by a violation of the correct epistemic procedures.

Three Types of Bad Beliefs

The General Definition

I use a general definition of bad beliefs that involves a combination of three conditions. Yet it is worth noting that, according to the Clifford principle, even the first condition is sufficient to consider a belief to be bad. However, I think the thesis of doxastic voluntarism is too strong. In particular, we cannot voluntarily form every belief, but it is our epistemic and moral obligation to avoid bad beliefs.[11]

A belief is called epistemically bad[12] if it is
(1) unjustified,
(2) conflicts with the relevant or more accurate beliefs held by the epistemic authorities, and
(3) held despite the widespread public availability of evidence that supports justified true beliefs.

[9] Clifford et al., *The ethics of belief: Essays*, 75.

[10] Rima Basu, "What we epistemically owe to each other," *Philosophical Studies* 176, no. 4 (2019): 915–931, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1219-z

[11] Hereinafter, when I use the expression "bad beliefs" without specifying a particular type, I mean all types, or there is no significant difference between them in terms of the issue being described.

[12] Levy, *Bad beliefs*, xi.

I distinguish between three types of bad beliefs as opposed to knowledge or justified true beliefs.

1. *Epistemically bad beliefs* are the result of incorrect epistemic procedures and are formed based on unreliable evidence.
2. *Morally bad beliefs* are those that have morally wrong consequences, a negative impact, or morally detrimental content.
3. *Morally and epistemically bad beliefs* are inappropriately formed from the epistemic point of view and have morally wrong consequences.

I will refer to epistemically bad beliefs as an EBB, morally bad beliefs as an MBB, and epistemically bad beliefs that lead to morally bad beliefs and morally bad decisions as a MEBB. An MBB have bad consequences or cause moral harm but an EBB can be morally "innocent" if they cause no harm, or morally bad if they spread and have a bad effect on others (an MEBB). Morally bad beliefs can result from a fallacy even if the correct epistemic procedures are followed; in this case, responsibility does not imply guilt or blame. Instead, if epistemic ignorance is avoidable, morally bad beliefs that are the consequence of epistemically bad beliefs and that themselves cause moral harm are culpable.

Consider the following statements:

1. The nucleus of the sodium atom contains 11 protons.
2. The majority of Germans are vegetarians.
3. Maternal behavior affects the development of schizophrenia in a child.
4. The Kyiv regime is pursuing a neo-Nazi policy.

The first statement is true and value-neutral. Since it can be tested in many ways with different scientific methods, and confirmed by experts, this belief is epistemically reliable, therefore it meets the formal requirements for knowledge. The following three sentences are examples of beliefs with a certain flaw, but it is necessary to analyze whether they are bad beliefs. However, what is meant by 'bad' in this expression has to be clarified by distinguishing between the moral and epistemic aspects. For this purpose, the following example should be considered.

Suppose Ian is a student, who formed the belief 'The majority of Germans are vegetarians' based on his very limited experience with Germans. He spent only a month in the country, communicating mainly with students and professors at

the university, and most of his new friends ate only vegetarian food. However, statistical data from surveys conducted by various German sociological institutes show that the third belief is false.[13] Therefore, Ian has formed an epistemically unjustified false belief based on a restricted inductive conclusion. Yet, this belief does not harm him or other people and can be easily corrected. If Ian adjusts his views based on new evidence (e.g., publicly available statistics) and forms a new belief that a minority of Germans are vegetarians, his previous belief should not be considered *bad* according to the definition provided. However, if he continues to insist that his experience is more relevant than official statistics and develops counterexamples and defensive arguments (e.g., that meat products in supermarkets are mainly targeted at migrants), this would be an example of a typical EBB.

The third sentence 'Maternal behavior affects the development of schizophrenia in a child' describes a thesis that has long been supported by many psychiatrists.[14] Recent research on schizophrenia proved that the disease is dependent on genetic rather than behavioral factors. Therefore, mothers who blamed themselves for their children's illnesses in the past were guided by epistemic procedures that were reliable at that time. Moreover, the doctors came to that belief based on scientific publications in recognized peer-reviewed journals and fostered a false sense of guilt in the mother. Therefore, this is an example of a belief that is morally, but not epistemically bad, at least prior to the availability of new research.

