

# Motivating Ethical Demands on Belief

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## Abstract

The border between our epistemic life and our ethical life is a tightly policed one. On one side there are the epistemic norms that govern our belief-forming practices, and on the other there are the ethical, moral, practical, or prudential norms that govern our other practices. In this paper, I attempt to renegotiate the border between ethics and epistemology by calling into question one of the underlying assumptions on the side of the border police, i.e. the intuition that there is no ethical dimension to our epistemic life. I present a case that challenges this underlying intuition and calls the plausibility of it into question. This case is that of the supposedly rational racist whose belief seems epistemically permissible but morally objectionable. Although there are a number of options available to explain away the challenge, I show that each falls short. So, by the end, we will see why it is worthwhile to consider the assumption underpinning the thought that the question of what we should believe is not only an epistemological one, it is also an ethical one.

The border between our ethical life and our epistemic life is a tightly policed one. On one side there are the epistemic norms—such as truth, accuracy, evidence, etc.—that govern our belief-forming practices. And on the other there are the ethical, moral, practical, or prudential norms—such as considerations of fairness, justice, goodness, desirability, etc.—that govern our other practices. When we answer the question of what we should believe, it is held that moral or ethical considerations should not, do not, and cannot enter into that answer. Settling the question of whether to believe  $p$  is merely a matter of whether  $p$  is true. Whether believing  $p$  would make you happy, would be fair, etc. are not considerations that concern whether  $p$  is true. So, they are irrelevant to answering the question of what you should believe. What we see is that there is an underlying assumption that there is no and cannot be an ethical dimension to our epistemic life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Williams (1973), Winters (1979), Wedgwood (2002), Shah (2003, 2006), Setiya (2008), Hieronymi (2005, 2011) et. al.

Despite this seemingly strict division, there is a growing body of work that attempts to renegotiate the border between ethics and epistemology. For example, Fricker (2007) has argued that our epistemic practices are socially situated. When we recognize this, certain questions about social identity and power arise. So, there is an ethical dimension—namely the dimensions of justice and injustice—to our epistemic life. Similarly, Marušić (2012, 2015) argues that concerns other than truth can motivate belief, particularly in the case of sincere promising. You cannot sincerely promise to  $\phi$  unless you believe you will  $\phi$ . He argues that in some cases—such as a promise of fidelity, a promise to quit smoking, etc.—you have good reason to believe that you will  $\phi$  even if the evidence suggests otherwise. Similarly, Stroud (2006) and Keller (2004) argue that friendship goes against our epistemic ideals because it requires a kind of epistemic partiality that is contrary to the standards of epistemic justification held up by most epistemological theories. And of particular interest to the topic of this paper, Gendler (2011) argues that anti-racism requires believing against the evidence.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is but a small part of that larger project. The first step to recognizing how morality can make demands on what we ought *epistemically* believe is to call into question the assumption that there is a sharp divide between the ethical sphere and the epistemic sphere. To call into question the assumption that beliefs can exhibit epistemic virtues such as accuracy while simultaneously failing to meet some appropriate moral standard such as fairness. In addition, the goal is to call into question the assumption that moral standards do not apply to beliefs *simpliciter*.

So, I begin in § 1 by presenting a challenging case—challenging because it challenges deeply held intuitions about the epistemic irrationality and the immorality of racist beliefs. Racist beliefs are a paradigmatic example of beliefs that fail to adhere to both epistemic norms and moral

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<sup>2</sup>Preston-Roedder (2013) also argues that there can be moral reasons for belief, and such beliefs can be seen in moral exemplars such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. whose belief in the goodness of others far outstripped the evidence for such beliefs. Nolfi (2015) argues that the constitutive norm governing belief is not an alethic one, but rather an action-guiding one. So that would be one way of establishing how moral concerns enter into the domain of epistemic evaluation. Rinard (2015) argues that evidence for P is a pragmatic consideration in favour of believing P, and that the only genuine reasons for belief are pragmatic considerations in favour of so believing.

norms. But, as I shall show, using a commonly accepted and intuitive conception of epistemic rationality and justification, we can demonstrate that there seem to be rationally held racist beliefs. To anyone that commonly frequents the comments sections of the internet, the claim that if a belief is rationally held on the basis of evidence then it cannot be wrong nor wrong anyone should be a familiar one (recall the twitter campaign #factsarentracist).

So, the next step is to identify how these seemingly rational beliefs go wrong and further, how they wrong. After all, a natural place to get off the boat is to deny that these fact-/evidence-based beliefs that seem racist aren't really morally objectionable. Or, to claim that beliefs are not objects of moral evaluation. If the belief isn't straightforwardly false, then it is either the consequences of the belief that wrong—e.g. how it gets exhibited in action, the effects it might have on other beliefs and our evidence-gathering practices—or it is the character of the believer that is at fault—i.e. ill will. So, in § 2 I take up these attempts that have been made to explain the moral objectionability of racist beliefs, and show the explanations fall short. Finally, I end with an intuitive cataloguing of ways in which it seems reasonable to think that beliefs, despite being true, can wrong in § 3.

