CrossMark

ARTICLE

Moral Encroachment, Wokeness, and the Epistemology of Holding

J. Spencer Atkins ORCID

Binghamton University, New York, USA
Email: jatkins4@binghamton.edu

Abstract

Hilde Lindemann argues that personhood is the shared practice of recognizing and responding to one another. She calls this practice holding. Holding, however, can fail. Holding failure, by stereotyping for example, can inhibit others' epistemic confidence and ability to recall true beliefs as well as create an environment of racism or sexism. How might we avoid holding failure? Holding failure, I argue, has many epistemic dimensions, so I argue that moral encroachment has the theoretical tools available to avoid holding failures. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to articulate and understand the epistemology of holding in an attempt to remedy holding failure. I show that the virtue of wokeness emerges from an epistemic environment tainted with moral encroachment. I argue that as long as an individual is woke, she will have a tendency to avoid holding failures. Wokeness and moral encroachment, consequently, are fundamental to the epistemology of holding and consistent proper holding.

1. Introduction

Hilde Lindemann (2016) argues that personhood is a socially shared practice consisting of four moments: mental activity contributing to a human being's personality, bodily expression of that activity, recognition by others of what has been expressed, and responding to that expression. She calls this practice *holding*. Holding, however, can fail. Holding failure, by stereotyping for example, has epistemic and moral costs. Holding failure can inhibit others' epistemic confidence and ability to recall true beliefs (Gendler 2011) as well as create epistemic norms of racism or sexism. Failing to hold others properly keeps us from consistently holding other people in a morally permissible way, so it is imperative for Lindemann's view that she offer an account of avoiding holding failures: this paper develops such an account. I argue that holding failure largely consists in epistemic failings by, for example, forming beliefs about individuals on the basis of invidious stories about people "like that." While a defense of the notion of personhood as holding would be worthwhile, I assume holding is an independently plausible view of personhood. My project is to bridge the heretofore neglected gap between the ethics literature of holding and identity to the social epistemology literature. In doing this, I use resources from the social epistemology literature, namely moral encroachment and wokeness, to articulate and correct the epistemic dimensions of holding failure.

Moral encroachment and wokeness offer the theoretical tools to articulate and correct holding failures. Because holding failure is deeply connected to belief formation, I argue moral encroachment offers the epistemic basis for avoiding holding failures. Moral encroachment largely inhibits racist or sexist beliefs from attaining the status of knowledge. The virtue of *wokeness* emerges from the account of moral encroachment I offer below. The woke individual has the strong tendency to consider the relevant alternatives that moral encroachment brings to light. I then argue that so long as an individual is woke, she will have a tendency to avoid holding failures. Wokeness and moral encroachment, consequently, are fundamental to the epistemology of holding and consistent proper holding.

I first briefly lay out Lindemann's view of personhood and the role holding plays in personhood and explain how holding can go wrong. Immoral, and perhaps irrational, holding includes recognition misfires and misshapen responses. I argue that there are two epistemic dimensions to these holding failures: holding failure largely depends on beliefs about others and these holding failures can result in epistemic harms. After establishing the epistemic features of holding failure, I argue that Basu's (2019a) and Basu and Schroeder's (2019) view of radical moral encroachment can offer guidance for these holding failures, insofar as they inhibit racist or sexist belief from rising to the status of knowledge. In this section, I offer a version of radical moral encroachment that makes use of two mechanisms, threshold-raising and sphere-expanding mechanisms. And finally, I construe wokeness as a virtue characterized by the consistent tendency to see relevant alternatives when forming beliefs. As long as an individual is woke in this sense, she will have a strong tendency to avoid holding failure because her attention will be focused on the relevant alternatives.

2. Holding, holding failure, and personhood

What makes some creature a person? What do we owe to persons? How do we know what our obligations to persons are? Many philosophers have identified personhood as successfully or potentially exerting some sort of capacity, such as rationality or self-reflection. But Lindemann proposes that personhood is "largely … an interpersonal achievement" (Lindemann 2016: 15). Lindemann's view is that personhood is the shared communal activity of holding one another in their identities. Personhood, for Lindemann, "just is the bodily expression of the feelings, thoughts, desires, and intentions that constitute a human personality, as recognized by others, who then respond in certain ways to what they see" (2016: 15). Moreover, Lindemann's view has clear advantages over capacity-focused views that put, for example, the mentally handicapped at risk of losing personhood; her view allows these individuals to clearly be persons because others hold them in personhood. The social practice of holding, rather than being a capacity or ability, constitutes personhood.

Identity is fundamental for Lindemann's account of personhood because it is how we recognize others' personalities and depict our own. She argues that identity consists of stories and story fragments depicting "facets of who [we are]" (Lindemann 2016: 4). We can frame these stories and experiences as character archetypes and stock plots. Identities matter because they tell us how we're expected to behave and how we may or must treat others. These normative expectations allow social life to function smoothly.

Holding can go awry. What Lindemann calls "holding failure" comes in many shapes and forms. For example, misleading expressions can result in lies that cause others to respond in morally problematic ways. Eventually one must reveal that one has children to a budding romantic partner. If one fails to do this, then the partner

is manipulated into the relationship in bad faith and is therefore wronged. Or a clerk in a convenience store assumes that the black customer is a shoplifter simply because he's black. The kinds of holding failure pertinent to this discussion are *recognition misfires* and *misshapen responses*. I argue that these holding failures have two relevant epistemic features. First, failing to hold others appropriately has epistemic costs for the victim; it harms them epistemically by, for example, inhibiting the ability to recall true beliefs (Gendler 2011). Second, holding failure depends largely on epistemic features of one's environment – the historical and cultural narratives that affect our epistemic norms and the scope of our epistemic attention. Many cases of holding failure – like that of the clerk – involve believing wrongly by those in an oppressive power structure.

