

# Doxastic wrongs, non-spurious generalisations and particularised beliefs

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## 1 Introduction

Consider the following interactions, both of which involve someone whom I shall call Albert. Albert is white, was born a male and self-identifies as a man.

*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.

These are not idiosyncratic examples: it is not uncommon for African-Americans, not least Barack Obama himself, to report having been subject to this kind of race-based stereotyping.<sup>1</sup> Nor is it uncommon for many women to report being subject to this kind of gender-stereotyping. Albert forms beliefs, on which he acts, about John's and Susan's respective occupations with no evidence other than the context in which he sees them combined with one of their demographic characteristics - a characteristic which has grounded, and continues to shape, structural injustices.

Many think that by openly acting on the basis of race- and gender- based generalisations, Albert wrongs John and Susan even if those generalisations are statistically non-spurious. But there is another view, to the effect that Albert wrongs them merely

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, something like *Posh Party* has happened to him on more than one occasion (Westfall, (17/12/2014)). I adapt the classic cases from Tamar Gendler (2011) and Sarah Moss (2018b, pp. 220-222) respectively.

by dint of holding those beliefs about them. This view is an application of the general thesis that holding beliefs can wrong the subjects of those beliefs irrespective of whether one manifests that belief. Call this the doxastic wrongs thesis (henceforth, DWT.)

We form particularised beliefs about one another on the basis of demographic generalisations in a wide range of contexts, many of which seem morally unproblematic. For example, it seems morally unproblematic to assume that the young person standing outside a classroom is a student rather than a teacher, that the man speaking English with a French accent is French when he might in fact be Belgian. The challenge for DWT lies in identifying which differential particularised judgements based on non-spurious statistical inferences are morally problematic. (For my purposes here, I shall follow Frederick Schauer (2006), whose work on generalisation-based decisions is seminal, in using ‘generalisations’ and ‘stereotypes’ interchangeably.)

Most of the cases discussed in the literature on doxastic wrongs involve beliefs which have the following features: they are formed on the basis of statistically non-spurious generalisations about gender and ethnicity; they are false; they are negatively valenced (in societies such as ours, sadly, being a waiter or an administrative assistant does not command as much esteem as being a posh party guest or a FTSE-100 Board member); they are held by members of socially privileged groups about members of socially under-privileged groups.

But suppose that Albert’s beliefs are *true*: John is a waiter and Susan is an administrative assistant. Does Albert wrong John and Susan and, if so, why?

Indeed, suppose that (in other cases) Albert’s beliefs, though formed on the basis of stereotypes are false yet positively valenced, or true and positively valenced, and/or are held about a member of a socially privileged group. To give but one example:

*Board Meeting\**: 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.

It seems far-fetched to say that Albert wrongs William. Yet, I argue that a plausible Kantian argument for the view that Albert wrongs John and Susan in the classic cases licences extending it to non-classic cases in which the belief is true and/or positively valenced, and/or is held about socially privileged individuals. Section 2 provides a brief account of doxastic wrongs. Section 3 rejects Mark Schroeder’s argument to the effect that one cannot wrong someone by holding true beliefs about them (Schroeder 2018). Section 4 draws on a Kantian argument for DWT in respect of false beliefs, and applies it to true beliefs - holding their negative valence constant. Section 5 addresses three objections, and extends the scope of the Kantian view to the other non-classic cases. Section 6 concludes.

Three final remarks. First, unless otherwise stated, when I speak of beliefs, I mean beliefs grounded in statistically non-spurious generalised beliefs which track socially salient characteristics. I rely on Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen (2011, p. 30)’s

definition of a socially salient characteristic as a characteristic of a group such that ‘perceived membership of it is important to the structure of social interactions across a wide range of social contexts’. Second, I focus on cases in which the holder and subject of the belief do not stand in a special relationship with each other: they are not friends, spouses, colleagues or even social acquaintances. Whether we are under duties of epistemic partiality to those with whom we stand in such relationships is a fascinating question which I do not pursue it here.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I do not attempt to provide a full argument for DWT in general. My more modest aim is to show that *if* forming and holding a belief based on the aforementioned generalisations about a person can wrong her on Kantian grounds, it can do so even when the belief is true and/or positively valenced.

## 2 Doxastic wrongs: a primer

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 (Basu and Schroeder 2018).

