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Turning Our Backs: Epistemic Reasons for Disengaging From Academics Due to Moral Transgressions?

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Abstract

Recent years have seen many cases where the moral transgressions of public figures have led to widespread disengagement from their work, such as no longer watching their shows or reading their books. In the academic context, this can manifest as not inviting an academic to speak, no longer citing or teaching their work, or even ending professional relationships. This paper aims to explore the question of whether there could be purely *epistemic* reasons that could underwrite such practices of disengagement; bracketing social, moral, or political concerns. In doing so, it addresses a common criticism: an academic's moral transgression need not give us epistemic reasons to doubt the quality of their work, making disengaging unjustified. The main part of the paper investigates whether this criticism can be countered by viewing an academic's moral transgressions as a defeater. After dismissing the option of undercutting defeat, it proposes a template argument for when there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging, namely if it takes place in areas where the moral transgression that motivates disengagement also functions as a higher order defeater.

Keywords: Disengagement; cancelling; defeat; higher order defeat; competence; moral transgression; no platforming

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen many cases where the moral transgressions of a public figure led people to no longer engage with them, e.g. through no longer watching their shows or reading their books, or even ending any professional or other relationship with them. Prominent high-profile cases usually take place in pop culture. For example, comedian Louis C.K.'s shows, productions and streaming specials were suspended or removed after allegations of sexual misconduct (Itzkoff 2017); author J.K. Rowling has been accused of transphobia, with people turning their backs on the Harry Potter book franchise as a result (Gardner 2024); and the country band The Dixie Chicks saw their

music boycotted by radio stations, advertising partners and fans, following a critical statement on the Iraq war (Snapes 2020).[1]

But this practice is not exclusive to the arts and entertainment industry. It also occurs in academic contexts, which will be the focus of this paper. For example, biochemist and Nobel laureate Tim Hunt was pushed to resign from his honorary professorship at UCL and a Royal Society committee after receiving public backlash for making a sexist joke at a conference (Jump & Else 2015). And in 2020, Utrecht University dismissed a social science professor because of harassment and sexually inappropriate behaviour (Executive Board Utrecht University 2020).

In these examples, people chose to no longer engage with the individuals in question for *social, moral or political reasons*, e.g. because they were accused of sexist, transphobic, or unpatriotic behaviour, that is, because they are deemed to have transgressed in a way that is seen as offensive or morally problematic (Norris 2021). This judgement often stems 'from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues' (Ng 2020: 623), but the case of the Dixie Chicks illustrates that disengaging needn't be tied to a social justice perspective, but can be found along the entire ideological spectrum.

Critics of this practice often point out that while the concerned individuals may be guilty of a moral, social, or political transgression, there needn't be any reason to doubt the *quality* of their work, and hence no reason to disengage. This line of criticism seems especially forceful when we consider academic cases of disengagement, where the quality of one's work is plausibly understood in epistemic terms. While Tim Hunt's joke may have been inappropriate, in bad taste, sexist, or morally impermissible, his scientific contributions and work on the cell cycle are plausibly still in good epistemic standing. Similarly, one may think that while the Utrecht University professor's behaviour clearly makes them guilty of a moral failing, their research may be impeccable. From an *epistemic* point of view, it may seem less obvious that moral transgressions could underwrite a practice like no longer engaging with an academic's work, since the transgressive behaviour is unrelated to the (epistemic) quality of their work. Putting the point more generally, the critic could worry that moral, social, or political transgressions do not give us *epistemic* reasons to doubt the quality of an academic's work, and hence do not support disengagement (while acknowledging that there may be non-epistemic reasons for doing so) – we can and should keep the moral, social and political realm separate from the epistemic realm, or so the thought goes.

To assess the validity of this popular line of criticism, it will be instructive to adopt a purely epistemic perspective. This motivates the inquiry of this paper: could there be purely epistemic reasons that can underwrite a practice of disengagement?[2] If we can find purely epistemic reasons that could underwrite the practice of disengaging from academics who committed a moral transgression, we could counter criticism which appeals to unaffected epistemic quality of the individual's work. On the flip side, if no such reasons can be found, this line of criticism remains open, and disengaging could be criticised as an epistemically unjustified practice.

[1]For discussion of how this relates to the practice of 'cancelling', see Section 2.

[2]Other works engaging with related questions often remain within the moral realm. Take Archer & Matheson (2019), who ask whether it is appropriate to admire immoral intellectuals, and provide explicitly moral reasons against doing so. They contend that there may be "intellectual reasons" for citing and teaching the works of immoral academics, which can be in tension with the moral reasons. So Archer & Matheson's inquiry differs from this paper in terms of the nature of the investigated reasons (I'm explicitly interested only in purely epistemic reasons) and their valence (in favour of disengaging, rather than in favour of continuing to cite and teach).

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The paper proceeds as follows: I first characterise the practice of disengagement and spell out its connections to related practices like cancelling, no-platforming and boycotting. Section 3 sketches a model of an instance of disengagement, to serve as the basis for my investigation. The key insight is that when we disengage from individuals, we behave as if the epistemic attitude we had towards the output of their work has now lost its positive epistemic status. Section 4.1 explores whether moral transgression can be seen as an undercutting defeater by appealing to moral encroachment, but ultimately denies this. Section 4.2 considers the possibility of higher order defeat and paves the way for Section 5, which provides a template argument: there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging if it takes place in an area where the moral transgression that motivates disengagement also functions as a higher order defeater. Section 6 discusses how to deal with (potentially problematic) philosophical classics, and competing reasons. The paper concludes by pointing out limitations and avenues for further research.