Gendler (2011) identifies the negative effects of stereotyping and social grouping both epistemically and on an individual's identity. For example, in a study on Asian girls from kindergarten to 8th grade age, "those whose Asian identity had been emphasized showed an improvement in [testing] scores when compared with controls, whereas those whose female identity had been emphasized showed a decrement" (Gendler 2011: 49). This study suggests that recognizing different elements of one's identity can affect one's epistemic performance – in oppressive power relations, this is called stereotype threat.

False stereotyping is a clear case of a recognition misfire. Believing that someone is more or less intelligent merely on the basis of race or gender fails to respond to the person as an individual. Rather, the individual is "just like all the others." In the above case, affirming different elements of one's identity with stereotypes affects cognitive capacity. This is the first epistemic dimension of holding failure: recognition misfire negatively affects cognitive and epistemic performance.

Misshapen responses are holding failures that involve failing to appreciate the individual's identity and, consequently, not responding to whom she actually is. Misshapen responses might include failing to respond to another's desires or preferences. So frequently, a woman's *No* to a potential sexual encounter is interpreted as playing hard to get. Lindemann writes: "Oppressive master narratives that enter into social group identities commonly make it impossible for the people bearing those identities to express themselves adequately, and then, of course, what they say and do won't get the right kind of response" (Lindemann 2016: 115). Perhaps a black boy's hoodie signifies to a police officer that he is a member of a gang, when in fact he simply likes the color of that hoodie. Their response is problematic because it limits what we recognize about an oppressed group and stymies the individual's self-expression. This example amounts to both a recognition misfire and a misshapen response, but it is important to pause here and see that misshapen responses do not necessarily follow from recognition failures nor vice versa. Though recognition misfire and misshaped response often couple one another, these two holding failures are separable. For example, a slave owner might recognize the slave's pleas as genuine cries for help but respond by whipping him anyway. In fact, the slaveowner might like knowing that the pleas were authentic. The problem is not the recognition but the response. While these poor responses correlate directly with an oppressive social order, they are also deeply epistemic in nature and, therefore, need an epistemic remedy.

Gendler (2011) identifies another kind of misshapen response. Although categorization helps finite minds navigate a complicated world, Gendler finds that racial categorization and implicit racial bias come at a high cost. Cross-race recognition failure – the failure to recognize accurately members of other races – limits our ability to hold people of other races in their identities and our ability to individuate them from others. If we meet a person of another race and later fail to distinguish them from other people of that race, then we have failed to respond to them properly. This is another epistemic

dimension of holding: the cognitive ability to recognize other people *as themselves*. Failing to do this, I think, amounts to a misshapen response.

Moreover, consider that Lindemann's above point applies to epistemic and belief-related norms as well. When a woman denies a sexual encounter, her "No" is either believed to be playful or believed but disregarded as unimportant. The misshapen response is dependent on some prior belief about what women are "supposed" to be like. Some men may respond according to this oppressive belief. This is the second epistemic dimension of holding: proper holding involves awareness of oppressive epistemic norms and master narratives of one's environment.

The popular case from the social epistemology literature is, in addition to many other things, a case of holding failure that is epistemically interesting.

> *Social Club.* Agnes and Esther are members of a swanky D.C. social club with a strict dress code of tuxedos for both male guests and staff members, and dresses for female guests and staff members. While preparing for their evening walk, the two women head toward the coat check to collect their coats. As they approach the coat check, they both look around for a staff member. As Agnes looks around, she notices a well-dressed black man standing off to the side and tells Esther, "There's a staff member. We can give our coat check ticket to him." (Basu 2019*a*: 10)

Of course, the man they approach is the guest of honor, historian John Hope Franklin. In this case, Agnes and Esther are guilty of a recognition misfire. They misrecognize Franklin as a servant and respond to him accordingly. They believe on the basis of a morally problematic narrative that the individual is a servant on the basis of race. They are not open to the possibility of a white server or a black club member; they are not even aware of such a possibility. Their recognizing Franklin in such a way reinforces these problematic narratives, perhaps by altering Franklin's identity to make him believe that he or his accomplishments are less valuable. In addition, their response – handing him their coat tickets – is misshapen. Franklin did not wear his tuxedo in order to convey to others that he is a staff member, similar to the boy's hoodie in the above example.

Holding norms are clearly dictated by cultural and epistemic norms both good and bad. I have attempted to root out just a few of these cultural and epistemic norms in this section and show how they inform many holding failures. But how are we to unproblematically hold individuals without discrimination? That is, how do we achieve consistent proper holding? By *consistent proper holding*, I mean non-morally problematic holding that occurs consistently for all the people one meets. For example, a racist grandmother who adores her grandchildren, supports them, and builds their identities with encouragement and love holds her grandchildren properly. However, since she is racist, she fails to achieve consistent proper holding because she fails to hold people of other races properly. She is inconsistent (as all of us are) in her proper holding. Consistent proper holding, like holding failure, is dependent on epistemic norms. Lindemann's view of holding and personhood needs a way to account for these epistemic dimensions.

3. Moral encroachment, doxastic wronging, and relevance

Many authors argue that the epistemic status of some beliefs is affected in some way by the beliefs' moral factors. This view is moral encroachment. There are many varieties of moral encroachment. I first get clearer on two major distinctions between families of

moral encroachment. I argue that we ought to prefer *radical* moral encroachment to *modest* moral encroachment.[1] Radical moral encroachment, I suggest, can be understood as using two moral encroachment mechanisms, the *threshold-raising* mechanism and the *sphere-expanding* mechanism. This is a novel view I suggest for further development. I then connect the account I lay out in this section to proper holding and offer reasons for thinking moral encroachment can assist in avoiding holding failures. Moral encroachment, I argue, offers the basis for the virtue of wokeness, which I outline in detail later. First, I turn to some distinctions.