## 1 The Supposedly Rational Racist

You shouldn't have done it. But you did. You scrolled down to the comments section of an article concerning the state of race relations in America—for example, an article on the incarceration rate of young Black men—and you are now reading the comments. The comments on such articles tend to be predictable. They range from the occasional reasonable and thoughtful response to the outright racist whose comment consists of a variety of slurs and/or various threats of physical violence. Of particular interest is Simon. Simon argues that Black men are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour. He further insists that although what he's saying is unpopular and "politically incorrect", what he's saying is backed up by the evidence, the so-called "hard facts". Simon insists that he's not racist. He insists that once you've seen the evidence that he's seen, you

can't deny that these stereotypes are backed by the evidence. The facts don't lie. The facts aren't racist, they're just facts. He's done his research. In denying his claim, it is *you* that is engaged in wishful thinking. It is *you* that believes against the evidence. It is *you* that is being epistemically irrational.

There is something particularly frustrating about someone like Simon. In most cases, commentators such as Simon are making a mistake.<sup>3</sup> They are misinterpreting the evidence or cherry-picking statistics to justify their prejudices. After all, there is often more than one way to explain the facts, and that Simon falls back on harmful stereotypes about marginalized groups says more about him than the groups his comments are attacking. But, it is not so easy to dismiss someone like Simon. As I shall show, there is no obvious reason to think that Simon is committing some kind of epistemic fault.

This thought goes against the grain. When it comes to people like Simon, a common claim is that the racist holds straightforwardly false beliefs, and as such the racist's beliefs are always irrational. Against this backdrop, a rational racist sounds like an oxymoron.<sup>4</sup> But, if we consider the effects that structural racism have had on the world we live in—e.g. the high incarceration rate amongst African-American males in the US—then I suggest that it is not unreasonable to assume there may be morally objectionable beliefs that are well-supported by the evidence.<sup>5</sup> Consider, for example the bigot who discriminates on the basis of a person's skin colour—e.g. the waiter who

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<sup>3</sup>As noted in comments on this paper, the claim that "Black men are more likely to engage in criminal behaviour" is false. However, as we'll see, there are harder cases in which the claims are true, and when true, it can be challenging to explain what is wrong and how one might be wronged by such beliefs.

<sup>4</sup>See for example [Lengbeyer \(2004\)](#) who argues that racists beliefs are false because they are resistant to the evidence. Further [Clough and Loges \(2008\)](#) argue that racist beliefs are false and objectively so. I explore the issue of the irrationality of racism more thoroughly in § 2.

<sup>5</sup>To borrow an example from [Fricker \(2007, pp. 88\)](#), in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* the character Marge is constantly being construed as hysterical by the other males in the play. Their dismissive attitude towards her and her testimony builds up to her breaking down at the end of the play and having to be physically restrained. So, by the end of the play she becomes what she has been constructed as: a hysterical female that expresses herself in semi-contradictions who disregards the facts and is unable to keep a grip on her emotions. This fictional case illustrates how it's not unreasonable to think that if women are constantly told that they are hysterical, then they might start behaving in that manner. So, the sexist belief that women are hysterical may become well-supported by the evidence. I discuss this in further detail with regard to stereotype threat later in the chapter.

believes that black patrons tip worse than other patrons—may be correct when they assert that they are not being unjust or prejudicial, rather, they are rational and reasonable and believing in accordance with the evidence.<sup>6</sup> After all, if you know that a coin has a strong bias towards heads, then it would be irrational to believe that on the next toss there is an equal chance between heads and tails. Further, to give an example that is not race-based, consider the renewed scrutiny of the blanket ban on blood donations from sexually active gay men following the attack on Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, in June 2016. Although males who have sex with men (MSM) represent about 4% of the male population in the United States, in 2010, MSM accounted for 78% of new HIV infections among males and 63% of all new infections.<sup>7</sup> So, is the blanket ban discriminatory, or it is epistemically rational to believe that MSM are more likely to have HIV than men that do not have sex with men? This case of blanket bans on blood donations by MSM is a challenging case to consider because it brings up a similar question as in the case of the bigoted waiter: is the ban a rational response to the evidence?

This is the paradox of the (supposedly) *rational* racist. Alternatively, the problem of whether (seemingly) evidence-responsive beliefs that accurately track the statistical evidence can be discriminatory, sexist, homophobic, etc. That is, some of these beliefs seem rational, i.e. the believer believes in accordance with the evidence, but their belief also seems racist or sexist or homophobic and thus irrational.

Returning to our project of renegotiating the border between the ethical and the epistemic, we can see why it's problematic to insist that when it comes to what you ought to believe, moral considerations play no role in settling that question. According to the standard picture of epistemic rationality, all that matters from the epistemic perspective are the weight of the evidence and other truth-conducive factors. So, Simon's beliefs might make him unpopular, but given that he cares about the truth, he's willing to believe the unpopular thing.