Both dimensions are crucial to a proper understanding of the nature and scope of doxastic wrongs. Consider the location of the wrong. DWT avers that Albert wrongs John by believing that he is a waiter - irrespective of his behaviour. he does. (For the sake of brevity, I shall use either one of the classic examples. What I say about one applies to the other, *mutatis mutandis*.) The verb ‘believing’ needs disambiguating. The question is whether the wrong is located in the way in which Albert forms his belief, or in his mere holding the belief irrespective of how he came to form it, or both, or indeed something else altogether. Suppose that Albert unwittingly swallows a pill one effect of which is that he instantaneously holds stereotypical beliefs about African-Americans. He has not engaged in any activity plausibly described as forming those beliefs (unlike someone who has been educated from childhood in a racist environment). I am inclined to think that while it is bad that John should be the subject of those beliefs, Albert does not wrong John. It does not follow however that having *formed* a (relevant) belief is a necessary condition for committing a doxastic wrong. Suppose that Albert realises that not everyone holds stereotypical beliefs about African-Americans and that there is evidence out there which undermines those stereotypes - stereotypes, he also knows, which are thought to be morally controversial. But he refuses to try and investigate, as a result of which he believes, at the posh party, that John is a waiter. It is intuitively plausible that Albert wrongs John, notwithstanding the fact that he has not engaged in the activity of belief-formation. His wrong is located in his holding and refusing to try and school himself out of that belief. From now on, I will use the phrase ‘believes that  $p$ ’ to denote both cases.

Consider now the direction of the wrong. On some views, Albert’s wrong lies in his failure to display doxastic virtues or to live by the principle that, in general, we

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Goldberg 2019; Stroud 2006.

morally ought to keep an open mind about people. DWT goes further: by assuming, on the basis of his race together with the context in which he encounters John that John is a waiter, Albert wrongs *him*.

DWT is a tough sell - implying as it does that there are such things as (in common parlance) 'thought crimes'. Let me say a few words to motivate it. Suppose that John overhears Albert describe to his partner, on the phone, what the party is like and how helpful the waiters are. It is obvious that by 'waiters' he means John amongst others, and that he has formed his belief on the basis of John's race. When challenged by John, he apologises for not finding an isolated spot before placing the call. His apology misfires. For the problem is not just that he has unnecessarily run the risk of offending John. The problem is that he has formed a false belief about John with no evidence other than a context-based race-based generalisation. *That* is John's grievance, and one which is not addressed by Albert's apology. Nor would it be addressed by Albert merely expressing regret that John is offended. Instead, Albert should admit that it was wrong of him to make this kind of assumption and should apologise for that. His apology, moreover, is owed to *to John* to apologise: were he to say to a fellow guest that he is sorry for mistakenly assuming on the stated grounds that John is a waiter, he would also miss the mark.

DWT elicits two standard objections. First, according to the lack-of-control objection, we are under a moral obligation not to  $\varphi$  only if we are morally responsible for  $\varphi$ -ing. However, we are morally responsible for  $\varphi$ -ing only if we have some degree of control over  $\varphi$ . Given that we do not have control over what we believe, there is no such thing as a doxastic moral obligation and, therefore, as a doxastic wrong.

The objection's normative premise, that having control over whether to  $\varphi$  is a necessary condition for being under a moral obligation not to  $\varphi$ , has come under sustained criticism, including in the context of belief (Smith 2005; Hieronymi 2006, 2008; Basu and Schroeder 2018). But even if the normative premise is true, its factual premise, that we lack control over what we believe, is not. Many of our practices are intelligible only if we take ourselves to have such control and if, at least sometimes, we are proved to be right. We undergo cognitive behaviour therapy in the hope, often fulfilled, that we will be led to revise noxious beliefs. We embark on scientific inquiry in the hope, often fulfilled, that we will acquire justified beliefs and shed unjustified ones. When called on their manifest prejudices, some individuals have been found to respond to implicit attitudes tests in less prejudiced ways (Basu 2019a, pp. 2513-2514; Basu 2018; Holroyd 2012, pp. 282-286; Marusic and White 2018). All that is needed, for DWT to hold, is that we have it can acquire some degree of effective control over some of our beliefs.

The second objection goes like this. Reasons for forming, holding and rejecting beliefs can only be epistemic reasons - grounded in whether the beliefs are true, what evidence there is to support or undermine them, and so on. The fact that a belief has morally problematic features is neither here nor there.

In response, some proponents of DWT argue that moral considerations can make a difference to the epistemic status of a belief. In now accepted parlance, the former *encroach* on the latter. Moral encroachment is a variant of pragmatic encroachment,

according to which the epistemic status of a belief in part depends on the believer's pragmatic circumstances. Suppose that I read an article in the newspaper that there is a nuclear facility 50kms east of Teheran. The journalist is well-known for his accurate reporting of the politics, society and economics of Iran. From the comfort of my study, this seems good enough evidence for me to form the belief that there is such a facility. Unlike me, the Prime Minister has access to a recent top-secret intelligence brief on Iran's nuclear capabilities. According to proponents of pragmatic encroachment, she is not epistemically licensed to form the belief that there is a nuclear facility 50kms of Teheran purely on the basis of the newspaper article: she ought to read the brief. According to proponents of moral encroachment, by parity of reasoning, the epistemic status of a belief can also depend on moral considerations in favour or against holding the belief (Pace 2011; Fritz 2017; Basu and Schroeder 2018; Moss 2018a; Schroeder 2018).

