

Doxastic wrongs, non-spurious generalisations and particularised beliefs

Handout November 2021

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1 Introduction

Posh Party: Albert is a guest at a posh party. He spots an African-American man (call him John) who is wearing a tuxedo, and forms the belief, purely on the basis of his skin's color and attire, that he is a waiter. He hands him over his cloakroom ticket and asks him to fetch his coat. In fact, John is the guest of honour.

Board Meeting: Albert has been invited as a consultant to speak to the Board of a FTSE-100 company. There is only one woman (call her Susan) in the Board Room. Albert forms the belief, purely on the basis of her gender, that she is an administrative assistant. He hands over his USB stick and asks her to help him with his PowerPoint presentation. In fact, Susan is a Board member.

Standard claim: Albert wrongs John and Susan: he has a belief about them which happens to be false, and which is grounded in race- and gender-based stereotypes; moreover, he acts on that belief.

Less standard claim: Albert wrongs John and Susan even if (a) the belief is true (John *is* a waiter; Susan *is* an administrative assistant); (b) he does not act on his belief. More widely: we can wrong someone purely by holding certain beliefs about them, even if those beliefs are true.

2 Doxastic wrongs

Suppose that some agent X believes that p about some other agent Y. DWT says that X can wrong Y. The wrong is *located* in believing that p - as distinct from acting on p - and is *directed* at the subject of that belief.

Location: the belief; not (just) the act. Disambiguating 'believing': forming a belief; not schooling oneself out of an already acquired belief;

Direction: Albert owes it *to* John and Susan not to form the relevant beliefs.

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Motivating DWT

Two objections to DW:

(i) Lack of control:

The objection: DW is tantamount to accepting 'thought crimes' - too demanding.

Reply: we can acquire the requisite degree of control.

(ii) Wrong kind of claim:

The objection: the epistemic status of a belief does not depend on its moral status.

Reply: encroachment.

3 The Kantian view

Key claim: we ought to relate to one another as persons, and not as objects. To treat others as persons is to recognise in them the capacity to act autonomously, that is, to frame, revise and pursue a conception of the good with which they identify. Albert owes it to John and Susan to ascertain what they do before forming a verdictive judgement about their occupation. At the very least, he owes it to them to allow for the possibility that they do not fit the stereotype.

Key point: whether the belief is true or false is irrelevant.

An interesting case: wrongdoers. Consider:

Knife Crime: Albert is taking his usual walk through Lambeth. He spots a young Black teenager (call him James) crouching next to the lifeless body of another Black teenager. Police and ambulance sirens can be heard in the distance. Albert forms the belief, based on his perceptual evidence and the aforementioned facts, that James stabbed the lifeless teenager, in yet another episode of gang warfare.

Suppose that James is guilty. Still, Albert wrongs him. Albert lacks evidence that James is not conducting his life as a moral agent. He owes it to him to assume that he is so conducting his life - that is to say, that he may have formed the belief that killing is morally impermissible under the circumstances and lived his life accordingly.

4 Objections

(i) The demandingness objection

The objection: The Kantian view is too demanding. Modifying our prejudicial beliefs is so arduous that we may not reasonably be expected to do so.

Response: of course there is a limit to what we may reasonably demand of one another; further, the constraints of our professional, social and familial lives, the failures of our will and imagination, our upbringing, and the contexts in which we conduct ourselves do make it difficult for us to revise our beliefs. However, once we become aware of those beliefs, it is harder to exculpate ourselves for holding them.

(ii) Permissible conduct

The objection: we sometimes do the right thing on the basis of prejudicial beliefs. Eg: Betty takes protective steps following repeated instances of sexual harassment.

Reply: the claim that Betty is morally justified in protecting herself from this kind of threat does not imply that the steps she takes to do so are exempt from moral evaluation in general, and from the charge of wronging their targets in particular. The objection goes through only if Betty's holding the relevant belief, on the basis of which she takes rational and warranted protective measures, does not wrong those men. This however is precisely the point at issue: so stated, the objection begs the question.

(iii) Proves too much

The objection: the Kantian View implausibly charges with doxastic wrongdoing agents whose beliefs are about members of privileged groups, and/or are positively valenced. Consider:

*Board MeetingT**: Albert has been invited as a consultant to speak to the Board of a FTSE-100 company. There is a white man wearing a suit, in his mid thirties, standing near the head of the table (call him William). Albert forms the belief on the basis of his race and gender that he is a Board member. He happens to be correct.

Reply: On the Kantian View, to the extent that Albert fails to consider the possibility that William's position is not merely a by-product and reflection of his race and gender, he fails to give him the respect he is due as an autonomous agent.

(iv) **Important question:** Albert's wrong seems worse in *Posh Party* than in *Board Meeting*. Can we account for this?

Reply: In discrimination cases, profiling is worse when it is parasitic on and entrenches injustice. Albert impose a risk of greater wrongful harm in *Posh Party* than in *Board Meeting**.

5 Conclusion

Kantian View: we wrong one another, doxastically speaking, when we hold about one another beliefs which manifest our failure to treat one another as autonomous and moral agents. The epistemic status and valence of our beliefs are irrelevant to the truth of the doxastic wrongs thesis, though they are relevant to the degree to which we wrong one another.