2. Disengaging and related practices

The examples of disengagement in the introduction may remind one of other widely discussed controversial practices like cancelling, no platforming, and boycotting. Before turning to the main argument, I want to briefly spell out their relations, as they concern this paper. I use 'disengagement' as an umbrella term to capture the various ways of withdrawing support or attention, in reaction to an individual (in this case, an academic) committing a moral transgression. For instance, take the hypothetical examples of a university professor who expressed homophobic attitudes in a lecture or on a private blog, or sexually harassed graduate students, or publicly supported an extreme right-wing party.[3] In response, people may withdraw their support or attention from the professor (i.e. disengage), which could take the form of no longer assigning their textbooks, no longer reading or citing their work, no longer inviting them to speak at conferences, or even suspending or firing them. To improve our grasp of disengagement, it will be helpful to compare and contrast it with cancelling, no platforming and boycotting in three aspects: degree of removal, number of methods, and their active or passive nature.

Characterising a highly divisive and contemporary phenomenon like 'cancelling' is no easy feat. Focusing on the similarities between the discussions lets us extract an understanding of cancelling as withdrawal of any kind of support from an individual with some degree of publicity (Ng 2020, Clark 2020, Norris 2020). The degree to which an individual is removed from the public sphere when cancelled is maximal: Ng (2020: 623, emphasis added) speaks of 'withdrawal of *any* kind of support', Bromwich (2018, as cited in Clark 2020: 88, emphasis added) refers to '*total* disinvestment'. The methods used to achieve maximal removal are diverse and can be both actively calling for removal (e.g. publicly campaigning for dismissal) or passively expressing disdain (e.g. not inviting to speak, striking from syllabi).

[3]The appeal to a hypothetical example serves to isolate the moving parts and doesn't indicate lack of real-life cases. Take e.g. geophysicist Dorian Abbot whose prestigious MIT lecture was cancelled after receiving backlash for publishing an opinion piece, comparing endeavours to increase diversity in college admissions to the selective procedures used by the Nazi regime (Powell 2021). Or the case of economist Eric Rasmusen, who was no longer allowed to teach and saw his pay deducted (after attempts to fire him failed), because he had expressed sexist and homophobic views online (e.g. by blogging that gay men should not be hired as teachers, and by retweeting an article claiming that geniuses are mostly male) (Stripling 2023). A well-known case in Philosophy is that of John Searle, who saw his Emeritus status revoked by UC Berkely, for having violated the university's policies against sexual harassment and retaliation (Weinberg 2019).

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Moving on to 'no platforming', Simpson & Srinivasan (2018: 1) understand this as 'the practice of blocking, or attempting to block, an individual from speaking at a university because of her expressed moral or political views'. As such, the degree of removal caused by no platforming is less than maximal – the individual is simply blocked from speaking at a university, but they may well continue to be read and taught and to hold their appointment. The number of methods used by no platforming is limited to one, as the name suggests: blocking the individual's platform at a university. This method is passive, in the sense that one simply chooses *not* to invite, rather than to actively campaign for, say, removal.

Boycotting, as 'withdraw[ing] from or avoid[ing] consumer or cultural interaction with parties perceived to be responsible for some transgression', occupies a middle ground (Radzik 2017: 102). The caused degree of removal may be larger than in the case of no platforming, in part because boycotting can make use of a larger number of methods: blocking one's platform, but also removing from syllabi, no longer citing, or reading. But with its focus on withdrawal or avoidance, boycotting stops short of cancelling's maximal degree of removal, and employs methods that passively express disdain, rather than actively calling for removal.

Disengagement as I see it can be understood as a form of boycotting. It is not as wide-ranging as cancelling, with its focus on the complete removal of an individual from the public sphere. Rather, disengagement may take place at the level of an individual, who may contend themselves with no longer using an individual's work. It makes use of more methods than no platforming, since it is not limited to not letting an academic speak at a university, but can also result in reactions like no longer reading, teaching or citing their work. But since boycotting often involves a focus on economic action and consumerism, I opt for the term 'disengagement' as more apt for discussing the academic case.

3. The academic case

To explore the question of whether there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging, it will be helpful to sketch a model describing the academic case. To start, I will consider the body of work that academic Ac produces as a set of propositions P. This includes various individual propositions p, collected in several outputs, such as papers, books, and conference presentations. I am assuming that Ac is propositionally and doxastically justified in putting forward P, where this justification is based on appropriate epistemic reasons and gained through epistemically adequate processes, such as thorough research and deliberation.[4]

[4]Here, one might worry, along with Goldberg (2009), that due to the nature of the discipline of Philosophy, we can in fact never be justified in believing our philosophical views. But importantly, we can nevertheless allow for multiple ways of reasonably asserting and defending philosophical positions. Goldberg (2013: 12) suggests 'speculation' as "a truth-directed attitude which can be reasonable even in the face of evidence which one acknowledges to fall short of warranting outright belief". More recently, Fleisher (2018, 2019) has suggested 'rational endorsement' as an appropriate propositional attitude to take towards a theory when outright belief seems unavailable, e.g. in light of pervasive disagreement, or when conducting cutting-edge research. When looking into norms that govern the philosophical practice of publishing specifically, Plakias (2019) argues that it can be permissible to publish even when not believing the published propositions, and that we should adjust our expectations and "treat an author's publication as a creation" (ibid.: 8). The general model could be refined to reflect various degrees of scepticism about justified philosophical belief. For example, 'putting forward P' could be understood disjunctively: as justifiably asserting and defending outright beliefs, as speculating, or rationally endorsing. Going forward, I discuss only the first disjunct.

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Turning our attention to the receiving end, we find an audience Aud. This audience can consist of students, fellow academics, and maybe even members of the public. I am assuming that in the good case, where the research leading to P was solid, Aud comes to believe p (which is an element of P) via some form of testimony, e.g. through reading Ac's papers, attending their classes or talks.[5] I am also assuming that the way in which the audience comes to believe p was not epistemically flawed. As a result, all else being equal, Aud is then also propositionally and doxastically justified in believing p.