Moral encroachment is controversial. Critics, such as Endre Begby (2021, pp. 156-164), essentially rehearse the aforementioned point that the moral stakes of a belief have no bearing on our reasons for holding that belief, though they do of course have a bearing on whether we should act on it. In any event, one need not endorse moral encroachment in order to accept the doxastic wrong thesis. One can grant that a belief is epistemically rational yet morally wrong (Fritz 2020). Alternatively, one can focus solely on epistemic norms. If the concern is that the believer wrongs the subject of his belief by relying on patchy evidence when he can reasonably be expected to have or procure better evidence, the believer's moral failure is traceable to his epistemic failures (Begby 2018; Begby 2021, pp. 165-170).

In what follows, I remain agnostic on (a) the soundness of moral encroachment as an account of the relationship between the moral and epistemic features of beliefs, and (b) the relationship between moral encroachment and DWT. All I need is the view, for which I have provided some intuitive support, that one can sometimes wrong another person merely by holding some belief about them. The question is which beliefs are of that sort.

### 3 The false-beliefs restriction

In the classic cases, Albert's beliefs are false: John is a guest, and Susan is a Board member. Let us re-label the cases *Posh Party<sub>F</sub>* and *Board Meeting<sub>F</sub>*. Mark Schroeder, who endorses the doxastic wrong thesis, restricts its scope to cases such as these: if Albert's beliefs happened to be true (*Posh Party<sub>T</sub>* and *Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>*), he could not be described as wronging John and Susan.

On Schroeder's account, what makes holding a belief wrongful to its subject is that being erroneous is costly even if we do not manifest that belief. This is because of the place occupied by our beliefs in our relationships with other people. As he puts it (Schroeder 2018, p. 121),

our interpersonal relationships are in part constituted by our beliefs about one another. In so far as our beliefs help to constitute our rela-

tionships, the effects of our beliefs on our relationships are not mediated by the effects of our beliefs on our actions or other behaviours.

I agree that relationships are damaged when the beliefs which help constitute them are false beliefs. By implication, though, the point does not provide the right explanation for cases in which the holder and subject of the belief do not know each other. Moreover, this argument does not show that the doxastic wrong thesis only applies to false beliefs: identifying one particular way in which beliefs damage relationships does not rule out other ways in which they can do so.

When handling cases in which the belief is true, Schroeder makes two moves. First, in some cases, one's true particularised beliefs about a person depend on false generalisations about the class to which she belongs. Suppose that Albert forms the (correct) belief that John is a waiter and not a guest on the grounds that African-Americans generally do not have what it takes to rise to the level of being invited to posh parties. Even though there is one respect in which Albert wrongs John in *Posh Party<sub>F</sub>* but not in *Posh Party<sub>T</sub>*, 'there *may* be some further respect' in which he wrongs her in both cases, 'as [a member] of a class' about which he holds false essentialising beliefs (Schroeder 2018, p. 122). Given that his particularised belief, though true, relies on false beliefs, we can account for the view that he wrongs Susan without extending the thesis to true beliefs.

*Pace* Schroeder, this merely shows that there are two kinds of particularised beliefs which it can be wrong (*vis-à-vis* their subject) to hold: beliefs which are false with respect to their particular subject, and beliefs which are true with respect to their particular subject but which are grounded in generalised false beliefs. While the latter help explain what seems wrong with Albert's accurately believing that John is a waiter, it does not rule out adding true beliefs grounded in non-spurious generalisations to the category of doxastic wrongs.

Schroeder's second move goes like this. We must distinguish between objective and subjective moral permissibility. Suppose that my neighbour tells me that her daughter Jane, who likes cycling in our shared driveway, is down for a nap and will not wake up until 3pm. As I am typing this sentence sitting at my desk at 1:45pm, my neighbour's testimony is good enough for me to form the belief that Jane is safely asleep bed. At 2pm, I decide to go for a drive. As it happens, Jane is safely tucked in bed, so I will not run her over if I drive off without carrying basic visual checks. As matter of practical ethics, I am objectively permitted to drive off without checking and thus do not wrong her by doing so, but my failure to check means that I am not subjectively permitted to drive off. The distinction between subjective and objective permissibility applies to beliefs, as well as to actions. Thus, even if Albert does not wrong Susan - for he accurately and objectively believes that she is an administrative assistant - in some cases his belief might 'nevertheless be subjectively wrong, epistemically irrational, and therefore incapable of being knowledge' (p. 123). This, Schroeder says, helps accounts for the intuition that there is something morally problematic about holding these kinds of belief - though Albert falls short of wronging