I found it difficult to find an example of a morally bad but epistemically properly formed belief without imposing caveats such as time constraints (as in this example) or appeals to cultural relativism (e.g., culturally specific rules of behavior). By and large, morally bad beliefs are still related to violations in reasoning and argumentation. This is also an implicit rationale in favor of the ethics of beliefs, which is not reducible to moral philosophy because of its epistemological component.

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[13] On average, about 10 percent (due to statista.com). "Statista – The Statistics Portal," Statista, https://www.statista.com/ (accessed: 20.06.2024).

[14] The concept of schizophrenogenic mother was popular in psychiatry in the 50s and 70s of the 20th century. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann coined the term in 1948. Nowadays, the schizophrenogenic mother is considered a harmful stereotype: John Neill, "Whatever became of the schizophrenogenic mother?" *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 44, no. 4 (1990): 499–505, https://dx.doi.org/10.1176/appi.psychotherapy.1990.44.4.499

At least in this example for the period indicated before the refutation of 'the schizophrenogenic mother theory,' the issue of who exactly should be considered experts didn't seem overly problematic because only a psychiatrist can make diagnoses such as schizophrenia, and determining the causes of its occurrence is the responsibility of scientists. However, any moral reasoning is not neutral and requires separate epistemic procedures, especially when it comes to moral testimony. A significant part of what we know about the world is not directly gained through first-hand experience, but testimony. Moral testimony does not merely differ from other types of testimony due to its emotional component or bias. It requires a personal understanding of the reasons behind a moral statement. No state of affairs makes a moral testimony true or false in itself. Therefore, such testimony can always be doubted and thus provide additional arguments in favor of moral relativism. The concept of *moral authority* is not identical to the concept of *epistemic expert*. Laura Frances Callahan points out that moral testimony has a certain defect and there is an asymmetry between this and other types of testimony.[15] Therefore, relying on someone's moral advice without self-reflection would be wrong. Professors of moral philosophy may be perfect experts in distinguishing between dozens of nuances of moral theories, discerning all connotations of concepts and meanings of moral terms. However, this does not make them a moral expert, namely, a person whose opinion can be accepted as the basis for their own beliefs, just as one would accept a physicist's expert opinion on the number of protons in a sodium nucleus.

The issue of expertise becomes even more problematic in the fourth example. Let's start with the use of the notion "Kyiv regime," It was coined by Russian propaganda to spread the idea of the illegitimacy of the government and the president, and is used only by pro-Kremlin media, and thus has nothing to do with the classical definition of knowledge. This statement is an example of a false and unreliable belief, which is value-driven. Because it contradicts easily accessible, reliable evidence, and is highly biased, it is an epistemically bad belief. It is also certainly a morally bad belief because it supports a range of inferential beliefs that are very harmful to many individuals, so it is an example of an MEBB. As in all the previous cases, it is possible to appeal to evidence that proves the opposite, such as publicly

[15] Laura Frances Callahan, "Moral Testimony: A Re-Conceived Understanding Explanation," *Philosophical Quarterly* 68, no. 272 (2018): 437–459. https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqx057

available statistics. Ukraine has a mixed or parliamentary-presidential form of government, where not only are far-right groups not represented in the parliament, but no right-wing party is either, as during the last election nationalist parties did not pass the 5 percent threshold and the rating of the sole candidate from the united nationalist parties was only 0.7 percent. The leader of a centrist liberal party of Jewish ethnicity became president of Ukraine with 73.2% of the vote. Yet, despite these and other verifiable facts, together with the expert opinion of prominent political scientists who have professionally defined the proper use of the term neo-Nazism, those who believe in statement 4 are not convinced but rely only on their selected circle of sources and certain authorities they agree with, thus creating an echo chamber effect.