At this point, the discipline of Philosophy seems to make for a complication. While it may be plausible that academic testimony generally can transmit justified belief (and maybe even knowledge) in disciplines like astronomy and history, some worry that this may not be the case in Philosophy because it is an 'intellectually autonomous enterprise' Ranalli (2019: 143). Philosophy requires that one actually think through the arguments oneself, and form the conclusions oneself, instead of merely taking an academic's word for it, and so philosophical testimony may not yield justified belief. The model can accommodate this in a few ways. First, it is possible to remain optimistic about philosophical testimony while also acknowledging that Philosophy requires performing the required intellectual work oneself: 'optimism should be a live option: careful philosophers needn't be afraid to trust each other's word' (ibid.: 159). And even if we don't share this optimism, we can still appreciate philosophical testimony's role in providing valuable input to Aud's reasoning process. The positive epistemic impact of philosophical testimony can then be seen as providing propositions that are worthwhile considering, even if Aud might ultimately end up rejecting them. On this version, the audience does not gain justified belief from Ac's testimony, but rather propositions that are worthwhile considering.[6]

With these qualifications in place, the model is intended to present us with a standard case of producing academic work and transmitting it to an audience Aud, in a way that maintains the relevant *positive epistemic status* (e.g. justification) of having the relevant *positive epistemic attitude* (e.g. belief) towards Ac's work.

What happens if we disengage from Ac? Per stipulation, Ac has committed a moral transgression.[7] Note that there need not be a direct link between the content of Ac's body of work and their moral transgression. Their transgression could be of moral or political nature, e.g. if they made homophobic comments, but their work need not be related to anything morally or politically significant. When disengagement takes its course,

[5]For the purposes of this inquiry, it matters only that Aud engages in epistemic pursuit, e.g. they hope to learn, understand, or know something. It is in the context of epistemic pursuit that the question of purely epistemic reasons for disengagement becomes salient, regardless of whether Aud chose to engage with Ac's work because of its perceived epistemic quality, or, say, because of its influence. While some works may be influential not because of their quality, but because of, say, their controversiality, we should hope that in favourable epistemic environments like academia, epistemic quality and influence at least correlate (for discussion, see Levy 2021). In contrast, if one engages with someone's work merely because it has made waves, but not in the context of epistemic pursuit, questions pertaining to its epistemic quality (and the related epistemic reasons) are less relevant.

[6]Admittedly, this is not a very strong claim since many propositions can be seen as 'worthwhile considering'. Nevertheless, it is a valuable status. Given our cognitive limitations, we need to decide which inputs to consider in our reasoning, and any quality indicators for choosing worthwhile inputs should be welcome. Ac's testimony contributes in this way. Moreover, if we look at philosophers' testimonies not individually but as a whole, justified belief may be possible after all. If a given philosophical view is not endorsed by any professional philosopher, a philosophy student may well gain the justified belief that the view is false from these combined testimonies. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

[7]Much of the controversy around real-life cases often stems from uncertainty about what really happened. I therefore assume no uncertainty about whether Ac really has morally transgressed.

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support and attention which had been given to Ac prior to the transgression, are now withdrawn from Ac. This can take the form of, say, no longer reading Ac's papers, or no longer inviting them to speak.

This leads me to an observation that is crucial for the remainder of the paper. The way Aud behaves when disengaging from Ac parallels cases where we learn about epistemic defects of an academic's work (e.g. data falsification, or plagiarism). In such cases, no longer reading Ac's work, or no longer inviting them to speak seems justified because the epistemic basis on which engagement with Ac's work was founded has been eroded: Aud no longer takes it to be justified to believe p based on Ac's work. This then manifests in disengaging from Ac: for example, we no longer study or cite papers we know have used problematic data sets. In the case of disengagement, Aud behaves in the same way: they withdraw support and attention from Ac, by no longer citing, reading or inviting. *Aud behaves as if (for Aud) it is no longer justified to believe p, based on Ac's work.* Putting the point more generally, Aud behaves as if (for Aud) there no longer is a positive epistemic status that could underwrite holding a positive epistemic attitude towards Ac's work (based on Ac's work). This observation is crucial for the remainder of this paper, since it raises the following questions: can moral transgressions play this role? Can moral transgressions cause this change in positive epistemic status and available positive epistemic attitude? If the answer is 'yes', then we can see how there might be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging: if the sort of morally transgressive behaviour that causes disengagement indeed leads to loss of a positive epistemic status (like justification) and unavailability of positive epistemic attitudes (like belief), then from a purely epistemic perspective, we might have reasons to do so. The following sections explore this possibility by focussing on the possibility of defeat.

4. Behaviour as defeater

A natural way to make sense of the idea that morally transgressive behaviour could have this result is to construe behaviour as a *defeater* for the positive epistemic status of the positive epistemic attitude towards p.[8] At first, it may seem odd to think of something non-propositional and practical like behaviour as a defeater. But on second thought, if we continue to reflect on cases of academic misconduct, we can see that it is not uncommon to ascribe this role to behaviour generally. For example, if we come to learn about Ac's habit of labelling their samples hours later from memory, then we may see this behaviour – sloppy sampling – as an undercutting defeater for p's positive epistemic features. While it was justified for the audience to believe p because it followed from Ac's expertise and careful deliberation about the results of their experiments, this positive epistemic feature can be undercut by their sloppy sampling.

Alternatively, if Ac is also in a habit of conducting research only after they have consumed several bottles of wine, this behaviour – doing research under the influence – could be construed as a higher order defeater. The audience's justification for believing p can be defeated by behaviour indicating that Ac's cognitive processes leading to p were not reliable, such as doing research drunkenly. These brief examples show that there needn't be anything suspicious about behaviour functioning as a defeater generally. The next question is whether the kind of behaviour that amounts to a moral transgression and hence leads to disengaging from academics can also be construed as a defeater in this way.