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<sup>6</sup>See Lynn (2006) for evidence of racial disparities in tipping practices.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/statistics/>

Although I cannot do so here, I do elsewhere make a case for how non-epistemic considerations, in particular moral considerations, make an epistemologically relevant difference to what an agent is rationally permitted to believe. In short, moral concerns can render an epistemically well-justified belief nonetheless morally wrong and thereby change what a person is epistemically justified in believing. Beliefs can fail to be epistemically justified if they fail to show appropriate moral care or concern. But, for the purposes of this paper which will set the stage for this later work, as I noted earlier a natural place to get off the boat of this project is to deny that these fact-/evidence-based beliefs that seem racist, sexist, etc. are even morally objectionable. The wrong that these beliefs exhibit, if they even do, is properly located outside of the epistemic realm. Either in the consequences of the belief, or in the character of the believer. So, I now turn to tackling these strategies and showing how they fall short of explaining what goes wrong, and why the wrong should be located in the belief.

## **2 Locating the Wrong Elsewhere, i.e. Anywhere But Belief**

In this section I tackle the three strategies I outlined earlier. First, I briefly consider the strategy of denying that the wrong is located in the belief and instead we should locate the wrong solely in action. Second, the strategy of locating the wrong in the consequences that the belief will have on cognitive systems that wrong. And third, that the beliefs don't wrong, rather they are reflective of ill will on the part of the believer, and *that* is what makes the beliefs morally objectionable.

### **2.1 Locating the Wrong in Racist Actions**

Below I present an intuitive account of why we might prefer an account that locates the racist wrong in actions alone. But, as we'll see, although this gloss captures a number of our intuitive assessments of the wrong, it will fail to capture the more subtle, insidious, and more prevalent forms of racism. The wrong of racism is manifested in more than just the actions of a racist. Even

if explicitly racist actions are uncommon, that doesn't mean that there isn't racism in the world.

Consider two police officers. Both are told in their morning briefing that the latest statistics available suggest that 92% of black residents in their neighbourhood have open arrest warrants.<sup>8</sup> Later they go on their separate patrols and each see a black resident. The first, Stella, uses the resident's skin colour as grounds for stopping the resident and running their name through the database to see if they have an open arrest warrant. The second, Stanley, shares the same belief with Stella, but he acts differently on the basis of the same belief. Stanley knows that the justice system is corrupt and he doesn't wish to bring down the machinery of the criminal justice system down on a person unless he has very good reason to. The difference in moral blame between Stella and Stanley suggests that it is not the belief that 92% of black residents in their neighbourhood have open arrest warrants that is morally problematic. If it were, then both Stella and Stanley would be just as bad as one another. But, Stanley seems commendable whereas Stella does not.<sup>9</sup>

So, it is not the belief that is the source of the moral concern, rather it is how that belief gets exhibited in behaviour and action. So, it cannot be the belief itself that is morally objectionable. The moral objectionability lays elsewhere.

Now, although this is an intuitive gloss on the wrong of racism, this account is too narrow in scope. It will fail to capture the more subtle, insidious, and more prevalent forms of racism. Racism seems to also involve negative personal beliefs such as antipathy, hatred, etc.<sup>10</sup> So the wrong is located in belief. But it is not just that racism fundamentally involves a false negative

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<sup>8</sup>This statistic is loosely (by which I mean grossly exaggerated) based on the Department of Justice's investigation of the Ferguson police department which found that 62% of residents had open arrest warrants, and of those residents, 92% were black. I should also note that during the writing of this paper, on Aug 25 2015, a municipal court judge in Ferguson issued an order to withdraw all arrest warrants issued in Ferguson before Dec 31 2014. This is because of the the Justice Department's report that Ferguson police and the city's municipal court engaged in a pattern and practice of discrimination against African-Americans.

<sup>9</sup>Further, both may be doing better than someone who doesn't have the belief that 92% of black residents in their neighbourhood have open arrest warrants. Having that belief is necessary to do something about racial injustice. We can easily imagine someone who asserts that and acts as though there is no "racial problem in America" because they lack such a belief.

<sup>10</sup>See [Ikuenobe \(2011\)](#), [Appiah \(1990, 1995\)](#), [D'Souza \(1996\)](#), et al. for accounts of this sort.

personal belief, part of the reason why stems from how a racist's beliefs can result in problematic dispositions that lead the racist to accept more readily false propositions that are hurtful, discriminatory, etc. towards one race and not the other. These dispositions manifest in bad epistemic practices such as accepting racist beliefs in the face of overwhelming evidence that would ordinarily lead one to giving up on those beliefs. So, although we might explain the difference between Stella and Stanley in terms of their actions, focussing on actions will obscure the ways in which there is a distinctive wrong associated with the beliefs in question and not just the actions.