Some Remarks on Consequentialism and Deontology

These examples would be interpreted differently from the standpoint of consequentialism and deontology. At least the first three statements can be regarded by the consequentialists as neutral in terms of moral content, as long as the beliefs do not have harmful consequences. The point is different in the fourth example, which contains political slurs because of the value-laden (non-neutral) terms that are themselves markers of potential moral harm. These are offensive terms where the form is both a designation-identifier of belonging to a group (e.g., ethnicity, political group) and a marker of the speaker's disdainful attitude toward that group. That is, sentences that contain such political terms are already emotionally charged, even if they are not followed by further actions. This is the case where sayings and doings in speech acts are equally performative. For example, they help partisans to recognize their friend and foe, in a similar way to the *dog whistle effect* (a specific language used for political messages). The consequentialist model may sometimes serve as a useful rule of constraint based on the principle of "do no harm," similar to the presumption of innocence while an investigation is ongoing, but it cannot be a reliable theoretical basis for responsibility. Why do I, nevertheless, posit that the deontological requirement of belief ethics of being responsible for acceptance of belief without evidence or based on insufficient evidence, is more reasonable than consequentialism, even in terms of consequences? Because it is preventative and forward-looking. William Clifford, in his famous essay

The Ethics of Belief, argues for the demand of responsibility, not for the content but for how bad beliefs were acquired, referring to possible bad epistemic consequences and recalling our duty to mankind: "That duty is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town."[16]

The second sentence, 'The majority of Germans are vegetarians', which I used as an example of an EBB, seems neutral because it contains no approval, demand, condemnation, or other value-laden attributes. It is simply a generalization. However, any generalization can be a source of potential moral problems when it is linked to subsequent beliefs. The improper formation of morally bad beliefs or conclusions based on ignorance may be considered by some people as a mitigating circumstance (e.g., "they did it out of ignorance, not malice"). However, this is not the case from the perspective of the ethics of belief, which sets out a strict deontological requirement to prevent future misguidance based on flawed evidence. This link to future beliefs and the stringent requirements for proper epistemic conduct can be explained by the following examples.

i. One symptom of age-related changes is a decline in cognitive ability.
ii. Elderly people have poorer cognitive abilities than younger adults.
iii. We should introduce an age limit in our vacancy advert for a communications manager because the position requires a high level of cognitive functioning and would be more suitable for a younger person.

While the first sentence is a trivial thesis to be found in a media article, the second is one whose uncritical or manipulative use could lead to an MEBB. The third is based on an MEBB, as it is an incorrect application of a generalization and shows the signs of injustice. While it is possible to imagine someone getting from the first statement to the third statement by incorrect reasoning, such a conclusion would be blameworthy primarily because of the way the belief was formed, not merely because of its content. To conclude, deontological ethics of belief defines forward-looking responsibility, while consequentialist theory implies mainly backward-looking responsibility and naturalistic scientific theories are limited to description regardless of moral perspective.

[16] Clifford et al., *The ethics of belief: Essays*, 16.

Metaethical Moral Relativism and Truth as a Fundamental Epistemic Value

From a philosophical perspective, morality is not primarily about norms or rules, but about the content that people are concerned with, what they care about and are involved in. The need for norms, rules, and regulation of actions arises precisely because people cannot easily come to an agreement on values and actions based on them. That is why the question of responsibility for bad beliefs fails to make moral sense without clarifying attitudes toward truth. At first glance, this seems contradictory, in fact even Clifford, who presents the most rigorous version of ethics of belief, argues that it is not so important whether a belief is true or false as on what evidence it is based.[17] Nor does the requirement of truth condition appear in the definition of bad beliefs I gave earlier. Thus, although the falsity of a belief is neither sufficient nor necessary for it to be defined as epistemically bad, it is worth explaining why, the main question of the article requires closer consideration of truth and relativism. Correctly formed beliefs can be false, and an improperly derived belief based on weak evidence can be coincidentally true. So what do "correctly" and "properly" mean without a regulative idea of truth that is independent of subjective opinions? Truth is needed as a fundamental basis that distinguishes epistemic virtues from vices and guides the cognitive pursuit. However, veritistic philosophy is going through hard times. Among social philosophers, there are many who, according to Alvin Goldman, suffer from veriphobia,[18] reducing truth and falsity to social and cultural factors. An even bigger challenge is the subversion of the concept of truth by its substitutes, such as post-truth. The rationale for such a replacement is often moral relativism, which, when used manipulatively (for example, by propagandists), makes truth a concept deeply related to the benefits of a group or those in power.