[8]For ease of exposition, I refer to 'positive epistemic status' and 'available positive epistemic attitudes' as 'positive epistemic features'. The most straightforward case will be justification and belief, and anyone not worried about the possibility of justified belief in Philosophy should feel free to take justified belief as the base case discussed here.

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In what follows, I will focus on only one proposition p and Aud's positive epistemic attitude towards p at a time. This leaves open the possibility that the positive epistemic features of other parts of Ac's body of work P could remain untouched by Ac's moral transgression. Similarly, it is possible that Aud has other reasons for justifiably believing p, unrelated to Ac's work. But since I am interested in the question whether there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging *at all*, it poses no problem that moral transgressions might defeat some but not all positive epistemic features.

4.1. Behaviour as undercutting defeater?

I follow the standard understanding of undercutting defeaters as striking against the connection between a proposition and its ground for justification (see Pollock & Cruz 1999, McGrath 2021). Take Pollock's (1987) canonical example: the fact that an apple appears red to me can justify my belief that the apple is red. But then I am told that the apple is illuminated by red lights. This targets the connection between the proposition 'the apple is red' and my ground for justification (my perception), and hence functions as an undercutting defeater.[9]

Let's apply this to the case at hand. The proposition in question is an element p of Ac's body of work P, and the audience's ground for justification is Ac's testimony, given their trust in Ac's research, careful deliberation, and expertise. Is it plausible that Ac's moral transgression (e.g. making homophobic comments, or harassing students) can defeat Aud's justification stemming from testimony? Given the nature of our case, this would mean that the moral or political properties of an action could have a decisive negative impact on the epistemic properties of a proposition, namely its justification. This naturally suggests an appeal to Moral Encroachment to make sense of the idea that moral transgressions could be an undercutting defeater.

As a first gloss, this view holds that moral factors can impact the epistemic status of an epistemic attitude. This is precisely what we would need if we wanted to understand moral transgressions as an undercutting defeater – if Ac's moral transgression could be the kind of moral factor that can negatively impact the epistemic status of an epistemic attitude (namely Aud's justification for B(p)). In the remainder of this section, I explore what kind of Moral Encroachment we would need to tell a plausible story here, only to conclude that such a story cannot be found. Nevertheless, exploring this possibility will yield helpful insights for what kind of story could be told.

First, we need a more precise characterisation of moral encroachment (ME). Jorgensen Bolinger (2020) helpfully summarises ME as the view that 'whether an epistemic attitude about p has some positive epistemic status can depend importantly on its moral features' (ibid.: 6). The various views differ in how they fill in these elements: which *attitude* and *status* are affected, via which *mechanism* they are affected, and because of which *moral feature*. For example, we may argue that beliefs (epistemic attitude) like 'The person of colour at the fine dining restaurant is a waiter' are not justified (epistemic status), even if they are supported by the evidence, by pointing out that the moral stakes are high, requiring additional or different evidence for a belief to be justified (mechanism), and that we relied on racial generalisations in forming them (moral feature).[10]

[9]Another example would be finding out that the research leading to p involved sloppy sampling. This also targets the connection between proposition p and its ground for justification (academic research). For a structurally similar example of undercutting defeat, see Feldman (2005).

[10]This is based on the Cosmos Club example put forward by Gendler (2011), and discussed by Jorgensen Bolinger (2020), among others.

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Can we construct a similar plausible ME story in our case? The affected epistemic *attitude* is the audience's belief in a proposition that belongs to Ac's body of work, and the affected epistemic *status* is being justified. But once we try to identify the attitude's relevant *moral feature* responsible for undercutting positive epistemic status, it is immediately more doubtful that ME could provide the story we would need. That is because according to ME, what changes the epistemic status of an epistemic attitude depends on the moral features of *that very attitude*. Translated to our case, this would mean that whether the audience's belief in p is justified depends on moral features of the belief B(p) itself. But B(p) can be a completely morally innocent belief in some academic proposition, and so it's unclear, first, what, if any, its moral features are, and second, how they could impact its justification. The moral feature that is at play is Ac's moral transgression and as such is external to the belief whose justification it is meant to impact. So since in our case, the relevant moral feature and affected epistemic attitude are distinct, an appeal to ME might not be so promising after all.

Despite this first problem, let's nevertheless explore this possibility a bit further by looking at how we would spell out the relevant *moral feature* for a plausible application of ME here. Following Jorgensen Bolinger (2020)'s taxonomy, the most promising candidate is to be found in the category of 'production process', which identifies 'upstream factors to do with *how the belief came about*' as the relevant moral feature (ibid.: 14, emphasis in original). More specifically, the thought is that there are some moral duties to (not) display certain epistemic behaviours in belief-formation. If these moral duties have been violated, then this duty violation itself is a moral feature of the resulting belief that negatively impacts its epistemic status. For example, we may argue that we have a moral duty not to rely on statistical generalisations when making judgements about others, because we owe it to others to relate to them as persons, not data points, and a belief that has been formed on the basis of generalisations is therefore unjustified, due to this moral feature found in its production process (e.g. Basu 2019).

It is unclear how this could be applied to our case. Aud formed their belief in unobjectionable ways: they merely attended Ac's talk, or read Ac's paper, and maybe deliberated about it (according to philosophical standards). And since Ac's moral transgression may be entirely unrelated to their belief that p, it's also not clear which moral duty (not) to engage in some epistemic behaviour this could have violated. While Ac's moral transgression certainly violated a moral duty (not) to act in certain ways, they produced p through epistemically adequate methods like research and deliberation.