What motivates moral encroachment? Authors disagree about the answer to this question. Bolinger (Forthcoming), Basu (2019b), and Gardiner (Forthcoming) each distinguish at least two broad families of views about moral encroachment. Gardiner's distinguishes the first and second loci of the epistemology of risk. The first locus tracks the actions, dispositions, and behaviors that certain beliefs orient us toward. Some beliefs are morally problematic because they pose risks to others. If we were to act on such beliefs, we would have done something wrong or wronged another person. Moss (2018) argues that the beliefs run the risk of harm only if they are false. Moral encroachment obtains, on this view, because some beliefs pose undue risks to other people. Basu calls the first locus *downstream from belief*, while Bolinger says that this is the *rational ecology* of the belief. The second locus identifies that beliefs *themselves* are the morally relevant features at play. That is, the beliefs themselves can wrong others, regardless of their formation and independent of the actions that follow from them. Bolinger identifies that this narrow category includes the propositional content of the belief in question, the confidence one has in the belief, and the mental state of accepting the belief (Bolinger Forthcoming). Versions of moral encroachment that identify the belief *itself* as the motivation for moral encroachment are *radical* moral encroachment views. Versions that find the morally relevant features downstream from the belief are labeled *modest* moral encroachment views.

The second distinction in families of moral encroachment concerns the mechanism. That is, the question about *how* moral factors affect various epistemic states. Bolinger (Forthcoming) helpfully captures the two dominant views in the literature: threshold-raising and sphere-expanding. The threshold-raising, or threshold-shifting (Gardiner Forthcoming), mechanism for moral encroachment identifies that the moral stakes of a given context raise or lower the evidential threshold for knowledge or justification. This mechanism is quite similar to the mechanism employed in many accounts of pragmatic encroachment. Pragmatic encroachment says that the threshold for justification or knowledge rises with the non-moral stakes. For example, suppose that before I get out of my car, I put my keys in my pocket. As I am about to lock my car, I check my pocket once again just to be *absolutely* sure I have my keys. If pragmatic encroachment is right, then as I was checking my pocket for my keys, I did not *know* that my keys were in my pocket. This is because the stakes were high for me at the time; my memory, therefore, was not sufficient to meet the evidential threshold for knowledge in that circumstance. But here's the kicker: in circumstances where the stakes are not as high, e.g., there is no risk of locking my keys in the car, my memory of putting my keys in my pocket would likely count as sufficient evidence for knowledge. The upshot of this view is that the evidential threshold depends upon the stakes that correspond to the belief, especially the actions that follow from the belief. Threshold-raising accounts of moral encroachment are in some sense an analogue to pragmatic

---

[1]I use Bolinger's (Forthcoming) term *modest* moral encroachment, as opposed to Fritz's (2017) *moderate* moral encroachment. These distinct terms indicate the same sort of moral encroachment.

encroachment, since both views focus on raising and lowering the evidential threshold depending on the action-based stakes.[2]

The second mechanism, the *sphere-expanding* mechanism, deals with relevant alternatives and modal possibilities.[3] What are relevant alternatives?[4] Suppose you and I are schoolteachers with mediocre medical knowledge, and a young boy comes out in spots. I look at his spots and, after reasonable consideration, conclude that he has measles, a dangerous disease. But you say in response that it could be a mere heat rash. You have brought a relevant alternative to my attention that I do not have sufficient evidence to rule out. According to the relevant alternatives account of knowledge, we only know something if we can rule out the relevant alternatives. Thus, until I rule out the possibility that the boy has a mere heat rash, I do not know whether or not the boy has measles.[5] Sphere-expanding views of moral encroachment expand the scope of relevant alternatives based on the moral features of the belief in question. Buchak (2014), Bolinger (2018), and Moss (2018) offer sphere-expanding versions moral encroachment. Consider an example from Moss (2018): If I see a black man walking toward me in the street, I should not form the belief that he is dangerous on the basis of statistical evidence. However, if I see a pitbull walking toward me, it is permissible to conclude on the basis of statistical evidence that the dog might be dangerous. Moral encroachment brings such relevant alternatives closer for the man but not (necessarily) for the dog.

Gardiner (Forthcoming) notes one advantage of the sphere-expanding model, as opposed to the threshold-raising model. On sphere-expanding moral encroachment views, moral factors can affect the relevance of possibilities in two ways: first, moral factors can make what are normally irrelevant error possibilities relevant by either expanding or contracting disregardability thresholds; second, moral factors can make particular error possibilities relevant or irrelevant depending on the error possibility's moral features, in a manner that's not just moving the disregardability threshold. To illustrate this second point, consider Moss's administrative assistant case: Suppose I visit an office for the first time. I know that nearly every woman employee is an administrative assistant, so I form the belief that some particular woman employee is an administrative assistant. Suppose that I have failed to consider two relevant error possibilities: that she is a researcher and that she is a custodian, both of which are equally supported. Some moral encroachers claim that moral encroachment renders "researcher" relevant but not "custodian," because perhaps these two possibilities have different moral features. So on sphere-expanding versions of moral encroachment, moral factors can affect the relevance of *particular* error possibilities, rendering them either relevant or irrelevant. According to Gardiner (Forthcoming), threshold-raising accounts of moral encroachment, i.e., accounts that raise the standard of sufficient probabilistic evidence, cannot

[2]For threshold-raising accounts of moral encroachment, see Guerrero (2007), Pace (2011), Fritz (2017), and Basu and Schroeder (2019).

[3]Though, I focus primarily on Moss's sphere-expanding account of moral encroachment, Gardiner (Forthcoming) is the primary proponent of the sphere-expanding mechanism for moral encroachment. She has offered the most comprehensive account of sphere-expanding moral encroachment in "Risk and Relevance: How the Relevant Alternatives Framework Models the Epistemology of Risk."

[4]For more on the relevant alternatives theory, see Dretske (1970), Lewis (1996), McKinnon (2013), and Gerken (2017).