The traditional view of the relationship between morality and knowledge is based on the idea of truth as a value or a fundamental epistemic good.[19] In moral philosophy, truth is the key concept that opens the door to ethics of belief, just as

[17] Ibid., 10.

[18] Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a social world* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7–9.

[19] Cf. Duncan Pritchard, "Truth as the Fundamental Epistemic Good," in: *The Ethics of Belief*, 2014), 112–129. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199686520.003.0007

the concept of kalokagathia united beauty and truth in ancient philosophy. If truth isn't a value, or if virtues have no epistemic evaluation, then properly formed beliefs cannot be distinguished from bad ones, and the difference between truth and post-truth becomes vague. This question, like others concerning the social nature of beliefs, goes beyond a purely normative approach, as it belongs to the domain of metaethics and ethics of virtues and vices.

The main claim that I am trying to make in this section is that moral relativism can provide a theoretical philosophical basis for justifying bad beliefs, including a MEBB. Moral relativism tends to be associated with positive qualities and virtues, including tolerance, openness to other opinions, and pluralism of values. Notably, relativity is often presented as a pluralism of moralities.[20] However, there are issues where moral relativism supports epistemic flaws. It is not the objective of this current study to provide an exhaustive description of all the different forms of relativism, but, generally, relativism is defined by the formula "A is relative to B," for example, "morality depends on the historical circumstances of a culture." Normative relativism denies the existence of absolutely true or correct beliefs.[21] Yet when discussing the responsibility for holding bad beliefs, the most relevant form of relativism that needs to be considered is Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR). Consequently, the question that needs to be answered is: does this kind of relativism (MMR) lead to the withholding of moral judgments and conclusions and irresponsible convictions? Let's proceed with a definition.

> Metaethical Moral Relativism (MMR) posits that the truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is not absolute or universal but relative to a group and their traditions, convictions, or practices.[22]

Traditional epistemology is based on value monism, where true beliefs are of ultimate epistemic value and there is exactly one way of being true. Moral relativism is based on the idea of plurality of truth, where there can be epistemic goals

[20] Cf. Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–28, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315213217

[21] Martin Kusch, "Introduction: A primer on relativism," in: *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Relativism*, ed. Martin Kusch (New York: Routledge, 2020), 2.

[22] Chris Gowans, "Moral Relativism," in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021).

other than the truth: there is more than one way of being true, and different values determine attitudes to the truth. Still, accepting a principle of MMR does not necessarily entail acting on it, so compliance with moral relativism is not a sufficient basis for claiming that one's beliefs are irresponsible. Therefore, the thesis of relativism should be considered not only to the question of whether truth is an epistemic good and post-truth as counterfeiting truth but also to the idea of following epistemic virtues and avoiding epistemic vices. If someone claims that a moral statement is true, they are adopting a form of cognitivism in metaethics, because they believe that truth or falsity can be ascribed to the moral judgment itself (a moral judgment can be objectively right or wrong). However, moral relativism supports a mostly non-cognitivist thesis that moral statements have no essential conditions of truth and are rather manifestations of approval or disapproval. Does it influence the ethics of belief if "the question is not whether their belief was true or false, but whether they entertained it on wrong grounds"[23]? Here, rightness and wrongness, as regards the methods of acquisition mean that beliefs are evaluated not by a purely epistemic criterion of truth and falsity, but by a moral criterion. Yet, if it is wrong to hold a belief based on unreliable evidence, what does the rightness of the evidence mean, without reference to the truth as a metaethical ideal and epistemic good against which the moral criterion is compared?

Another question, which I consider in the following section, is whether moral relativism supports the idea that deep moral differences between people with different moral judgments are insoluble. The cause of disagreement can be found in the judgments themselves (deontological); in the way they are formed, such as lack of evidence or unreliable procedures (evidentialist); or in the unreliability of those who testify, in particular, their refusal to recognize their expert knowledge, authority, or epistemic equality (social). I would like to emphasize here two points that seem important to me. The first relates to external factors and the topic of the social environment, trust in experts, authorities, and peers. The second concerns internal factors, in particular, epistemic virtues and vices, which are often seen as character traits that determine epistemic behavior.