The takeaway is this: what looked like a promising way of arguing for purely epistemic reasons for disengaging, namely if we can construe moral transgression as an undercutting defeater using a ME framework, is not so promising after all. What we would need is that Ac's moral transgression functions as the moral feature that negatively impacts the epistemic status of Aud's attitude towards p, and as it stands, ME views cannot yield this result.[11]

4.2. Behaviour as higher order defeater?

The previous section showed that our attempts to conceive of moral transgression as an undercutting defeater were unsuccessful. Instead, could moral transgressions function as a higher order defeater?

[11]For reasons of space, I do not discuss the final element of ME views: the *mechanism* of how epistemic status is affected by moral features, since it is also a poor fit for the case at hand, and hence does not change the conclusion of this section.

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Higher order defeaters are 'evidence that a cognitive process producing doxastic state S as output is flawed [which] has defeating force with respect to S' (Lasonen-Aarnio 2014: 316).[12,13] This option seems promising for two reasons: it may pick up on the previous vague suggestion that something might go wrong in the production process of belief (or the relevant epistemic attitude), and it may provide a targeted story – defeat is not only made possible but more probable because the 'flawed cognitive processes' have defeating force.

We have already encountered an example of higher order defeat. That the wine-loving researcher is in the habit of drinking bottles of wine before conducting research is evidence that their cognitive processes leading to beliefs in their conclusions is flawed, and in a way that has defeating force: we cannot trust the researcher not to have made mistakes under the influence. Applying this to our case, the question becomes: can Ac's moral transgression be seen as evidence that their cognitive processes leading to the relevant epistemic attitude towards p are flawed, and do these flaws have defeating force?

5. The competence argument

One way in which this could be the case is if we can establish a link between a certain type of behaviour and defeat. Consider what I will refer to as the *Competence Argument*:

1) If one can reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in area *a*, then one possesses competence *c*.
2) If one displays behaviour of type *b*, then this is evidence that one lacks competence *c*.
3) Therefore, if one displays behaviour of type *b,* there is evidence that one cannot reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in area *a*.

If the Competence Argument is correct, then the fact that someone displays *b* can function as a higher order defeater: it is evidence that their cognitive processes are flawed with defeating force, because it is evidence that they lack the required competence.

Some version of this argument seems correct to me, and I will motivate it by discussing each of its premises. Premise 1) is meant to capture the thought that certain areas require certain competences in order to properly engage in the academic discussion, the general idea being that there are what we might call 'industry standards' one needs to meet. In its most familiar version, 1) simply states that a certain area *a* requires competence *c* to put forward propositions one justifiably believes. We can find motivation for the idea behind 1) in various places. Take Goldberg's appeal to 'philosophical standards' when defending the possibility of reasonable assertion, even when justified belief is not available. In order to reasonably assert a proposition, one needs to be able to 'defend the proposition to acceptable philosophical standards'

[12]In line with McGrath (2021: 208), I consider higher order defeaters to be distinct from undercutting defeaters, since "higher-order defeat does not boil down to the same thing as "defeat involving defeaters with higher-order content." Perhaps some defeaters with higher-order content, such as *I have strong evidence against p* are rebutters, and perhaps others can be undercutters. "Higher-order defeat," as I am stipulatively using this terminology, refers to defeat by virtue of being a reason to believe that one's belief is unreliably based."

[13]I take this to be a standard characterisation of higher order defeat. Other characterisations are also compatible with my arguments. See for example McGrath (2021: 221): "M* is a higher-order defeater of M as a reason to believe P iff M* is a reason to think that one's belief that P is (or would be) unreliably based", or more generally, higher order defeat is "defeat by having reasons to believe the source of one's belief is unreliable" (ibid.).

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(ibid.: 21). When discussing the role of trust in epistemic exchanges like testimony and argumentation, Dutilh Novaes (2020) states that when deciding whether to engage in an epistemic exchange with a potential partner, we need to have reason to believe that they have 'valuable epistemic resources' to offer, and this requires them to be 'sufficiently knowledgeable/competent on the topic in question' (ibid.: 221). And in his recent discussion of social cues as genuine epistemic evidence, Levy (2021) claims that in order to be able to assess beliefs and adjudicate claims, we need the relevant expertise, or competence: 'History isn't just story-telling. It has its own tools and techniques and its own experts. [. . .] we need field-specific expertise, [. . .] What's needed, in science and the humanities alike, is specific expertise' (ibid.: 100–101).[14] I take all of these examples to spell out the idea behind 1): that in order to make a valuable epistemic contribution (be in terms of putting forward propositions with positive epistemic status, asserting, or adjudicating) in an area *a*, competence *c* is required.

But importantly, 1) only posits competence as a necessary condition, since it is possible that someone doesn't reasonably put forward p, despite having the required competence. Similarly, 1) is merely concerned with positive epistemic status instead of truth, because being competent is compatible with, for example, putting forward incorrect but justified propositions. In fact, much of scientific progress stems from competent people reasonably putting forward justified but ultimately false propositions, which are then refuted by justified propositions reasonably put forward by other competent people.

Premise 2) posits that display of behaviour *b* provides evidence for lacking the required competence. The thought here is that there are certain types of behaviour that are at odds with having a given competence, so that it is difficult to see how one could have that competence and also display said behaviour. But the strength of the evidence provided by *b* can vary. There may be cases where *b* and *c* are outright incompatible, so that a display of *b* guarantees lack of *c*. For example, intentionally driving with your eyes closed (maybe because you enjoy the thrill of it) could be the kind of behaviour that is incompatible with having the competence of 'responsible driving'. But most of the time, behaviour *b* will only provide *some* evidence for lacking the competence, which need not be conclusive. Take stalling the car at a busy junction. While both behaviours seem somewhat incompatible with responsible driving, stalling may only indicate a mistake or accident, rather than lack of competence.