[5]The touchstone example from the literature is the zebra case. For original case, see Dretske (1970). In the zebra case, the relevant alternative is that the zebra you are looking at might be a cleverly disguised mule; you, therefore, fail to know that the creature you are looking at is a zebra. This example, I think, amounts to an irrelevant alternative. That is, this is not a genuine case of relevant alternative. You might just say in response to my skepticism, "But what are the chances of that?" Probably pretty low, I would likely respond. The spots case, while less colorful, presents a genuinely relevant alternative.

capture this second feature of moral encroachment, since its only remedy is to raise the standard of evidence. Raising the evidential probability to any particular (non-extremal) threshold does not necessarily eliminate certain, relevant possibilities. On sphere-expanding models, evidence must eliminate these specific possibilities.

Radical moral encroachment – the view that puts beliefs and contents of beliefs as the central moral feature – is often motivated by doxastic wronging. Basu and Schroeder (2019) argue that doxastic wrongings – the view that beliefs *themselves* wrong others – cannot be rationally epistemically permissible.[6] But what is a doxastic wronging? A doxastic wronging is a belief that directly wrongs another person or group of people. It is not what ensues from the belief that is the wrong-making feature nor how the belief was formed; rather, Basu and Schroeder argue that it is the belief itself that wrongs the individual or group of individuals. Consider the *Wronged by Belief* case: Suppose that you are eight months on the wagon. At a department dinner, the guest speaker spills a little wine on you, but when you return home you can tell your spouse thinks you've had something to drink. What you took to be a major accomplishment, namely not drinking at the dinner, is now under question. It seems that your spouse should apologize for *believing* that you had fallen off the wagon because the belief itself has, in some way, wronged you. Even in light of evidence, it strongly seems your spouse ought to apologize.

Now Basu and Schroeder argue that doxastic wrongings cannot be rationally epistemically justified. On their view, there are no rational beliefs that wrong other people because "the bar for sufficiency on evidence is sensitive to moral considerations" (2019: 199). Moral norms and epistemic norms are not in tension with one another as, for example, Gendler (2011) concludes. It is important to notice that Basu and Schroeder seem to endorse a threshold-raising mechanism for moral encroachment. We might, however, wonder whether their account of radical moral encroachment is better modeled by the sphere-expanding mechanism. I turn to Sarah Moss as an example of a sphere-expanding moral encroachment.

Moss (2018) endorses a sphere-expanding account of moral encroachment. Consider again the *Social Club* case. Even though Agnes and Esther seem to have sufficient evidence to think that Franklin is a staff member, they still do not know that he is a staff member and should not act as if he is a staff member. Why? They cannot rule out the relevant possibility that he is not a staff member, so they do not know. In other circumstances, for example when the morally laden belief is not about a moral agent, these relevant alternatives do not necessarily obtain. Moss consequently thinks I can use statistical evidence to form the belief that the dog walking towards me is probably more dangerous than other dogs, but I cannot use comparable evidence to conclude that the person walking towards me is dangerous.

Moss (2018), however, denies doxastic wronging, as it has been laid out above. Her view, therefore, is aptly labeled *modest* moral encroachment as it identifies the wrong-making features of the belief downstream from the belief itself. Her account, therefore, falls into Gardiner's first locus. The basis for moral encroachment is not that some beliefs wrong but because of their harmful consequences. She writes that if a (morally laden) belief about some individual is false, we might "cause [the individual] to be

---

[6]There is some debate about the scope of doxastic wronging. In one camp, doxastic wronging is broad, including things downstream from the belief such as consequences of actions or posing risks on others in virtue of holding beliefs that are either false or lacking sufficient supporting evidence. This view commits Bolinger (2018) and Moss (2018) to doxastic wronging. However, in the second camp, doxastic wronging is limited to the contents of a belief. This is the version of doxastic wronging that states that beliefs *themselves* can wrong others. On this version of doxastic wronging, Moss and Bolinger are not committed to doxastic wronging. I limit my focus to this second camp.

alienated by a false opinion about his character" (Moss: 2018: 198). So even if we form a belief about an individual that he will never know about, we are still putting him at risk because if we are wrong and if he discovers it, he is thereby harmed. The risk of harm, according to Moss, makes otherwise non-relevant alternatives relevant.

One might think that the racist belief still wrongs other people even if it does not harm or run the risk of harm. I think one can be wronged even if they are not harmed. Suppose, for example, that I never notice the peeping Tom watching me while I am in my house. Given that I am not aware of his presence, it is not clear that I'm harmed, but it does seem pretty clear that I am wronged in some way, even when I do not know about him. Murdoch (1970) and Basu (2019b) argue for a similar position about racist belief. Racist beliefs, even when they do not actively harm anyone, still wrong other people in a manner similar to the peeping Tom. If this is right, then there's some problem with modest moral encroachment, namely that it fails to recognize some morally relevant features of our beliefs.

It is important to see that beliefs can wrong even when they do not necessarily run the risk of harming others because, as Basu (2018, 2019b, 2019c) argues, when we suggest that beliefs themselves do not wrong others, we leave out some relevant moral dimensions of the belief.[7] For example, suppose that an apathetic security guard, Jake, thinks that you have stolen something from the mall, but given his disregard for his job, he does not question you. It seems as though Jake's belief, rather than the actions that could have followed from his belief, has undermined your character in some morally significant way. We might also consider the beliefs of a racist hermit who, given his solitude, is guaranteed to pose no risks to anyone. His beliefs still appear to be morally problematic even though he has very little chance of ever meeting someone of the race he is prejudiced against. If my intuitions are correct about these cases, then it seems as though our beliefs can wrong others, and we, therefore, need to account for that in our construal of moral encroachment. We need a radical moral encroachment, as opposed to a modest moral encroachment.