Susan.<sup>3</sup>

I agree that if Albert forms his belief about Susan on the basis of faulty evidence and/or as a result of sexist biases, it is plausible to say that he is not subjectively permitted to hold that belief. However, the distinction between subjective and objective permissibility cuts across the distinction between an act or a belief being wrong *simpliciter* and an act or a belief wronging its subject. Schroeder seems to rule out the possibility that Albert subjectively (albeit not objectively) wrongs Susan. Not only does this move seem unwarranted: there are independent reasons to resist it. For it seems to imply that, as a matter of practical ethics, I do not subjectively wrong Jane by driving off without checking whether she is cycling in the driveway. Yet, on plausible accounts of the morality of risk imposition, my failure to take her vital interest into account in my deliberation is a dereliction of a duty which I owe *her*, even if I then decide not to drive off. By parity of reasoning, Albert's failure to take due care in forming his belief about Susan wrongs her, even though his belief happens to be true.<sup>4</sup>

In the next section, I develop this point into an argument for extending the thesis to cases such as *Posh Party<sub>T</sub>* and *Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>*, and draw out one important implication of that argument for cases in which the subject of the belief is a wrongdoer.

## 4 The Kantian View

### 4.1

Albert forms his true belief about John on the basis of a statistically accurate generalised belief: it really is the case that African-Americans are more likely to be waiters than guests at posh parties - a fact of which he is well aware. Still, it does not follow from the fact that John is African-American and from the fact that any African-American is more likely to be a waiter than a guest at a posh party, that *John is* a waiter. Albert only has epistemic warrant for the claim that John is more likely to be a waiter than a guest. The question is whether, and if so why, he wrongs John by believing that he is a waiter even though the belief is true.

Rima Basu's Kantian defense of DWT, though focused on cases in which the belief is false, is a useful starting point (Basu 2019b, p. 922ff).<sup>5</sup> Let us accept the

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between subjective and objective modes of evaluation is closely related to Derek Parfit's distinction between fact-relative, belief-relative and evidence-relative accounts of permissibility (Parfit 2011, pp. 50-62).

<sup>4</sup> I draw on John Oberdiek's recent account of the morality of pure risk imposition (Oberdiek 2017, esp. ch. 4). Fritz (2020) mounts a sustained critique of Schroeder's view, which focuses on false-belief cases. Fritz thinks that the epistemic status of a belief as true or false in itself has little to do with its being morally suspect, though he does not develop that view.

<sup>5</sup> In that paper, Basu, who draws on Peter Strawson (1962)'s interpretation of the Kantian requirement, explicitly says that one can wrong someone by holding true beliefs about them, but she does not fully explore that possibility: indeed, her discussion proceeds almost entirely with reference to

Kantian principle that we ought to relate to one another as persons, and not as objects. For me to treat you as a person requires that, in my dealings with you, I recognise that your occupation, your relationships, your political and religious views and your hobbies are constitutive of your identity and your sense of your own worth. To treat you as a person means that I owe it to you that my beliefs about you in those dimensions should be responsive to and match the ways in which you describe and understand yourself. Failing that, I do not relate to you as a person: rather, I form views about you as if I were 'observing a planet' whose movements are only answerable to the laws of physics.<sup>6</sup>

So stated, the Kantian View is indifferent to the truth value of my beliefs. What matters is that my beliefs are responsive to the person you are and take yourself to be. However, the view needs revising. Suppose that John identifies with his job, or that he actively dis-identifies with it, or that he could not care less about it. The Kantian View does not work in cases in which the true belief matches its subject's self-description, or in which the subject's self-description is not engaged by the belief. Yet, intuitively, it still seems that Albert wrongs John in all of those cases as well.

Suitably revised, the Kantian View shows why Albert wrongs John. The key injunction is not that our beliefs about others should match their own views about who they are and their sense of their own worth. Rather, 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. To be sure, their lives is shaped in part by the broader environment in which they operate; but it is not fully determined by it. As John Rawls (1993, pp. 48-54) would put it, it is to recognise that they have the moral power of rationality. This in turn requires that, when forming and holding beliefs about them, we owe it to them to be sensitive to whatever evidence we have that they are conducting their lives as autonomous agents. As the point is sometimes put in the literature on the wrongfulness of certain forms of discriminations, we owe it to them to treat them as individuals (Eidelson 2013, 2015). Absent such evidence, we owe it to them to give them the benefit of the doubt. Albert, thus, owes it to John to ascertain what he does before forming a verdictive judgement about his occupation. If he cannot, will not or indeed may not do so (lest, for example, he should unduly intrude on John's privacy), he owes it to him to allow for the possibility that he does not fit the stereotype. In doing so, crucially, he need not occlude the structural constraints under which individuals operate; nor need he eschew all probabilistic beliefs, based on statistically non-spurious and relevant generalisations, about them. If he is asked by his dinner companion whether it is

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cases in which the belief is false. See p. 920 for her explicit statement, and p. 919 for the exception, involving a racist hermit who holds the belief that the Indian person he sees on a photo must smell of curry - a belief which, at the precise time at which it is formed, happens to be true. This particular case involves a particularised belief grounded in a spurious stereotype and thus falls outside the scope of my inquiry here. I much agree with Lawrence Blum (2004)'s discussion of the moral wrongness of this kind of stereotypes.