3) follows from 1) and 2), and contends that displaying behaviour *b* is evidence that one cannot reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in area *a*. But importantly, this conclusion allows for the possibilities of someone who lacks competence putting forward a true proposition in the relevant area by accident (though they would not be reasonably putting it forward), and of someone with the required competence reasonably putting forward a proposition that lacks positive epistemic status due to other reasons.

Further support for the Competence Argument can be found in Simpson & Srinivasan's (2018) paper on the practice of 'No Platforming'. They argue that prohibiting an individual from publicly speaking at a university can sometimes be both permissible and desirable. Their key insight is that a university is not a public free marketplace of ideas, but rather an institution with a distinct epistemic aim: to promote high quality teaching and research. As such, universities must be committed to upholding academic standards and the authority of experts in a discipline. This justifies

[14]A reliabilist virtue epistemological framework may provide further support to 1): Sosa (2010, 2017) shares the idea that certain competences (or manifestations thereof) are required for successfully attaining certain objectives, though his notion of 'competence' involves nuances not discussed in this paper.

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not giving a platform to people who do not live up to the standards of a discipline, or who may threaten the authority of experts, in a way that is not only compatible with but also conducive to academic freedom.

What matters for my purposes here is not the relationship between no platforming and disengaging, as outlined in Section 2. Rather, Simpson & Srinivasan's argument also assumes the plausibility of the relationship between area, competence, and behaviour expressed by the Competence Argument. When they argue that 'disciplinary expertise', 'intellectual standards', 'disciplinary competence', and 'intellectual rigors' need to be protected, they assume something very much like premise 1): that a certain area (i.e. a certain discipline) comes with certain competences (expertise, standards, and rigors) that are necessary to reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status (to promote good teaching and research) (ibid.: 16, 15, 12, 11). Turning to 2), they also seem to think that certain behaviours provide evidence for lack of such competence:

> 'The Holocaust denier flouts the epistemic and methodological norms that govern historical inquiry. The oil company shill flouts the epistemic and methodological norms that govern inquiry in climate science and related disciplines'. (ibid.: 15)

We can plug these examples into the Competence Argument: historical inquiry (*a*) requires living up to certain epistemic and methodological norms (*c*), making it the case that a historian denying the Holocaust (*b*) has provided evidence of not living up to such norms, thereby casting doubt on their ability to reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in the area of historical inquiry (put simply: thereby casting doubt on their historical scholarship). The same goes for the oil company shill: climate science (*a*) requires living up to certain epistemic and methodological norms (*c*) and pretending to give an impartial endorsement of something in which one has a vested interest (*b*) demonstrates not living up to said norms, providing evidence that the oil company shill is unfit to reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in the area of climate science.[15]

5.1. Applying the competence argument

Now that the Competence Argument has been sufficiently motivated, can it capture our case? Is there an area *a* where the moral transgression corresponds to the kind of behaviour *b* that provides evidence that one lacks competence *c* necessary for reasonably putting forward propositions with positive epistemic status in *a*? This would mean that in these cases and in this area, the moral transgression would be a higher order defeater – it would be evidence that the cognitive processes leading to the putting forward of propositions are flawed with defeating force, namely because they indicate lack of a necessary competence. Presumably, the most plausible candidates are cases where the moral transgression is somehow related to the area in question, and when this connection is a close one, presumably, the moral transgression provides *strong* evidence for the lack of competence. We have already seen one such example: sensitivity to historical facts (as an instance of complying with the epistemic and methodological norms of historical inquiry) is a necessary competence (*c*) for reasonably putting forward

[15]This allows for the possibility of internally fragmented experts (see also Section 6.1). For example, the historian might be producing high quality research in their area of expertise (e.g. medieval trade laws), while also doubting the Holocaust. Even if we accept this as a possibility, it doesn't change the fact that their Holocaust denial provides us with *evidence* that they flout the relevant norms (which in turn can also call into question their work on medieval trade).

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propositions with positive epistemic status in historical inquiry (*a*), and publicly denying the Holocaust (*b*) is evidence that one lacks this competence. Alternatively, we may think that in order to reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in ethics (*a*), one requires ethical awareness (*c*), and harassing one's students (*b*) is evidence that one lacks such awareness.

It is not my aim here to argue that historical inquiry or ethics specifically are areas that necessarily require a certain competence which is incompatible with displaying certain behaviours, especially in the light of empirical research indicating that moral philosophers might not be very moral people.[16] What matters is that *if* there are such areas, then there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging from academics: if Ac's moral transgression manifests in behaviour of type *b* that provides evidence for lacking competence *c* required to reasonably put forward propositions with positive epistemic status in area *a*, then we have purely epistemic reasons to disengage from Ac in area *a*, that is, to no longer read their books on *a,* no longer cite their papers on *a*, or no longer inviting them to speak on *a*. The purely epistemic reason for disengaging consists in the fact that Ac's moral transgression provides Aud with a higher order defeater: Ac's behaviour is evidence that their cognitive process producing p is epistemically defective or unreliably based since it is evidence that they lack the required competence for reasonably putting forward propositions with positive epistemic status. Learning about it defeats the positive epistemic status of Aud's epistemic attitude towards p, based on Ac's work (for example, it defeats Aud's justification for B(p), which was based on Ac's work).

At this point, we have a template for purely epistemic reasons for disengagement. The substantive question of whether there are (or will be) real-life cases of disengaging that fit this template cannot be definitively answered in this paper. But as previously noted, cases where the moral transgression and area are closely related are better candidates than cases where the two are entirely separate. For example, racist psychologists researching intelligence, sexist biologists working on sex and gender, and antisemitic historians writing on the Holocaust probably fit the template more easily than transphobic logicians.