## 2.2 Locating the wrong in the cognitive effects of racist beliefs

To build upon this idea and this way in which beliefs wrong, we might want to say that the beliefs themselves do not wrong, rather it is the effects that the beliefs have on our cognitive systems that wrong. For example, it is not that believing "A is Black and therefore less likely to attend University than their White Peer B" is intrinsically bad; it is what we might call a *risky amplifying belief*.<sup>11</sup> These sorts of beliefs are volatile; they interact with our other frame-working beliefs, cognitive biases, etc. in highly systematic and structuring ways.

We can see this in the case of stereotypes. Stereotypes are helpful in guiding us through the world. As McGarty et al. (2002) note, stereotypes are not only aids to explanation, they are also energy saving devices. Not only are stereotypes devices that we form to help us understand the world, but also they also help us understand the world by saving us time and effort. After all, by treating people as members of a group rather than individuals, we can save energy by ignoring the diverse and detailed information that is associated with individuals. However, because we live in a complex social environment, by taking shortcuts we often adopt biased and erroneous perceptions of the world. So, rather than being aids to understanding, a common thought is that stereotypes are aids to misunderstanding. So, although stereotypes can assist with explanation,

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<sup>11</sup>For work on how such beliefs affect the performance of black and brown students, see Gershenson et al. (2016).



they problematically produce falsehoods and distortions. Further, they not only problematically produce falsehoods and distortions, they do so systematically so they cannot be trusted. Leslie (2015), for example, argues that stereotypes are more likely to form about some group if that group is perceived to share an underlying *essence*. For Leslie (2015) these "striking-property generalizations"—e.g. sharks attack bathers, mosquitos carry West Nile—are formed because they treat a group as having an underlying essence that predisposes them to some activity or character trait. Further, our cognitive system is such that if we believe then we more readily form and endorse these generalizations when they are negative. This is just a fact about how our cognitive systems work.

So, we might want to say that the beliefs aren't bad on their own, but given that the way these cognitive biases work they're often invisible to us, we have reason to be skeptical about whether we can add the belief unproblematically, and so we should exercise extreme caution (up to and including avoidance) in adding these sorts of things to our own belief set. So, although the badness isn't in the token belief, it's still in the head, and not just in the action that is likely to follow from the beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

You don't have to be explicitly racist or sexist or any other kind of -ist to see this amplifying effect. We live in a racist society, so no matter how well intentioned we are when we add the belief, we end up with a racist amplified belief set. To see this, consider the cognitive saint—someone who doesn't have any racist background beliefs, assumptions, or biases—and as such can add the arrest

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<sup>12</sup>Clifford (1877) once warned that

No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character for ever.

Clifford may have exaggerated his claim, as surely there are insignificant trivial beliefs—e.g. the number of leaves on the tree outside my window—but there is an important insight here. It's not really the belief taken on its own that we should be evaluating. In deciding whether to believe that *p*, you must consider how it will likely interact with your other mental states and structure your future beliefs and dispositions. If you have reason to think that believing *p* would put you onto a morally monstrous path, then you have reason to disregard the evidence and refrain from adding the belief.

warrants belief without any untoward consequences, and perhaps ought to. But, mightn't the addition of the belief that "92% of black people have arrest warrants" cause the entire framework to become biased? The beliefs are morally objectionable because of the effect that they have on our cognitive system. The addition of the belief "92% of black residents have arrest warrants" might itself mark the beginning of an implicit association of the sort "black=criminal".<sup>13</sup>

This wrong exhibited by the beliefs is tied closely to the the essential functional role of belief. Our beliefs prepare us for more beliefs of the same kind. That is, our beliefs guide us in assessing new evidence as it comes in. This is simply how priors work. And we have good reason to think that our priors are going to lead to us updating on evidence in morally problematic ways. So, although we may again be tempted to argue that it is the effect of the racist belief on other beliefs or incoming evidence that seems bad, there's nothing else within the agent's control that causes those harms. And as a result, those harms contribute to a wrong, so when we look for what is within the agent's control that is responsible for that wrong, there's nothing except the agent's beliefs. So, it is the beliefs that wrong.

It is these sorts of considerations that will lead us to locating the wrong of racism in belief, not in the actions of an agent. We have moved from locating the wrongs in actions alone, to noting how beliefs can harmfully interact with an agent's cognitive system. But, this isn't the only way in which the belief might be morally problematic. We can imagine an isolated belief that has no consequences on further beliefs, there might still be grounds for thinking that such a belief is wrong. I'll discuss this further in § 3.

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<sup>13</sup>As IAT studies have shown us (see for example [Banaji and Greenwald \(2013\)](#)), many people in the US have negative associations of this type towards African Americans. Although, there is still a lot of work to be done to figure out the exact nature and role that these biases play in the cognitive framework, it is not unreasonable to suspect that increased exposure to these sorts of beliefs can create piggybacking associations of the form that I'm concerned about.