Given that beliefs seem to wrong others, as in the *Wronged by Belief*, security guard, and hermit cases, we might have some reason to think that Moss's view of moral encroachment (and other versions of modest moral encroachment) does not go far enough. This is plausible given the considerations outlined. I do, however, think that Basu (2019a) and Basu and Schroeder's (2019) view of radical moral encroachment can bring "closer" certain alternatives, while also raising the threshold for justification. So rather than Moss's modest, sphere-expanding encroachment and rather than Basu and Schroeder's radical, threshold-raising encroachment, I want to briefly construe a version of radical encroachment that incorporates both mechanisms: radical encroachment that raises the evidential threshold *and* expands the sphere of relevance.[8]

We might think that certain relevant alternatives, e.g., that this individual does not have some feature of the reference class to which she belongs, can be brought closer in virtue of the fact that certain beliefs can *wrong* others as opposed to those beliefs *running the risk of harming* others. I think that, following Basu and Basu and Schroeder, the cases outlined above point to the plausibility of doxastic wronging. There is an account of moral encroachment that appreciates both doxastic wronging and expands or contracts the threshold of relevance. Yet, doxastic wrongings may raise the evidential threshold as well, as Basu and Schroeder argue. Doxastic wrongings, it seems, can

---

[7]Consider a relevant objection to this claim. We do not have control over belief formation, so it seems unfair to hold others accountable for their beliefs. That is, we cannot be responsible for beliefs, since belief formation is not under our voluntary control. I do not have the space to address this concern. For a response, see Basu (2019b) and Basu and Schroeder (2019).

[8]Special thanks to Rima Basu for this point.

plausibly raise evidential thresholds and make some error possibilities relevant. That is, on radical moral encroachment views, moral factors can consistently affect both mechanisms outlined above. We can understand radical moral encroachment as both *sphere-expanding* and *threshold-raising*.

4. Holding failure and moral encroachment

This section establishes the connection between moral encroachment and holding. I argue that this connection is beneficial for both Lindemann's view and Basu's view of moral encroachment. My argument in this section is twofold: first, I argue that holding offers some guidance on understanding the harms of probabilistic belief in situations where the moral stakes are high. Holding can flesh out moral encroachment. Second, I argue that Basu's moral encroachment has a lot to offer for fleshing out the epistemology of holding and consistent proper holding. The goal here is to show that Basu's account of moral encroachment bolsters the epistemology of holding and offers the basis of avoiding holding failure.

If holding is the correct view of personhood, then we have a way to make sense of the harms moral encroachment urges us to avoid. Recall that identity is an essential component to our personhood on Lindemann's view. Other people can easily mold our identity by, for example, believing certain things about us. If I believe my sister to be a "dumb blonde," she may very well end up believing that she is less intelligent, especially if I treat her as a dumb blonde. Given the importance of identity on this view, it follows that our beliefs should not contribute to the degradation of another's identity. Negatively affecting another's identity is wrong in any number of accounts of personhood, but it is especially pertinent to this one because personhood largely *depends* upon identity. To change another's identity for the worse, therefore, is a serious harm according to this view, perhaps more of a harm than on other views of personhood.

Consider an example of a holding failure from poet Ross Gay:

> I've been afraid walking through the alarm gate at the store that maybe something's fallen into my pockets, or that I've unconsciously stuffed something into them; I've felt panic that the light-skinned black man who mugged our elderly former neighbors was actually me, and I worried that my parents, with whom I watch the newscast, suspect the same; and nearly every time I've been pulled over, I've prayed there were no drugs in my car, despite the fact that I don't use drugs; I don't even smoke pot. That's to say the story I have all my life heard about black people – criminal, criminal, criminal – I have started to suspect myself. (Gay 2013)

Gay's experience is a clear example of a systemic misshapen response that has resulted in changing an individual's identity. Beliefs about Gay have resulted in a kind of self-oriented skepticism; he perceives himself differently according to the way others have perceived him. This is the kind of harm – the kind of holding failure – that moral encroachment urges us to avoid.

Recall that holding failure is often coupled with epistemic harms. Holding different elements of other people's identities, such as race or gender, can positively or negatively affect epistemic capacities (Gendler 2011). In the dumb blonde example, my sister believes that she is less intelligent because of the way other people have held her. It might be that one of the harms moral encroachment attempts to avoid are the epistemic harms that result from these holding failures.

To bolster the damages that holding failures can have on identity, consider Basu (2019c). She, following Strawson (1962), argues that we should not view other people

as objects to be understood in accordance to the laws of nature, e.g., as a scientist might observe a plant, rather we are to be *involved* with other people. Being involved means that one engages in certain reactive attitudes towards others and stands in relation to others in a manner distinct from the way a scientist views a natural phenomenon. Let me turn to a case and Basu's analysis:

> Imagine mistaking a white male at a Beyoncé concert for a staff member rather than a concert-goer. A mistake has been made; a wrong has been done. You failed to relate to him as he sees himself, and instead formed a belief on the basis of well-founded statistical evidence concerning the racial demographics of concert-goers and staff at a Beyoncé concert. You, in short, observed him in the way a scientist observes plants. (Basu 2019*c*: 924)

There's a holding failure here, namely that you have failed to view the person in a manner consistent with the way this person views himself. In doing so, you have reduced this person to a sort of observable phenomenon as opposed to an individual to be recognized and responded to, which is characteristically owed to persons on Lindemann's view. It is clear that viewing a person in such a way constitutes a recognition misfire.

The considerations outlined above are especially important for those who experience *dispositional vulnerability*. Melton (2009) argues that marginalized groups are especially prone to negative impacts on identity because "members of historically oppressed groups are more dependent that others on external validation for the maintenance of self-respect and self-esteem" (Basu 2019*c*: 924). Dispositional vulnerability, if plausible, shows us that holding failures relative to marginalized groups – victims of homophobia, racial and gender oppression – are especially damaging for such people, a further need for the development of the epistemology of holding.