[23] Clifford et al., *The ethics of belief: Essays*, 11–12.

The Social Background of Bad Beliefs, Virtues, and Vices

Moral relativism is not always an ally in opposing dogmatism and supporting epistemic virtues. Sometimes it can support epistemic vices and enhance the persistence of bad beliefs. For instance, propaganda intensifies the sense of moral rightness, which reinforces the idea that any action, such as lying, is justified, since the truth has no value beyond benefit and gain. However, propaganda only has an impact if the internal moral prerequisites for accepting bad beliefs are present in the group. When epistemic virtues such as open-mindedness are weakened and epistemic vices such as wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, and gullibility are strengthened, bad beliefs spread easily and are difficult to eradicate. They can also receive additional protection in echo chambers. An echo chamber is a limited, closed detrimental media space that amplifies the messages spread in it and protects them from refutation. Other opinions are discredited, distrusted, and silenced, and vice versa, like-minded people reinforce their beliefs by repeating and spreading them.[24] Therefore, manipulation with the idea of moral relativism, especially the dependence of truth on moral testimony, contributes to the support of propaganda through the message of "our truth against yours" or in-group favoritism. Moral disagreement can be resolved on rational grounds if there is a common epistemic agreement, in particular, on epistemic values. If, on the other hand, metaethical relativism rejects truth as a value and instead offers only incommensurable socially variable criteria, there can be few expectations of a rational resolution.

Epistemology of Virtues and Vices

If one wanted to show the relationship between the ethics of belief and the epistemology of epistemic virtues and vices succinctly, these two quotes would do the job:

[24] C. Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," *Episteme* 17, no. 2 (2020): 141–161, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.32

"A wise man … proportions his belief to the evidence"[25] (David Hume).

"The credulous man is a father to the liar and the cheat"[26] (William Clifford).

The tension between the descriptive and normative approaches to the question of bad beliefs, which I mentioned at the beginning of the article, and the imbalance between the individual and social ethics of belief, are highlighted in the attitude toward epistemic virtues and vices. For virtue ethics, the relevant properties are moral traits, and for ethics of belief, they are intellectual traits. Intellectual virtues are cognitive excellence, intellectual vices are cognitive defects. An epistemically responsible agent, as seen in the ethics of belief, should be a bearer of epistemic virtues. These virtues are among others open-mindedness attentiveness, benevolence, curiosity, intellectual courage, intellectual humility, discernment, objectivity, warranty perceptual acuity, intellectual generosity, epistemic temperance, intellectual perseverance, inquisitiveness, epistemic justice.[27]

Traditional ethics of belief consider knowledge as the result of intellectually approved action and the achievement of a credible cognizer. Cognitive science, on the other hand, shows that the state of affairs concerning virtuous individual cognition is far from ideal.[28] Therefore, epistemic flaws should also be taken into account. Vice epistemology is a new branch of the theory of knowledge or "the philosophical study of the nature, identity, and epistemological significance of intellectual vices."[29] Ian James Kidd defines it as an epistemology of character: "Virtue

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[25] David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section X, Part I, ed. Peter Millican (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 80.

[26] Clifford et al., *The ethics of belief: Essays*, 17.

[27] Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry Into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic authority: A theory of trust, authority, and autonomy in belief* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[28] Marco Meyer and Mark Alfano, "Fake News, Conspiracy Theorizing, and Intellectual Vice," in: *Social Virtue Epistemology*, ed. Mark Alfano et al. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 236–259; Emily Sullivan and Mark Alfano, "Vectors of Epistemic Insecurity," in: *Vice Epistemology*, ed. Ian James Kidd et al. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 148–164.