### 2.3 Locating the Wrong in Ill Will

Now we might argue that the wrong of racist beliefs isn't in the effects of the belief alone. According to a standard way of thinking about the moral wrong of racism, when the wrong is located in belief there are two conditions that the wronging belief must satisfy. The first is the false condition—the belief is false—and the second is the hot condition—the false belief is accompanied by other negative qualities that the belief exhibits, e.g. being held in bad faith, being self-deceptive, being indicative of ill-will on the part of the believer etc.<sup>14</sup> We can already see how such an account will not be able to explain what is morally objectionable about the rational racist. Although our bigoted waiter or the red cross's blanket ban on MSM donors seems objectionable, it is not straightforwardly false. Rather, it is a rationally held belief that responds to the best available evidence.

For the purposes a space, I will ignore what is referred to as "the false condition" for the reasons noted—i.e. we are assuming that the beliefs are true. My focus will be this "hot condition".<sup>15</sup>

In taking up this strategy of identifying the wrong in the character of the believer rather than in the belief, I follow [Arpaly \(2004\)](#) who starts with the assumption that if all that a person gets wrong are the facts, then her false beliefs—i.e. her ignorance—should excuse her action. If our account were just that a false belief or ignorance excuses an agent, then an account of racism that argues that racism fundamentally involves false beliefs will not capture all instances of a racist wrong. For example, the way in which an ignorant racist still wrongs. Arpaly recognizes this and argues that there are cases in which a false belief or ignorance does not excuse an agent. In some cases it exempts one from moral blameworthiness, but not others. Consider Boko.

Boko Fittleworth (a character in a P.G. Wodehouse novel) overpowers and traps a man whom he spots hiding in his would-be-father-in-law's garden shed at midnight,

<sup>14</sup>See [Ikuenobe \(2011\)](#), [Appiah \(1990, 1995\)](#), [D'Souza \(1996\)](#), et al. for accounts of this sort.

<sup>15</sup>I take up the question of how true beliefs can nonetheless exhibit moral wrongs in the final section.

because he believes this man to be a burglar. In fact, the man is not a burglar but a business tycoon whose presence in the shed is part of a secret, unlikely, and harmless plot in which the future in-law is a willing participant.<sup>16</sup>

Now, although Boko owes the businessman an apology, he is not blameworthy for his action because he has the excuse "But I thought you were a burglar". Arpaly argues that the anti-semitic who has the false belief that Jews are members of a worldwide conspiracy set on world domination, however, does not have the analogous excuse "But I thought you were a member of worldwide conspiracy set on world domination". So, we are going to need some explanation of why some false beliefs excuse actions, whereas other false beliefs do not.

Arpaly argues that the answer has to do with a difference in the *epistemic rationality* of Boko's belief as opposed to the *epistemic irrationality* exhibited by anyone's belief, in this day and age, that Jews are part of worldwide conspiracy set on world domination. Whereas it is epistemically rational to believe of a man hiding in your shed at night and who refuses to identify himself that he is up to no good, she argues that unless you have just arrived on Earth from another planet with a seriously flawed travel guide, it is difficult to reach the belief that all Jews are involved in a worldwide conspiracy set on world domination. Whereas the first is an *honest mistake*, it is difficult for the latter belief to be an honest mistake. This is because many of the people who hold such beliefs have met Jewish people, know of historical events motivated by such beliefs, and are able to see the unlikely nature of such a conspiracy. So, rather than being an honest mistake, their beliefs seem to be the result of motivated irrationality.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Arpaly (2004, pp. 102).

<sup>17</sup>She reiterates this point in (Arpaly and Schroeder, 2014, pp. 234) when she asks, so, what's the difference between the ordinary racist, i.e. the one who deserves condemnation, and the alien racist who does not?

One difference that springs to mind is the fact that the Earthly racist holds his belief in, e.g. the supremacy of the majority Chinese ethnicity against plentiful evidence that is readily available to him. With a typical level of intelligence and with the information that is available to rather uneducated people in the first world, he would probably not have developed his racist beliefs if there were not something amiss with him epistemically. The run-of-the-mill racist is epistemically irrational, as are other run-of-the-mill prejudiced people.

This, however, is still not enough. This is because although some irrational beliefs are morally objectionable, Arpaly recognizes that this does not hold in general. She argues that the person who irrationally believes of their lottery ticket that it will win is not being morally vicious in the same way as the anti-semite.<sup>18</sup> So, if irrationality in belief is not sufficient for moral condemnation, what is? (Arpaly and Schroeder, 2014, pp. 235) argue that the difference is that the bigot's irrationality is "hot" irrationality. They explain,

We agree with Kwame Anthony Appiah that the racist's irrationality is motivated irrationality. His thinking that the Jews are a conspiratorial people is more likely to be caused by his hatred of them, or of people who are ostentatiously "other," or to be caused by his resentment of his low social station, or the like. And the fact that the racist's belief appears to be caused by a desire opens the possibility that, however involuntary, the belief might have something to do with ill will or moral indifference.