Moral encroachment can help us avoid holding failures, such as the one Gay experienced. Consider that holding involves responding to individuals as individuals, rather than as members of a reference class that share common sets of features. Recognizing and responding to individuals is crucial for holding. Properly responding to a person, therefore, is deeply connected to responding to the individual as distinct from the class. Moral encroachment takes seriously this feature of holding. Applying statistical generalizations to individuals is morally problematic according to holding, but moral encroachment identifies that this is irrational as well. The evidence about the person we have on the basis of statistical generalizations often denies individuality which, as I have argued, is often a holding failure. The epistemology of holding consequently appears to mesh well with an account of moral encroachment.

Beliefs *themselves*, moreover, can constitute holding failures. Consider again *radical* moral encroachment – moral encroachment that is motivated by doxastic wronging. If doxastic wronging – construed as the contents of belief as the wrong-making feature of some beliefs – is plausible, then it seems that beliefs themselves can be holding failures. In *Wronged by Belief*, your spouse fails to recognize your accomplishment of not drinking at the dinner. That is, your spouse is guilty of a holding failure, namely a recognition misfire. Even though he or she merely believes something about you, they have failed to recognize a vital part of your identity. It is not the risk of acting on this belief or the harmful consequences that may follow from the belief, e.g., mentioning your drinking alcohol at dinner or responding to you as though you had drunk alcohol, rather it is plausible that the belief itself has failed to recognize you.[9] Similarly, Jake the security guard's belief and the hermit's belief constitute holding failures as well. Radical moral encroachment gives

---

[9]Thanks to Rima Basu for drawing out this point.

us the conceptual basis to expand holding failures to the contents of belief, rather than only to the actions and dispositions that follow downstream from belief.

Holding failure can occur subtly. We form beliefs that appear rational on the basis of problematic master narratives and oppressive structures. To believe that this black person is more likely to shoplift on the basis of statistics stems from a history of racial injustice and domination. Moral encroachment inhibits these problematic and harmful beliefs from being justified or rationally permissible or from rising to knowledge. Moral encroachment, therefore, has a lot to offer holding because it, on the above account, keeps relevant alternatives nearby and raises the threshold for justification. With the above account of radical moral encroachment, we can be more aware of relevant alternatives and threshold raisings *because* these beliefs wrong others. Appreciation for such relevant alternatives might be necessary for consistent proper holding.

5. The virtue of wokeness, relevant alternatives, and attention

Because holding is, in addition to a social practice, largely an epistemic practice, it follows that various epistemic virtues – perhaps open-mindedness, contentiousness, etc. – are necessary for consistent proper holding. One of these virtues needs to be *wokeness*. Rima Basu (2019a) thinks that wokeness is a moral demand necessary for rationality. Basu argues that immoral beliefs fail to be rational. In this section, I offer Basu's view of wokeness, articulate it in terms of relevant alternatives, and argue that wokeness is best understood as a virtue. Since the relevant alternatives account of moral encroachment offers the epistemic basis of holding and holding failure, consistently paying attention to relevant alternatives is of considerable importance for avoiding failure. And wokeness as a virtue can keep attention fixated on these relevant alternatives. Wokeness, we will see, arises from this account of moral encroachment; it is a virtue correspondent to moral encroachment.

Before proceeding, consider a thought about moral encroachment and wokeness: one might think that wokeness *just is* moral encroachment, but this is wrong. Moral encroachment merely says that what is epistemically rational can be affected by moral factors (Gardiner 2018: 174). This is an epistemological claim. Wokeness is a virtue that corresponds to and invites us to appreciate the epistemology of moral encroachment. It assists us in navigating the epistemic waters of the emerging moral encroachment discussion and assists us in gaining knowledge in an epistemic environment tainted with moral encroachment. Moreover, moral encroachment could be true, and one might still fail to be woke. This individual might have significantly limited knowledge as a result. So, even though wokeness emerges from moral encroachment, wokeness is distinct from it. It is the virtue necessary for achieving knowledge in light of moral encroachment.

Basu offers, perhaps, the only definition of wokeness available in philosophical literature. I, therefore, offer her definition in full. To be woke, one must

> be aware of the moral demands of one's environment. With regard to our epistemic practices, it is the demand to be aware of the moral stakes of our beliefs about one another. It is the demand to be aware of the background against which our epistemic practices exist, i.e., the unjust world we inhabit, and to ensure that our epistemic practices are not only responsive to unjust features of our environment but that they also do not themselves contribute to those unjust features of our environment. (Basu 2019a: 17)

Basu thinks awareness of this sort involves understanding the cultural and historical narrative from which our present epistemic norms emerge. Many of the epistemic

norms surrounding race have been greatly influenced by our history of racism and slavery. We form beliefs about race from within this context. Wokeness urges us to examine this context and appreciate that we should not make assumptions about, for example, ethnic minorities on the basis of race (Basu 2019*a*).

Wokeness is the awareness of one's epistemic environment and the epistemic norms that follow from morally problematic master narratives. For example, in the *Social Club* case, the norm is that most staff members are black, which influences our beliefs about who is and who is not a staff member. Basu invites us to see that forming beliefs in such a manner might be morally problematic, especially when the individual is not a staff member. To be woke, then, is to be aware of these epistemic features and refrain from contributing to them.

The woke person must be aware of structural epistemic injustice and ensure that her beliefs do not contribute to that injustice. These involve a kind of moral sensitivity towards one's epistemic environment. Basu thinks refraining from contribution to an unjust environment involves raising one's standard of justification in order "to meet the moral stakes of one's environment" (Basu 2019*a*: 15). Since we risk harm to those who are oppressed epistemically, it follows that we should change our standard of evidence in these environments.