<sup>6</sup> Marusic and White (2018) offer a similar defense of doxastic wrongs in false beliefs cases. The phrase 'observing as a planet' is Rae Langton's (Langton 1992, p. 486).



more likely than not than John is a waiter, he does not wrong John if he answers in the affirmative. If he is asked whether John *is* a waiter, he does. The important and familiar point is that he should not essentialise John by reducing him to the fact that he is African-American.

The claim that there is a duty to give agents the benefit of this particular doubt mirrors in the domain of beliefs precautionary principles for risk imposition under conditions of uncertainty (Bolinger 2020, pp. 2422-2426). Suppose that I do not know what Jane's napping habits are. I owe it to her to act on the assumption that she might be in the driveway as I am about to set off, in light of the risks of serious harm to which I would subject her otherwise. Analogously, absent evidence to the effect that John and Susan lead autonomous lives, Albert owes it to them to presume that they do lead such a life. To be sure, there is a difference between the two cases. In the driving case, I am not required to believe that Jane might be in the driveway: I am required *to act as if I believe* that she might be. In *Posh Party<sub>T</sub>*, Albert is required *to believe that* John might not be a waiter, irrespective of what he might go on to do with that belief. That difference notwithstanding, so long as one grants that holding certain beliefs on the basis of generalisations can wrong the subjects of those beliefs and that we owe it to others to take precautionary steps so as not to wrong them when faced with uncertainty about the relevant facts, one can endorse the claim that Albert owes it to John not to assume that they lack autonomy. The point holds whether his belief, were he to assume as much, is true or false.

## 4.2

Let us take stock. The Kantian View accounts for the claim that Albert commits a doxastic wrong in both variants of *Posh Party* and *Board Meeting*. In those classic examples, Albert's belief is negatively valenced: being a waiter or an administrative assistant does not command as much esteem as being a posh party guest or a FTSE-100 Board member. The Kantian View, if successful in cases in which the belief is both true and negatively valenced in that sense, also applies when the belief is true and negatively valenced in the stronger sense that its subject has committed a grievous wrong.<sup>7</sup>

Here is an example. According to figures released in 2018 by the office of the Mayor of London, slightly over four fifths of the knife crimes which were committed in the capital in 2017 and which resulted in injuries were committed by men, and slightly over two thirds by members of ethnic minorities. Two thirds of the *victims* of non-domestic knife crimes are BAME and almost all are male.<sup>8</sup> Year on year, the Boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark witness the highest number of knife crimes.

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<sup>7</sup> In his important article on the morality of relying on statistical evidence in criminal and civil trials, David Wasserman (1991) deploys the autonomy argument against such reliance, but restricts it explicitly to cases in which the defendant's liability is not conceded.

<sup>8</sup> The figures are available at [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mopac\\_justice\\_matters\\_13\\_march\\_2018\\_disproportionality\\_slides.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mopac_justice_matters_13_march_2018_disproportionality_slides.pdf) (accessed on 7/10/2021).

Now consider:

*Knife Crime:* Albert is taking his usual walk through Lambeth. He spots a young Black male standing around the prone body of a Black teenage boy. Police and ambulance sirens can be heard in the distance. He forms the belief, based on his perceptual evidence and the aforementioned facts, that the teenager, who has died of his injuries, was killed by the young man, in yet another episode of senseless gang warfare.

The requirement that wrongdoers should not be treated on the basis of their race seems uncontroversial enough. The point here is that they ought not to be even *thought of* on that basis either. This seems clear if Albert's belief is false (as when the young man - call him James - is a friend of the murdered victim and would have come to harm too had he arrived on the scene ten minutes earlier.) But it is so, too, if his belief is correct. For he holds the belief that James killed the teenager on grounds relevantly similar to those on the basis of which he formed accurate beliefs about John. Moreover, he does James a greater wrong than he does John. Not only does he assume of James either that he has not escaped the constraints of his socially salient characteristics or that he is not conducting his life in reflective awareness of those constraints - in denial of James' capacity for autonomy. In addition, he fails to respect him as a moral agent. For to treat others as persons is not merely to recognise in them the capacity to act autonomously. It is also to recognise in them the capacity to act morally, that is, to form considered judgements about right and wrong and to lead their (autonomously chosen) life in the light of those judgements. It is to recognise in them the capacity for moral responsibility.

In Rawls (1993), this is the second of our two moral powers - the moral power of reasonableness. It is far less extensively discussed in liberal political and moral philosophy than the the power of rationality. Yet it is central to our moral lives. In the present context, Albert may not have evidence *that* James is conducting his life as a moral agent, but he also lacks evidence to the contrary, and thus 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.

To say that Albert wrongs James by not suspending judgement is to imply, *inter alia*, that James has a grievance against Albert, and that Albert owes James an apology for believing that James killed the boy. But (it may be objected), in the light of his considerably more serious wrongdoing, how can James justifiably make such a demand of Albert whose belief as to his culpability, let us not forget, was accurate?