So, prejudiced beliefs are morally vicious when they are held as a result of moral indifference. Returning to our challenger, Simon, he might not think that he is a racist or a bigot because he is just believing in accordance with the evidence, that is not *why* he believes. If that is what he reports, he is guilty of bad faith or motivated irrationality. He is just ready to believe anything of a particular group as long as it is bad.

So, returning to our case of the server and the person in charge of hiring, both may think that they are believing in accordance with the evidence, but that is not actually why they believe. They may think that there is this statistical evidence, but even if there wasn't this statistical evidence, they would still believe what they believe. This is a strong claim to make about the psychology of such persons. And it puts us in a difficult position when arguing with the supposedly rational racist because they are just going to deny this description of themselves. We would be in a stronger

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<sup>18</sup>Though of course, we could add more to the case in which they would be morally vicious.

dialectical position if we were to grant that they are not believing in bad faith, or due to motivated irrationality, and still point out how their belief wrongs.

Not only would we be in a dialectically advantageous position in response to the supposedly rational racist if we noted that the hot condition wasn't necessary, I can also show that an over reliance on the hot condition can obscure other cases of beliefs that wrong. To show this, what I need to show is that there can be an agent with a good will and who has well-intentioned beliefs and show that they can still make a distinctive kind of mistake that doesn't seem excused, but rather seems morally objectionable. For such a case, consider the following scenario.

### **The Questioning and Unquestioning Scientists**

Sierra and Tango are conducting a study to see if there is a relationship between race and IQ. According to their results, not only is there is a 15-point difference between the average IQs of white and black test takers, but IQ is 60% inheritable within the White population. Tango doesn't like the conclusion, but as a scientist he resolves that facts are facts and he accepts the conclusion. So, he does everything right according to evidentialism. Sierra on the other hand, does not like this result, and so she does some extra research and notices another hypothesis that they did not consider: that the environmental conditions could account (and do a better job accounting) for most of the disparity rather than genetic factors.<sup>19</sup>

Is the badness of Tango's belief due to a deficiency of good will? [Arpaly and Schroeder \(2014\)](#) would say that it is, but I do not find that a convincing gloss on this scenario. It does appear in this case that it is Sierra who is the one with scientific integrity, whereas Tango's acceptance of the result may be due to his prior negative beliefs about IQ in the black population. However, if we alter the scenario slightly, we'll see why that cannot be the whole story.

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<sup>19</sup>This case tracks the debate between [Herrnstein and Murray \(1996\)](#) and [Block \(1996\)](#).

Let's now set the example in the heyday of scientific racism. That is, scientific experiments are being run in order to justify the racist practices of a society. Now, suppose that the result that Tango\* and Sierra\* arrive at is the true result—that there is no relationship between race and IQ. Now, again, Tango\* doesn't like the conclusion, but as a scientist he resolves that facts are facts and he accepts the conclusion. So, he does everything right according to the epistemic norm of evidentialism. Namely, the evidence supports  $p$ —that there is no relationship between race and IQ—more than it supports  $\neg p$ —that there is a relationship between race and IQ. Sierra\* on the other hand, does not like this result, and so she does some extra research in order to find a relationship between race and IQ. Now it is Tango\* who exhibits scientific scrutiny and integrity in this flipped case. And it is Sierra\* that is engaged in motivated reasoning.

What does this case illustrate? This case illustrates how problematic it is to assume that Tango's acceptance of the results is due to bad faith or motivated irrationality. This is what the supposedly rational racist is saying. It is unfair to assume of the supposedly rational racist that he believes what he does because he is ready to believe anything negative about some group, rather than he believes what he does because it is what the evidence suggests. What the case of Tango\* shows is why it's wrong to believe of Tango that he only accepts the result due to his prior negative beliefs about IQ in the black population.

The supposedly rational racist sees himself as Tango (and in turn as Tango\*). He is willing to accept unpopular conclusions if that's what the evidence shows. When it comes to responding to the evidence, Tango and Tango\* do better than Sierra and Sierra\*. But, our moral intuitions suggest that Sierra is better than Tango, but also that Tango\* is better than Sierra\*. So, this suggests that there is something important about the content of the beliefs and the effects of the belief is that is not strictly evidentialist. This will be taken up in the next chapter, but for the purposes of this chapter, what this case shows is that a gloss in terms of motivated irrationality or the quality of an agent's will is not going to have the tools to answer the challenge raised by the

supposedly rational racist.<sup>20</sup> Because racism can come in *cold* varieties as well as *hot* varieties, the hot condition is not necessary for identifying the moral wrong of racism.<sup>21</sup> And further, it puts us at a dialectical disadvantage when trying to engage with the supposedly rational racist.

### 3 When Beliefs Wrong

To briefly recap, in the last section I explored three strategies that the traditional epistemologist might employ to explain away the problem of the supposedly rational racist. First, they might try to argue that the wrong is not located in belief, it can only be located in action. As I showed, such a gloss obscures the ways in which there is a distinctive wrong associated with the beliefs in question and not just the actions. The second strategy they could employ is to argue that it is not the belief itself that wrongs, but the consequences the belief will have on the cognitive system of the agent that wrongs. Third, the strategy of denying that the belief is rational because the belief must be false or accompanied by negative feelings such as ill will. As I showed, the challenge posed by the supposedly rational racist escapes each attempt to locate the wrong elsewhere.