Here's how wokeness can apply to the version of moral encroachment offered above. Recall that on this view of moral encroachment moral facts render various alternatives relevant, such as a person not fitting in with a generalization about a social group. This is because such a belief wrongs the person in question. We as knowers must keep these relevant alternatives within the scope of our epistemic attention. That is, we need to think about them when we form beliefs. We might, for instance, refrain from acting on a belief about an individual on the basis of statistical evidence. Wokeness can be hashed out in terms of relevant alternatives: wokeness involves epistemic awareness of the relevant alternatives that moral encroachment brings to light. The woke person, therefore, understands that individuals often deviate from statistics about their reference classes and keeps attention on that insight.

Basu argues that wokeness is a moral demand. I think this is right, but I think wokeness is also a virtue. Perhaps the woke person has a strong inclination to see and appreciate various unjust epistemic features of her environment. She would have the habituated tendency to, for example, refrain from forming beliefs on the basis of race. Construed this way, Basu thinks there is a moral demand for this virtue. Perhaps the moral demand would be for development and habituation of this virtue. Consider wokeness construed as awareness of relevant alternatives: the virtue, then, would be the constant tendency to keep one's epistemic attention focused on possible alternatives when forming beliefs about other people on the basis of race or on the basis of statistical generalizations.

Let's think more about wokeness as a virtue. Virtues, according to many accounts, come in varying degrees of excess and deficiency. One can have an excess or a privation of wokeness too.[10] It is easier to see a deficiency of wokeness: I might form beliefs about individuals on the basis of various stereotypes. Agnes and Esther in the *Social Club* case are not aware of the relevant possibility that Franklin is not a staff member, let alone the

---

[10]Following Tessman (2005), the appropriate levels of wokeness might depend on the degree to which a society exhibits oppressive power structures. In a more oppressive society for example, the threshold for wokeness deficiency might rise, such that it is much easier to have a deficiency of wokeness. By a similar token, the threshold for excess might rise, such that it is more difficult to have an excess of this virtue. That is, supposedly irrelevant alternatives in less oppressive societies are relevant alternatives in more oppressive societies. Perhaps in less oppressive societies, these thresholds for vices shift.

guest of honor. Forming beliefs in this manner indicates a privation of wokeness. Wokeness could go the other way too; one could be too woke. For example, perhaps I am so focused on seeking out relevant alternatives that I begin to consider *ir*relevant alternatives. When I see the black man walking toward me on the street, I might think it relevantly possible that he is an undercover celebrity visiting my neighborhood. This is unlikely, so it does not seem to be a relevant alternative. Consideration for irrelevant alternatives would be some indication of excess wokeness. Another excess of wokeness might be self-righteousness, a common excess of many virtues. If wokeness can come in degrees that correspond to vices of excess and privation, then it strongly appears that it is a virtue.

To ensure one takes into account genuinely relevant alternatives takes practice, another reason to think that wokeness is a virtue. The tendency to direct one's attention to authentically relevant alternatives is one major dimension of wokeness, and I do not think such a tendency comes overnight: it has to be practiced. Wokeness might be a demand, but it is the demand for a virtue.

Consider that my account of wokeness need not invoke moral encroachment. There is a way of construing wokeness in terms of relevant alternatives *without* thinking that moral norms encroach upon epistemic norms. Gardiner ([Forthcoming](#)) thinks that in general statistical evidence is subject to relevant alternatives that undermine belief. We can construe a version of wokeness from this view. On this view, moral norms would not need to encroach upon epistemic norms, rather epistemic norms would inhibit much of our beliefs based on statistical evidence. Wokeness construed as such would not depend upon the plausibility of moral encroachment. Such an account of wokeness as a virtue, however, would expand to other beliefs formed on the basis of statistical evidence. Recall that Moss (2018) argues that it is morally and epistemically permissible to form the belief that the pitbull walking toward you is dangerous based on statistics. On this version of wokeness, such a belief is not epistemically permissible, since it is founded on statistical generalizations. Thus, to be woke, on this account, one would have to refrain from concluding that the dog is dangerous just as one must refrain from concluding that the person is dangerous. This account, I believe, would be too broad for our purposes, i.e., developing the epistemology of holding, and so I bracket it in favor of the version that appeals to moral encroachment.

Recall the misshapen response examples I addressed earlier; wokeness – as I've construed it – offers a solution. The woke police officer, for example, would not easily commit a misfired recognition because she is aware of the possibility that the young black man in the hoodie just likes his hoodie, rather than signaling gang membership. She directs her attention to this relevant alternative, and, consequently, she avoids the holding failure. Because she keeps her attention on the relevant alternatives, she responds to his expression in an appropriate way; she, therefore, appreciates his individuality and refrains from negatively impacting his identity. Moreover, when a woman does not consent to the woke person's wiles, the woman's "No" is perceived as a concrete denial of sexual interaction rather than mere foreplay. This person is aware of the relevant possibility that she is *not* just playing hard to get, even if the epistemic norms of the society indicate that she is. These examples make apparent the connection between holding failure and wokeness.

Consider again cross race recognition failure – the inability to distinguish people of other races from one another. I argued that this phenomenon is a holding failure because it fails to individuate persons from one another, thereby affecting individual identity. It seems reasonable to think that the woke person, as I have construed the virtue, would be aware of this phenomenon, given that her attention is attuned to relevant alternatives and injustice.

One might think that the discussion of wokeness offered here falls prey to what Davis (2018) calls epistemic appropriation, specifically *epistemic detachment*. Epistemic detachment is a kind of epistemic harm that involves marginalized communities creating concepts. These concepts are then taken up – developed, further researched, etc. – by members of non-marginalized communities. The development of concepts by non-marginalized groups is then not shared with marginalized communities, and, consequently, such developments "are overtly detached from the marginalized knowers responsible for … [the] production" of the original concepts (Davis 2018: 705). In short, marginalized knowers are excluded from knowing more about concepts that *they created in the first place*. Davis argues this is an epistemic harm.