[29] Quassim Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," *The Monist* 99, no. 2, 2016: 159, https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onv034

and vice epistemology collectively constitute what we might call character epistemology, reflecting a conviction that the study of epistemic activity ought to invoke, to some substantive degree, the epistemic characters of individual or collective agents."[30] A list of epistemic vices includes forming beliefs by guesswork, wishful thinking, ignoring contrary evidence,[31] epistemic laziness, arrogance, dogmatism[32], intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness.[33] In *Character as Moral Fiction*, Mark Alfano argues that although the traditional set of virtues demanded by normative virtue ethics are not innate character traits in most people, there is a way to improve human behavior to be consistent with these virtues through moral technologies.[34] That is, it makes sense to act as if people are virtuous even if you know they are not because attributing virtues can have a positive effect on their behavior.

The question of whether ordinary people can distinguish between reliable information and disinformation, fake news, political propaganda, and other examples of bad beliefs is empirically investigated in cognitive science. Neil Levy argues that while people are incompetent at solving most tasks, they are perfectly rational in relying on the opinions of others. However, in my opinion, rationality cannot be equated with utilitarian benefit. Just as truth becomes post-truth without epistemic virtues, rationality becomes benefit without epistemic virtues and commitments. Instead, my idea of rationality presupposes that there is a commitment to truth as a condition of rationality. His thesis that ordinary people cannot deal with beliefs in an epistemically polluted environment is a typical anti-responsibilist conclusion based on the descriptive approach of cognitive science: "The epistemic pollution makes the task of distinguishing reliable from unreliable sources too difficult for ordinary people to reasonably be expected to accomplish

[30] Ian James Kidd, "Deep epistemic vices," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 43 (2018): 43, https://doi.org/10.5840/jpr2018431

[31] Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," 159.

[32] Ian James Kidd, "Epistemic Corruption and Social Oppression," in: *Vice Epistemology*, 69–85.

[33] Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 152.

[34] Mark Alfano, *Character as Moral Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139208536

it. The markers of expertise can play their certifying role only if they are not themselves excessively polluted."[35] I can agree that a key issue in explaining why people have bad beliefs, in addition to the problem of access to information and evidence, is the concept of expertise. However, the question of "environment" is more social than epistemic, even in the case of beliefs.

Experts, authorities, and epistemic peers

Experts, authorities, and epistemic peers are those who influence the formation of our beliefs. Are there objective epistemic criteria for defining them, and are trust and distrust in a source of information determined by these criteria? I think it depends a lot on the community and what norms it is governed by. The formal distinctions between these concepts are quite clear: an expert is defined by the level of knowledge, skills, and experience in a particular field; an authority has social weight and influence on people's opinions and their allegiances; and peers are those who are in an equal social position. Yet if epistemic virtues and values are not used in identification, expert assessment is replaced by social authority (often one that does not have professional knowledge and is value-biased), and only like-minded people are recognized as epistemic peers. Although my task lies mainly within the ethics of belief, I cannot avoid the axiological question, because it is not about obligations but about values. At the bottom of the problem of bad beliefs, especially conspiracy theories that are resistant to correction, is the problem of values, in addition to the problem of confidence and belonging to one's community. Thus, many of those who respect science in general and give scientists a fairly high degree of credibility still believe that scientists do not represent their values.[36]

Epistemic trust is justified only when it is based on epistemic values and virtues. The minimum necessary epistemic value is truth. Epistemic virtues are opposed to epistemic vices, for example, open-mindedness is opposed to closed-

[35] Levy, *Bad beliefs*, 117.

[36] Arthur Lupia, David B. Allison, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Jennifer Heimberg, Magdalena Skipper and Susan M. Wolf, "Trends in US Public Confidence in Science and Opportunities for Progress," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 121, no. 11 (2024): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2319488121

mindedness, and epistemic vigilance is opposed to gullibility. Only when we believe that another person is guided by epistemic virtues, has the truth as his or her goal, and is competent in the matters of trust in question, is it justified to trust that person's testimony without further verification. This is the basis for my belief that the nucleus of the sodium atom contains 11 protons. I have neither the resources nor the opportunity to empirically verify this thesis, so my belief is based on the testimony of competent experts in physics following the epistemic division of labor. Therefore, I expect that they will do their part to the best of their ability. This expectation is not faith, as A.J. Burger calls it, "believe in the absence of evidence."[37] On the contrary, my hope results from my knowledge of the principles of scientific ethos and the methodological organization of scientific endeavor. Confidence in the scientific community is an example of trust based on virtue because "Most institutions demand unqualified faith, but the institution of science makes skepticism a virtue."[38]