So, I now turn to cataloguing some intuitive ways in which beliefs wrong. As we've seen already, beliefs can wrong when they have harmful effects. But, there is a particular kind of harmful effect that will challenge the traditional epistemologist's assumption that there are no distinctive ethical demands on belief. That is, that it is never morally wrong to believe what the evidence supports. This is the third strategy available to the traditional epistemologist that I noted at the very beginning of this chapter. As I show, the case of stereotype threat is a particularly striking example of ethical concerns overriding epistemic concerns. In addition, beliefs can wrong in virtue of being unjust or unfair. In so doing, I will show how Simon's true belief can wrong

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<sup>20</sup>Further, it is now well-documented that although it is tempting to think of the racist, and as what's objectionable about the racist, is that they suffer from ill will or a deficiency of good will, racial injustice can survive and even thrive in the absence of hooded members of the KKK.

<sup>21</sup>See for example Valian (2005)'s account of the gender disparity in philosophy, which she calls a "cold" social-cognitive account given that "it is purely cognitive rather than emotional or motivational" (pp. 1).



even when it doesn't have harmful effects.

My goal here is not to give necessary and sufficient conditions for beliefs that wrong. My goal is more modest. What I will have done by the end of this section, and in turn the end of this paper, is called into question the perplexing nature of the traditional epistemologist's assumption that there is no and cannot be any ethical dimension to our epistemic life. I hope to have shown that that assumption conflicts with our intuitions in regard to the case of the supposedly rational racist. And further, that this apparent conflict cannot be so easily explained away. So, it is at the very least worthwhile to ask whether what we should believe is not only an epistemological question, but also an ethical one.

### **3.1 How Beliefs can be Unjust or Unfair**

We have been concerned with the effects of beliefs, but before turning to the particularly striking case, let us consider a case in which beliefs wrong, but the wrong is not the result or effect of a belief.

Consider the hermit in the woods who holds racist beliefs. He will never interact with the disadvantaged person he believes something negative of, he will never interact with or contribute to the institutional structures of racism. He may be a product of these institutional structures, but we are hard pressed if we want to say that he contributes to them given his isolation. But, suppose that he thinks I am likely to own a convenience store because of the racial group that I belong to. Supposing his belief is true, has he wronged me? Although it seems that I may need to learn of this person's belief to be insulted or offended, and thus harmed, it is important to remember that you do not need to harm someone to wrong them. I can be wronged even when I am not harmed.

We can also isolate the belief further and say that there is some racist belief he holds that no one will ever learn about, that perhaps through some sci-fi trickery has been completely isolated

from his other beliefs as well so it has no effects whatsoever. And again we can ask whether that belief wrongs. I leave it open here whether such a belief does harm. In Chapter 2 when exploring how the demands of morality may interact with and affect the demands of epistemic rationality, I will return to this kind of wrong.

The moral wrong that might be committed is that the Hermit takes what [Strawson \(1962\)](#) calls the *objective stance* towards me and the racial group that I belong to, and thus fails to see me as an agent. That is the affront he commits to my humanity. That is the sense in which the belief is unjust or unfair. This is not the strongest case yet, and it will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. But, for the time being, we can start to see that there does not seem to be a strict divide between the ethical and the epistemic, and the question of what one should believe could be an ethical one.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2 Why True Beliefs are Not Harmless

The more striking case brings us true beliefs that nonetheless harm. The key observation is that it is not harmless to believe a racist belief, even if the belief is well-supported by the evidence. There has been substantial work in social psychology showing that when members of disadvantaged groups are reminded of the group they belong to, and thereby are made aware of the stereotypes about their group, they end up performing worse on a task than they otherwise would. This is the phenomenon of *stereotype threat*. This term was first introduced by [Steele and Aronson \(1995\)](#) who showed that Black students performed worse on standardized tests than their White peers when their race was emphasized. Black students, however, performed either equivalently or better than their White peers when race was not emphasized. So, if the stereotype exists that Black

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<sup>22</sup>There is a worry to address here: this kind of case raises the worry that there is something special about the impermissivism of racist beliefs that sets the moral concerns concerning racism apart from other moral concerns. I set this worry aside until Chapter 4 where I will compare my positive answer to the supposedly rational racist with other moral-pragmatic arguments that introduce non-epistemic considerations into the determination of whether a belief is rationally permissible.

students are not as smart as White students, then when race is emphasized the Black students will end up performing true to a negative stereotype.