The question is not specific to doxastic wrongs. It applies to practical wrongs and is raised by the racially-driven imposition of hard treatment. If Albert openly berates James for committing murder (a belief he forms on the basis of James' demographic characteristics), he acts without warrant even if James did in fact commit murder. Albert owes James an apology, it seems, even though James' wrongdoing is far worse than Albert's. There is no reason not to apply the point to doxastic wrongs. Granted,

in both cases, and particularly if James does not express remorse, we may think it is wrong of him to demand an apology. But the fact remains that Albert owes it to him to issue it.

## 5 Objections

The Kantian View seems vulnerable to three objections: it is too demanding; it rides roughshod over the fact that, in some cases, prejudicial beliefs are a basis for morally permissible conduct; it proves too much.<sup>9</sup>

### 5.1

Consider the demandingness objection. Even though we have some degree of control over our beliefs, we often have unbidden thoughts about other people. Not only can we not help doing so and, in that respect, relying in one way or another on stereotypical judgements: it also saves us a huge amount of cognitive labour, thanks to which we can go about our lives.<sup>10</sup> Even we have some degree of control over whether to believe  $p$  or *not-p*, it is very difficult for us to switch from believing  $p$  to believing *not-p*. It requires that we spend considerable amounts of time and cognitive energy examining relevant evidence against our existing beliefs. It also requires that we shed our beliefs if necessary, at the often painful cost of revisiting the relationships and experiences on the basis of which we formed those beliefs. Given the costs of the requisite epistemic labour, it seems harsh to say that we wrong those other people merely by holding those beliefs - and even harsher still, to the point of implausibility, when those beliefs are true. Suppose that Albert has been brought up in a traditional, father-breadwinner/mother-at home family. This fact together with the context in which he encounters Susan explain why he assumes that she is an administrative assistant. To say that he wrongs her *merely* for holding that belief and *a fortiori* if he is not aware of being improperly biased, is unduly demanding of him.

Reply: 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. Indeed, research on implicit biases shows how deeply and pervasively entrenched these are in our psyche, and how difficult it is for us to root them out (Brownstein and Saul 2016a, 2016b). But once those beliefs are brought into light and we thus become aware of them, it is harder

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<sup>9</sup> I am very grateful to the commentators and audiences mentioned in the Acknowledgements for raising many of the problems I discuss in this section.

<sup>10</sup> There is a very large literature on this issue. Endre Begby (2021) offers a useful summary in the context of a book-length account of the epistemology of prejudice. Note: I set aside here the complex question, at the heart of Begby's account, of whether someone who grows up in a deeply racist society is epistemically justified in holding racist beliefs. See also Amia Srinivasan (2020)'s recent discussion.

to exculpate ourselves for holding them. Thus, while ignorance of the very notion of implicit bias might have exculpated Albert in, say, 1950 Britain, it does not exculpate him now (Holroyd 2012; Saul 2013; Washington and Kelly 2016; Zheng 2016). Moreover, even if Albert's beliefs are excusable here and now, it does not follow that he may not be called into account for holding them. Generally, one can wrong another person by  $\varphi$ -ing even if one is blameless for  $\varphi$ -ing - as proponents of the view that there is such a thing as strict moral liability would aver (Capes 2019). It is appropriate to call Andrew into account, just as it is appropriate to call into account someone who makes objectively racist comments without properly realising what it is that he is saying (Calhoun 1989). To call him into account is to insist that he should at least try to revise his beliefs. His failure to do so wrongs Susan.<sup>11</sup>

## 5.2

A second putative difficulty with the Kantian View is this. In some cases, holding beliefs on the basis of generalised judgements about others is not merely understandable for the aforementioned reasons: it provides a basis for a rational and morally permissible response to one's predicament. Consider a woman - call her Betty - who on more than one occasion was sexually harassed by drunk men while travelling alone on public transports or walking down the street. As a result, whenever she sees a drunk man boarding her railway carriage or walking towards her, she cannot help believing that he might end up harassing her, and moves to a different carriage or crosses the street. Under those circumstances, it is rational and morally warranted (objectively speaking) of her to do that. Do we really want to say that she wrongs those men, not merely when her belief happens to be false, but even when it happens to be true, given that her belief is traceable to repeated threatening encounters *and* that it leads her to protect herself from an actual threat? Surely not.

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. Pending further objection and in the light of the Kantian View as applied to wrongdoers, we can still say that Betty wrongs those men even though her belief is correct.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Roger Crisp for the point about strict liability, which T. Khaitan and S. Steel discuss in the context of anti-discrimination law (Khaitan and Steel 2018).