However, the recognition of scientists as trustworthy experts is problematic at least for certain social groups, and correlates with their support for bad beliefs. Honesty and expertise are the bedrock of the scientific ethos. With proper methods, rational guidelines, and critical attitudes of the scientific community, they are supposed to guarantee protection against bad beliefs or at least reduce their number. Bad beliefs are problematic because they are based on trust instead of truth, are guided by peer agreement instead of expert judgment, and are driven by unreliable practices that contradict normative epistemic procedures. They are formed, shared, and evaluated by a group rather than an individual, and are the exact opposite of the essence of scientific knowledge. Hence, even the EBB's criteria for assessing bad are not purely epistemic, as they refer to the expert opinion of a particular group.

In the scientific community, internal criticism and organized skepticism are norms of ethos, but with other social groups, this is not the case. Belonging to such groups increases the chances of holding bad beliefs and being resistant to the correction of mistakes. There are several reasons for this, in particular, the benefit of winning in a group and reducing risks, including decreasing moral culpability and responsibility. Chris D. Frith and Uta Frith argue that cooperation, collaboration,

[37] Clifford et al., *The ethics of belief: Essays*, 6.

[38] Robert King Merton. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 547.

and collective problem-solving increase the chances of success and gain for an individual.[39] A similar conclusion was also reached by the Munich Crowd Cognition Group: sharing responsibility in social decision-making helps individuals use the flexibility of the collective context to benefit themselves by claiming credit for good outcomes or avoiding the blame for bad outcomes.[40] Daniel Williams argues that "belief-based social learning is not credulous; trust must be earned, and people are highly vigilant against deception and misinformation."[41] People who trust dubious sources and pseudo-experts are not gullible if they do not trust experts but give excessive credibility to authorities recognized by their group and insufficient credibility to globally recognized experts or official sources. If they personally pay a low price for bad beliefs, they receive a situational benefit, the risk of which is covered by society.

Conclusions

If the assertion that "our experience of responsibility for action emerges during our upbringing through exposure to our culture"[42] is correct, then the ethics of belief should have a value in itself, as it accustoms one to take responsibility for beliefs. Responsibility is a trait that can be trained like other skills: like training in mathematics or rules of behavior.

Truth as a regulative norm, an approximate ideal, and an epistemic value is a necessary condition for knowledge even if there is no absolute truth or if it is unattainable (which I ultimately agree with), regardless of preference or utilitarian benefit. The reason we need a demand for moral responsibility for the way beliefs

[39] Uta Frith and Chris D. Frith, "What makes us social and what does it tell us about mental disorders?," *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 29, no. 1 (2024): 1–9, https://doi.org/10.1080/13546805.2024.2307958

[40] Marwa El Zein, Ray J. Dolan and Bahador Bahrami, "Shared Responsibility Decreases the Sense of Agency in the Human Brain," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 34, no. 11 (2022): 2065–2081, https://doi.org/10.1162/jocn_a_01896

[41] Daniel Williams, "Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Highly Intelligent, Vigilant, Devious, Self-Deceiving, Coalitional Apes," *Philosophical Psychology* 36, no. 4 (2023): 824, https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2186844

[42] Chris D. Frith, "Action, Agency and Responsibility," *Neuropsychologia* 55, no. 1 (2014):137, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuropsychologia.2013.09.007

are formed is that epistemically ill-formed beliefs tend to become morally and epistemically bad beliefs under unfavorable social conditions. Therefore, even if Clifford's principle is too demanding, our epistemic and moral obligation is to avoid bad beliefs. Just as psychological research on character traits demonstrates that virtuous behavior can be induced, the history of propaganda's impact on large social groups shows how manipulating flaws can change beliefs from sound to epistemically bad ones that are based on non-epistemic values. Why is there a responsibility for beliefs? Because a significant part, if not most, of our knowledge is not our personal experiential knowledge but is based on testimony. If trust in testimony has no reliable basis, any knowledge based on testimony becomes an emotional choice or ideological preference. Moral testimony, on the other hand, is always subjective and value-based and therefore requires personal responsibility. There is nothing wrong with belonging to a group and checking one's beliefs with others because the entire history of cognitive development testifies in favor of the benefits of society. However, individuals guided by bad beliefs without reliable evidence act not only epistemically but also morally wrong, which is why morally bad actions are so often not the result of mistakes as accidentally acquired false beliefs, but morally and epistemically bad beliefs that are resistant to correction.