It should be clear how the discussion of wokeness could be a case of epistemic detachment. This paper has taken a concept which originated in a marginalized community and developed it within a mainstream, analytic philosophy context. This philosophical context and literature are largely removed from the marginalized groups responsible for creating the term *woke*. There are two problems: first, my project runs the risk of committing epistemic detachment, and second, there are high moral stakes to a discussion of wokeness given the risk of epistemic detachment, so some version of moral encroachment may obtain here.

Let me offer two responses to the above worry. First, consider a brief history of the term *woke*.[11] *Wokeness* was originally a term to show that somebody is aware of social injustice and oppression. The term was picked up by #Blacklivesmatter to indicate that someone was determined to put an end to racial inequality. White internet-users in recent years, however, have used the term pejoratively (Pulliam-Moore 2016). The way in which the term is used among this community is intended to undermine *wokeness* as a concept. One of the goals of this project, i.e., bringing wokeness into the philosophical sphere, has been, in a way, to return to the original intended meaning of the term. By articulating the term in this context, I hope to do justice to the term and defend the term against pejorative usage.

Second, I think the above worry raises an authentic problem with any sort of research inspired by nomenclature from marginalized communities. We run the risk of harming marginalized people. Given the moral stakes, moreover, moral encroachment is likely to affect the status of this kind of research. One solution, I think, is that in order to do research about *wokeness*, we must ourselves be woke. That is, we must be aware of the moral risks that such a discussion can have on marginalized communities, and then tailor the discussion and ideas accordingly so as to include such groups.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Hilde Lindemann's notion of holding and personhood is largely an epistemic practice. I have argued that this view both serves and is served by radical moral encroachment, understood as both raising evidential thresholds and broadening the sphere of relevance. That is, moral facts affect the relative remoteness of particular error possibilities and raises the evidence required for positive epistemic status. Bringing into perspective certain relevant alternatives is key for consistent proper holding. I also argued that wokeness is a virtue framed around appreciating relevant alternatives about other people. Wokeness construed as such is a necessary virtue for consistent proper holding.[12]

---

[11]For more on the history of wokeness, see Hess (2016) and Pulliam-Moore (2016).

References

Basu R. (2018). 'Can Beliefs Wrong?' *Philosophical Topics* **46**, 1–17.

Basu R. (2019*a*). 'Radical Moral Encroachment: The Moral Stakes of Racist Belief.' *Philosophical Issues* **29**, 9–23.

Basu R. (2019*b*). 'The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs.' *Philosophical Studies* **176**, 2497–515.

Basu R. (2019*c*). 'What We Epistemically Owe to Each Other.' *Philosophical Studies* **176**, 915–31.

Basu R. and Schroeder M. (2019). 'Doxastic Wronging.' In B. Kim and M. McGrath (eds), *Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology*, pp. 181–205. London: Routledge.

Bolinger R. (2018). 'The Rational Impermissibility of Accepting (Some) Racial Generalizations.' *Synthese* **197**, 2415–431.

Bolinger R. (Forthcoming). 'Varieties of Moral Encroachment.' *Philosophical Perspectives*.

Buchak L. (2014). 'Belief, Credence, and Norms.' *Philosophical Studies* **169**, 285–311.

Davis E. (2018). 'On Epistemic Appropriation.' *Ethics* **128**, 702–27.

Dretske F. (1970). 'Epistemic Operators.' *Journal of Philosophy* **67**, 1007–23.

Fritz J. (2017). 'Pragmatic Encroachment and Moral Encroachment.' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* **98**, 643–61.

Gardiner G. (2018). 'Evidentialism and Moral Encroachment.' In K. McCain (ed.), *Believing in Accordance with the Evidence: New Essays on Evidentialism*, pp. 169–95. Cham: Springer.

Gardiner G. (Forthcoming). 'Risk and Relevance: How the Relevant Alternatives Framework Models the Epistemology of Risk.' *Synthese*.

Gay R. (2013). 'Some Thoughts on Mercy.' *The Sun Magazine*. https://www.thesunmagazine.org/issues/451/some-thoughts-on-mercy.

Gendler T. (2011). 'On the Epistemic Cost of Implicit Bias.' *Philosophical Studies* **156**, 33–63.

Gerken M. (2017). *On Folk Epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guerrero A. (2007). 'Don't Know, Don't Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability, and Caution.' *Philosophical Studies* **136**, 59–97.

Hess A. (2016). 'Earning the 'Woke' Badge.' https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/24/magazine/earning-the-woke-badge.html.

Lewis D. (1996). 'Elusive Knowledge.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **74**, 549–67.

Lindemann H. (2016). *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McKinnon R. (2013). 'Lotteries Knowledge and Irrelevant Alternatives.' *Dialogue* **52**, 523–49.

Melton D. (2009). 'The Vulnerable Self: Enabling the Recognition of Racial Inequality.' In L. Tessman (ed.), *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, pp. 149–64. Cham: Springer.

Moss S. (2018). 'Moral Encroachment.' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **CXVIII**, 177–205.

Murdoch I. (1970). *The Sovereignty of the Good*. London: Routledge.

Pace M. (2011). 'The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations: Justification, Moral Encroachment and James' 'Will to Believe'.' *Noûs* **45**, 239–68.

Pulliam-Moore C. (2016). 'How 'Woke' Went from Black Activist Watchword to Teen/Internet Slang.' https://splinternews.com/how-woke-went-from-black-activist-watchword-to-teen-int-1793853989.

Strawson P. (1962 [2008]). 'Freedom and Resentment.' In *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Routledge.

Tessman L. (2005). *Burdened Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

J. Spencer Atkins is affiliated with Binghamton University Philosophy Department. His research interests include ethics, social epistemology, and environmental philosophy.