<sup>12</sup> In some cases, an agent is justified, even obliged, to take protective action for the sake of another party, without needing to form any belief at all, be such belief probabilistic or verdictive, about the threat. Suppose that Albert is tasked with protecting Vice-President Kamala Harris and notices a swastika-tattooed White male coming very close to her, gesticulating, during a impromptu downtown walk-in. Common-sensically, Andrew is under a moral obligation to act as if the man is more likely to be a threat to the VP than the middle-aged African-American woman standing at a similar

Here is one such further objection. Whether some agent A has a claim against another agent B that the latter not  $\varphi$  depends in part on what it is reasonable to demand of B. Betty cannot reasonably be expected not to hold the belief, whether fleeting or enduring, that any drunk male passenger she might encounter is a sexual harasser. And if that is correct, then by implication she is not under a duty to any of those men not to hold that belief.<sup>13</sup>

Reply: the view that our claims against one another depend on what we may reasonably be expected to demand of one another, so stated, yields implausible conclusions in a range of cases. Consider for example a drugged-up ten year-old Hutu soldier brainwashed into thinking that all Tutsis are little better than cockroaches. According to the view under discussion and on the plausible assumption that he cannot reasonably be expected not to hold that belief, the pregnant Tutsi woman whom he eviscerates to death lacks a claim against him that he not kill her - which seems deeply implausible (Frowe 2015). To block this move, proponents of the objection might insist that the woman has not *done anything* to warrant being so treated, and that she therefore does have a claim against him (Quong 2020, pp. 161-163). This will not help in Betty's case however. For even if she correctly believes, on a given day, that the man she sees board the train would end up harassing her, he has not *done anything to her* (yet) to warrant her holding that belief. She is no more justified *vis-à-vis* him in holding that belief than Albert is *vis-à-vis* James in *Knife Crime*. However - and this is crucial - she is not blameworthy, precisely because of the recurrent wrongdoings which led her to form it in the first instance. There is no inconsistency there: one can be under a duty not to  $\varphi$  and yet not be blameworthy for  $\varphi$ -ing.

### 5.3

So far, my examples have involved beliefs which, whether true or false, are negatively valenced, objectively so or by prevailing social norm: killing another person other than in self- or other-defence is presumptively wrong; waiters and administrative assistants (regrettably) rank lower on the socio-economic scale than posh party guests and Board members. Those beliefs, moreover, are held by members of privileged groups about members of disadvantaged groups. A third difficulty with the Kantian View is that, by its own light, it implausibly charges with doxastic wrongdoing agents whose beliefs are about members of privileged groups, and/or are positively valenced.

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distance bearing flowers. But he need not actually believe that the man is likely to be more of a threat than the woman. He can be agnostic yet be morally required not to act on his agnosticism. That being said, an agent who is and believes herself to be under strong protective duties to another person, particularly a close relative or friend, is likely to find it harder not merely to resist from acting on prejudicial beliefs but to resist forming, or to revise, those beliefs. This takes us back to the problem of demandingness. I am thankful to Matthew Clark and Chase Mizzell for their help in thinking through the problem of protective duties and permissions. (Clark's example, in our oral exchange, involved Martin Luther King. Mine is reflective of contemporary America and combines gender-hatred with race-hatred.)

<sup>13</sup> I draw here on Jonathan Quong's account of moral rights (Quong 2020, ch.6).

Here are some cases.

A.

Recall:

*Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>\**: 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.

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. This is so whether or not William's conception of himself and the importance he attaches to his position match Albert's beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Yet it seems implausible (the objection goes) to say that Albert *wrongs* William: to be thought of as a FTSE-100 company Board Member is rather a good thing, particularly when the belief is correct.

Reply: the fact that Albert's belief is in one respect a good thing for William does not entail that it is not wrongful to him. Suppose that Albert is a local celebrity who has been asked to handout cash prizes at a showjumping competition. He is late and misses the show. The officials point out to him where the top three competitors stand: two of the competitors are female, and one is male. Without bothering to check the results, he hands out the top prize to the male rider, automatically assuming that he won on the grounds that (he thinks) male riders are more likely to win those sorts of events than female riders. Let us suppose that the generalisation on which his particularised belief rests and the particularised judgement itself are correct. Although there is a sense in which he benefits the male rider, there is also a sense in which he wrongs him, by failing to give him the reward for the right kind of reason - namely that he was the most skilled rider on the day. (The fact that *this* is the right kind of reason is compatible with the view that his being the most skilled rider on the day can itself be explained in part by structural gender-based injustices.) This case is relevantly similar to *Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>\**. If giving a reward on the aforementioned grounds does not exonerate Albert from wronging the male rider, forming a positively valenced belief on the aforementioned grounds does not exonerate him either.

B.

Consider next:

*Beaten Up<sub>T</sub>*: Albert spots a young African-American teenager who has clearly been beaten up, in a offside street. A white police officer is leaning over the teenager. Albert assumes on the basis of both parties'

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<sup>14</sup> In framing the Kantian View in this way, I part company with Basu's treatment of doxastic wrongs and members of privileged groups (Basu 2019b, p. 929).