What these studies have shown is that members of disadvantaged groups internalize negative stereotypes and evaluations of their own group. Even those who reject them explicitly may respond differently subconsciously. That is, you do not need to believe that the stereotype is true. All you need to know is that you're a member of a group that is perceived in a negative light.<sup>23</sup>

Relatedly, in the emerging field of "embodied inequality", social epidemiologists have shown how racial discrimination raises the risk of many emotional and physical problems. It is not simply that people at a social disadvantage are more likely to experience stress from racism, the fear of racism alone can switch on the body's stress-response system. For example, in one study by [Sawyer et al. \(2012\)](#), when Latina participants thought they were interacting with a racist white partner, they had more stress and showed a greater cardiovascular response than participants who believed that their partner had egalitarian attitudes.

Combined with what we know of stereotype threat, we can see that these stress-response systems and anxiety can be triggered just by knowing that we live in a world that is shaped by racism. And Stanley's beliefs, though he doesn't act on them in the way that Stella does, are not innocent. Both Stanley and Stella's beliefs are at fault for this state of affairs. Both Stanley and Stella's beliefs wrong. Members of marginalized groups then suffer real harms from these beliefs. You need never act on the beliefs, the existence of the beliefs alone contributes to these wrongs. So the wrong is a kind of complicity in sustaining or maintaining a certain state of affairs.

We may want to point the finger at our institutions, either formal institutions such as unjust court systems or discriminatory access to higher education, or social institutions such as the background of collective beliefs in our society. These institutions and the harms they do, how-

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<sup>23</sup>As with much of social psychology there is an ongoing debate about whether stereotype threat is a real phenomenon. The results, however, have been replicated over 300 times and an annotated bibliography of empirical work on stereotype threat can be found at <http://www.reducingstereotypethreat.org/bibliography.html>.

ever, cannot be so easily separated from our beliefs. Our beliefs help sustain and maintain these institutions. So again, the wrong is a kind of complicity in sustaining a state of affairs that wrongs.

Now, you may push back again here by noting that it still seems like it's the consequences of the belief that harm, not the beliefs themselves. But, although it is the effect of the racist belief that seems bad, there's nothing else within the agent's control that causes those harms. If it is an institutional problem, then one place to start to address that wrong is by rejecting the belief. If one doesn't reject the belief, then aren't they contributing to the wrong? One person cannot change these institutional structures that work to exaggerate the harm caused by the individual beliefs. But, the individual can disavow their beliefs and refrain from belief.

There is, however, an interesting dilemma that arises in this particular case of wronging beliefs. These beliefs seem to contribute to a harm insofar as you believe them. But, not believing doesn't make the belief false, nor necessarily stop you from contributing to the harm. As was discussed earlier the person that doesn't believe that Black students are less likely to attend university than their White peers may also be doing real harm. Such a person might thereby come to think that there's no racial injustice. So recognizing this category of wronging beliefs whereby we help sustain an unjust system through our beliefs not only helps us identify a particularly insidious way in which beliefs can wrong, but it also presents us with this troubling dilemma of what we ought or even can morally believe.

For example, how are you supposed to do something about racial injustice if you don't have those beliefs? Consider the character of Shayla. Shayla is an activist in the same neighbourhood as Stanley and Stella. She has worked hard to uncover the fact that 92% of Black residents have open arrest warrants. She holds this belief on the basis of impeccable evidence. Further, she uses this belief in writing an article on how the the police are systematically framing Black residents as a way to control the Black population while funding their salaries. Is Shayla's belief a racist belief? If there are moral reasons against Stanley and Stella's belief, are there similarly moral

reasons against Shayla's belief? Similarly, how am I supposed to write this dissertation without communicating a number of morally offensive beliefs?

There are two ways we might go here. The first, we could bite the bullet and say that there is something morally objectionable about Shayla's belief, and perhaps she should refrain from believing. What we might have here is simply a case of a conflict of duties. Her belief is true but believing it would contribute to stereotype threat and thereby be morally problematic, so she ought not believe it, but if she doesn't believe it she can't do anything about it. Alternatively, what such a case might illustrate is a proposal that I will explore in elsewhere. Namely, that when it comes to beliefs about racial differences, much more evidence is needed than in ordinary circumstances. And not searching for more evidence displays a lack of moral care or concern that affects the epistemic justification of beliefs.

The supposedly rational racist wishes to draw an analogy between the rationality of believing that a hurricane will hit the coast on the basis of some statistical evidence, and the rationality of believing that a member of some race is a criminal on the basis of similar statistical evidence. But, we can note that the evidence that Stanley and Stella have as opposed to Shayla is much weaker. Although that evidence may be sufficient in some cases, given the wrongs and harms involved with racist beliefs, they should exercise more caution. Shayla, however, is in a much better evidential position. So, what such a case might illustrate is that moral matters can affect the standards of sufficiency governing evidence that justifies belief.<sup>24</sup> Regardless, what we see is an ethical dimension to our epistemic life.

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<sup>24</sup>We can see this as a moral analog to pragmatic encroachment. In high stakes cases more evidence is required to justify your beliefs. So, if we can specify the features that create morally high stakes scenarios, we can make the similar move of requiring the agent to gather more evidence before their belief is justified.

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