To conclude, and to emphasize the relevance of the responsibilist approach, I will try to summarise the factors that strengthen or weaken bad beliefs.

The following three conditions support the formation of bad beliefs:

- increasing benefits but decreasing responsibility in a group, compared to independent actions and decisions by an individual;
- managing epistemic flaws rather than virtues (e.g. gullibility instead of vigilance);
- trust in-group authorities instead of recognized experts and not recognizing others as equals.

While the following strategies, based on the ethos of science, can be used to overcome bad beliefs:

- taking responsibility for the formation of beliefs and evidence;
- cultivating an environment where epistemic virtues are developed;
- relying on expert opinion.

Although no epistemic or moral norms can guarantee protection against bad beliefs, recognizing and avoiding them certainly requires effort.

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Streszczenie

Odpowiedzialność za złe przekonania a relatywizm moralny

W niniejszym artykule argumentuję w obronie odpowiedzialności za złe przekonania z perspektywy etyki przekonań i kognitywistyki, przedstawiając klasyfikację złych przekonań na trzy typy. Przedstawiam również argumenty na rzecz regulatywnej wartości prawdy. Metaetyczny relatywizm moralny zmienia rozumienie podstawowych założeń etyki przekonań, a także podważa ideę prawdy jako fundamentalnego dobra epistemicznego. Z relatywizmem moralnym wiążą się potencjalne pułapki epistemiczne, w tym wykorzystanie go do wspierania złych przekonań, w których prawda staje się względna wobec korzyści pewnej grupy lub sprawujących władzę, podważając w ten sposób samą koncepcję prawdy. Chociaż klasyczna zasada Clifforda jest zbyt wymagająca, to niezbędna jest moralna odpowiedzialność za sposób nabywania przekonań, gdyż wadliwie epistemicznie ukształtowane w niesprzyjających warunkach społecznych stają się moralnie i epistemicznie złe.

Słowa kluczowe: złe przekonania, relatywizm moralny, etyka przekonań, cnoty i wady epistemiczne, kognitywistyka, epistemologia

Zusammenfassung

Verantwortung für falsche Überzeugungen und moralischer Relativismus

In diesem Artikel argumentiere ich zur Verteidigung der Verantwortung für falsche Überzeugungen aus der Perspektive der Glaubensethik und der Kognitionswissenschaft und präsentiere eine Klassifizierung von falschen Überzeugungen in drei Typen. Ich führe auch Argumente für den regulativen Wert der Wahrheit an. Moralischer metaethischer Relativismus verändert das Verständnis der grundlegenden Prämissen der Glaubensethik und bezweifelt die Idee der Wahrheit als grundlegendes epistemisches Gut. Der moralische Relativismus birgt potenzielle erkenntnistheoretische Fallstricke, wie etwa die Förderung falscher Überzeugungen, bei denen die Wahrheit zum Vorteil einer bestimmten Gruppe oder der Machthaber relativiert wird, wodurch das Konzept der Wahrheit selbst untergraben wird. Obwohl Cliffords klassisches Prinzip zu anspruchsvoll ist, ist die moralische Verantwortung für die Art und Weise, wie Überzeugungen erworben werden, von wesentlicher Bedeutung, da erkenntnistheoretisch fehlerhafte Überzeugungen, die unter ungünstigen sozialen Bedingungen entstehen, moralisch und erkenntnistheoretisch falsch sind.

Schlüsselworte: schlechte Überzeugungen, moralischer Relativismus, Ethik des Glaubens, epistemische Tugenden und Laster, Kognitionswissenschaft, Erkenntnistheorie

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