*Doxastic wrongs, non-spurious generalisations and particularised beliefs*

race and against a background of growing awareness of police brutality against African-American men, that the police officer - call him Warren - is responsible for the beating. He happens to be correct.

How can it be - the objection says - that Albert wrongs Warren by correctly believing, on the aforementioned basis, that he is a racist thug who abuses his official position? Warren is not the victim here.

Reply: if Albert wrongs James in *Knife Crime* by assuming on the basis of race-based stereotypes that he is responsible for killing the teenager, he wrongs Warren by making exactly the same assumption based on relevantly similar stereotypes.

C.

Consider, finally:

*Posh Party Reverse<sub>T</sub>*: John notices Albert walking up the steps. He assumes, based on Albert's race and the fact that he is a guest, that Albert in turn will assume that he is a waiter on the basis of *his* race and the context of their encounter. He happens to be correct.

Surely - the objection holds - John is the victim here. It seems wholly implausible to say that *he* owes Albert an apology for believing, presumably on long standing experience of interacting with posh white men, and as it happens correctly, that Albert will be guilty of stereotyping him.

Reply: the fact that Albert wrongs John does not imply that John does not wrong Albert. By the lights of the Kantian View, they wrong one another.

D.

The fact that the Kantian View charges Albert with wronging the subjects of his beliefs in those cases is no reason to reject it. However, the worry might be that it treats on a par *Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>* and *Board Meeting<sub>T</sub>\**, *Knife Crime<sub>T</sub>*, and *Beaten Up<sub>T</sub>*, *Posh Party<sub>T</sub>* and *Posh Party Reverse<sub>T</sub>*. Yet intuitively, Albert commits a greater wrong in the first case of each pair than in the second. Can the Kantian View account for this?

The difficulty is a familiar one in the literature on discrimination in general, and racial profiling in particular. Profiling which targets members of ethnic minorities and employment practices which discriminate against women (for example, in the latter case, in respect of bodily strength for certain jobs) are particularly problematic in so far as they are parasitic upon and further entrench existing injustices, even if the statistical generalisations on which those practices rest are not spurious and are not intended so to discriminate (Mogensen 2019; Eidelson 2015, ch. 6, ch. 6; Lippert-Rasmussen 2013, ch. 11).

However, *ex hypothesi*, Albert does not act on or manifest his beliefs, and the claim that he further entrenches existing injustices seems of little help here. Could it be, then, that the reason why his doxastic wrongs are worse in the first case of each pair is that, as Basu (2019a, p. 924) puts it, John, Susan and James are 'more dependent

than [members of privileged groups] on external validation for the maintenance of self-respect and self-esteem', precisely because of the structural injustices to which they are routinely subject? That they are 'dispositionally vulnerable' to failures of respect, even if the beliefs at issue are correct?

This is an intuitively appealing thought. But we still need to know why they are vulnerable to 'silent' beliefs. Again, the answer lies in the ethics of risk imposition. In all but the most rarefied cases such as that of a hermit, we cannot but communicate the beliefs we hold and the reasons for our holding them; and, more often than not, those beliefs manifest themselves, sooner or later, in various forms of treatment. When particularised beliefs based on socially salient characteristics are negatively valenced, are false and take members of disadvantaged groups as their subjects, those beliefs are the worse morally speaking, *vis-à-vis* their subjects, to the extent that there is a risk that they will be acted upon and that, when acted upon, they are likely further to entrench existing injustices, in violation of the Kantian principle in its practical as well as doxastic form. Analogously, suppose that I leave my house on foot at 2pm, listening with rapture to the latest recording of my favourite piece of music. I know that I have a tendency, when listening to music, to pay very little attention to my surroundings. I am also not particularly well coordinated when I walk. Were I to knock into Jane, she would incur a very minor injury - far lesser than if I were to hit her with my car. This explains why my wrongful failure to check before I set off on foot whether she is playing in the driveway is not as wrong in this case as my wrongful failure to check before I drive off. The point holds even if Jane happens to be safely tucked up in bed. Likewise with doxastic wrongs: the fact that Albert does not manifest or act on his beliefs does not undermine the claim that he wrongs the subjects of those beliefs; the fact that, were he so to act, he would harm them to a greater or lesser extent lends support to the view that some doxastic wrongs are worse than others.<sup>15</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

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, as well as the socially salient characteristics 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.

To some, perhaps many, the claim that the Kantian View extends to what I have called non-classic cases might seem a *reductio*. The onus is on them, thus, to show either that particularised verdictive beliefs based on non-spurious race and gender based (or similar) generalisations do not wrong the subjects of those beliefs, or to

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<sup>15</sup> This argument does not have the resources to show that a hermit, who will live in complete isolation until he dies does a greater wrong to, e.g., James in *Knife Crime* than to Warren in *Beaten Up*. My intuition is that he wrongs them to the same degree.



provide a different argument for the view that they do which does not extend to the non-classic cases.

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