5.2. Competence and company

To further illustrate the kinds of cases where there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengagement, it will be instructive to take a look at the related but different phenomenon of unwelcome epistemic company, i.e. of 'encountering agreement about the content of your belief from an unwelcome source' (Blanchard 2020: 2). The question he and others explore is whether such unwelcome epistemic company can be a defeater for my own belief.[17] For example, if I find myself agreeing with a white nationalist that p, does the discovery of this company defeat my own belief in p? Blanchard argues that such unwelcome company is indeed a defeasible reason to doubt, revise or check my belief.

At first sight, the phenomenon of unwelcome epistemic company may seem similar to the cases discussed in this paper, since Aud plausibly considers Ac unwelcome epistemic company, once they learn about Ac's moral transgressions. However, the academic case is not strictly speaking one of unwelcome epistemic company. The latter occurs when an agent already has a belief, and then finds out that the belief is shared by unwelcome company. In the cases modelled in this paper, an agent (Aud) does not

[16]See e.g. Schwitzgebel (2014), Schwitzgebel *et al.* (2012).

[17]See Levy (2020) for a further development of Blanchard's view, and Piovarchy (2023) for a critical response.

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already have the belief, but comes to believe p through testimony from a source (Ac). If Aud later learns about Ac's moral transgression, the situation may present like unwelcome epistemic company. But Blanchard is primarily interested in the convergence of the belief states of two previously independent and unrelated believers, and whether epistemic or moral flaws of one may correlate with epistemic or moral flaws of the other. In my case, we are dealing with a dependency: Aud forms their belief on the basis of Ac's work, construed as testimony. The question I discuss is whether Aud has reason to disengage and not whether Aud may share Ac's epistemic or moral flaws.

Nevertheless, Blanchard presents a way of connecting a source's moral features to an epistemic reason, and this is also the link I am interested in, when asking whether Ac's moral transgression can provide epistemic reasons for disengagement. But we differ in what we take these epistemic reasons to favour: Blanchard sees unwelcome epistemic company as providing a reason for questioning my belief; I take Ac's moral transgressions as (potentially) providing a reason for disengaging from Ac. While disengaging may well involve also questioning my own belief, the other-regarding aspect isn't Blanchard's concern; he doesn't explore which attitudes and actions are appropriate for the believer to have towards their unwelcome company.

However, there may be an interesting connection between unwelcome company and lack of competence. In his response to Blanchard, Levy (2020: 5) provides an account of when exactly unwelcome company provides a defeater: if the shared belief expresses some of the properties that make the company unwelcome.[18] Take Blanchard's example of discovering that I share the belief that refugees commit more crimes than other groups with a white nationalist, who formed it through making inferences about a class of people based on sensationalist anecdotes. The belief in the criminality of refugees expresses racist properties, which is precisely what makes the company of the white nationalist unwelcome. Although cases of unwelcome company are different from cases of (potential) disengagement, we can construe the unwelcome company to consist of an academic Ac: for example, we may think of a political scientist who engages in hate speech against 'criminal refugees' online, due to their white nationalist leanings. To remain within the framework of unwelcome company, we now assume that an agent discovers they share the belief that refugees are exceedingly criminal with the white nationalist political scientist Ac. Since the content of Ac's belief expresses racist properties that make Ac's company unwelcome, the agent now has reason to question their own belief. Now we can observe a connection between company and competence: when dealing with an academic case where Ac's unwelcome company would give an agent who shares the same belief a reason to question said belief because of its content expressing unwelcome-making features, the Competence Argument will also provide Aud with a reason to disengage from Ac. This is because Ac's unwelcome-making properties (expressed by the shared belief) can be the *reason why* Ac lacks the required competence.

A racist political scientist might make inferences based on sensationalist headlines, which in turn is evidence that their cognitive processes in the area of political science are defective or unreliably based, since they lack the competence of being able to adequately and nuancedly interpret news stories. If looking at this example through the lens of unwelcome company, the belief in question expresses the unwelcome-making property; looking through the lens of (potential) disengagement, this belief may underwrite behaviour of type *b* (engaging in online hate speech against 'criminal refugees'), which

[18]He also discusses a second option: if we have reason to think that we have formed the shared belief via the same unreliable process as our unwelcome company. I don't discuss this option, since it is by assumption excluded from the model academic case I discuss here.

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provides evidence that one lacks *c* (ability to adequately and nuancedly interpret news stories). Unwelcome company and lack of competence can coincide: when the properties that make one's company unwelcome manifest in moral transgressions that display behaviour which provides evidence for lacking the required competence, this property can be the reason why one's cognitive processes in this area are defective or unreliably based. And just like Ac's unwelcome company provides a reason to question one's own belief, lack of competence provides a reason for Aud to disengage from Ac, because in both cases, we have encountered defeat.

But company and competence can come apart. Many cases of potential disengagement are interesting precisely because they involve beliefs with unproblematic contents that do not express unwelcome-making properties. A transphobic logician's belief in the merits of dialethism doesn't express their transphobia and hence doesn't provide someone who shares the belief with a reason to question it. Whether there is reason to disengage from the transphobic logician will depend on whether the Competence Argument can be spelt out successfully. This paper does not conclusively argue for this, but establishes the possibility.

6. Further clarifications

The previous sections have established that there could be purely epistemic reasons for disengaging from academics, namely if the academic's moral transgression in question provides a higher order defeater for the audience's epistemic attitude towards p. Whether this holds in a specific case depends on whether we are able to fit the case in question into the template provided by the Competence Argument. Leaving aside this qualification, I want to address two more general issues arising from the previous sections: how to deal with philosophical classics (6.1) and other types of epistemic reasons (6.2).

6.1. Dealing with the classics

What do the preceding points entail for our engagement with historical philosophers like Kant and Aristotle whose racist and sexist attitudes are well known, but whose works form an important part of the canon and are deemed extremely valuable? Should we now no longer read, cite or teach them? Let's see how the preceding arguments can be applied to philosophers like Kant and Aristotle, to name but a few. Recall, for there to be epistemic reasons to disengage, an academic's moral transgression needs to defeat the positive epistemic status of the audience's positive epistemic attitude towards p (gained from Ac's testimony). For simplicity, I'll discuss the case of justified belief going forward. Such defeat was possible if the moral transgression provided evidence that the academic in question lacks the competence necessary in their area. To see whether this applies to figures like Kant and Aristotle, it will be helpful to distinguish between a narrow, broad, and global reading of the Competence Argument.[19]

On a global reading, we may want to fill the template as follows: the area of philosophy (*a*) requires good judgement (*c*), and including overtly racist or sexist statements in one's work (*b*) provides evidence that one lacks such judgement. The global reading sees moral transgressions as the kind of behaviour that is incompatible with being a good philosopher, since one lacks a competence that is required for doing good philosophy. The thought may be that someone who takes properties like sex and

[19]Another possibility to explore in further research is whether the narrow, broad and global reading can be cashed out in terms of epistemic virtues, and their connections, which may vary in strength.

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gender to negatively affect the value of persons and their status as members of the moral community gets something fundamentally wrong about the very nature of value, and therefore is likely to be wrong about all sorts of fundamental descriptive or normative claims.[20] This would mean that Kant's and Aristotle's racist and sexist statements indeed function as a defeater and provide us with epistemic reasons to disengage.

However, the global reading will strike many as too strong. For example, is it really the case that a logician's transphobia is evidence that they lack the competence of carrying out rigorous proofs? Could we not engage with their contributions in the field of logic, while condemning their claims concerning ethics or metaphysics? These worries suggest a more restricted way of conceiving competence and area. On a broad reading, the template may then be filled as follows: the area of ethical inquiry (*a*) requires ethical awareness (*c*) and making overtly racist or sexist statements (*b*) provides evidence that one lacks such awareness. Like the global reading, the broad reading would also entail that Kant's and Aristotle's racism and sexism is evidence that they lack the required competence, thereby functioning as a defeater, and giving us epistemic reasons to no longer engage, but only with regard to ethical inquiry. For example, we may have reason to disengage from Aristotle's ethics, but not his metaphysics.

Despite being more restricted than the global reading, this may still strike many as the wrong result. But it is worth highlighting the nuances of this conclusion, which can significantly soften its blow. The Competence Argument does not issue a binary requirement to either disengage, or not, but allows for degrees at various points. First, the philosophers' sexism and racism merely provides *evidence* that they lack the required competence, which can potentially be outweighed, and if outweighed, does not have defeating power. And second, even if it indeed has defeating power, it only provides epistemic *reasons* to disengage, which need not be conclusive. They may be strengthened by *moral* reasons to disengage, or outweighed by stronger epistemic reasons, such as the work's immense value (see also 6.2). Third, as I have described 'disengagement', it sits between no-platforming and cancelling with regard to degree of removal and number of methods. Plausibly, weaker epistemic reasons to disengage call for a lower degree and fewer methods of removal than stronger epistemic reasons. The exact relationships between strength of reason and type of disengagement cannot be determined in this paper but should be explored in further research.

Despite these qualifications, the broad reading leaves open the possibility that we indeed may conclude that the philosophers' racism and sexism provides us with epistemic reasons to disengage. And this accurately reflects a part of the spectrum of defended views in the debate about how to appropriately deal with racist, sexist, or otherwise reprehensible attitudes of philosophers who form part of the canon.[21]

Finally, on a narrow reading, we could restrict the area in question to 'ethical inquiry pertaining to race and/or sex' (*a*), which requires awareness of racism and sexism (*c*), and making overtly racist or sexist statements (*b*) provides evidence that one lacks such awareness. This would yield the narrower conclusion that Kant's and Aristotle's racism and sexism functions as a defeater within the specified area, thereby giving us epistemic reasons to no longer engage with their claims about race and/or sex. This conclusion may seem more palatable, since it involves a more restricted area, and the link between

[20]As another example, one may think that Heidegger's fascism is evidence that his metaphysics rests on mistaken ontological commitments. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[21]For example, Ramsauer (2023: 792) characterises the Kant debate as the question whether his racism "indicates a failure of Kant's moral philosophy itself", or "a failure of the person Immanuel Kant?", concluding that it is a "philosophical problem" and that "Kant's racism demonstrates the failure of Kant's moral philosophy" (ibid.: 794).

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the moral transgression and area seems closer. At the same time, it may seem too weak, especially in light of the available qualifications just discussed.[22] As previously noted, how to specify area, behaviour and competence to fill in the template of the Competence Argument is no easy feat, and settling these questions goes beyond the scope of this paper. Instead of dictating a blanket response to problematic works of the canon, the verdicts depend on how we spell out the details.

6.2. Other epistemic reasons

The presented arguments posit the possibility of purely epistemic reasons if the moral transgression in question has defeating force. But one may wonder whether there could not be other epistemic reasons that bear on disengaging, unrelated to the possibility of defeat. Could there be epistemic reasons pertaining to disengagement because a) the relevant propositions are false, or because b) the epistemic costs of disengaging are too high, or c) our esteem of and trust in the source is now too low?

6.2.1. Falsehood

Starting with a), one may ask whether there isn't a more direct route to epistemic reasons for disengaging. Don't we have such reasons simply because often, the propositions in questions are just false? For example, Aristotle is simply wrong in claiming that women cannot become virtuous, and the falsity of this proposition alone gives us epistemic reason not to engage. This line of thought is both under- and overinclusive. It is underinclusive in the sense that not all cases that may call for disengaging involve false propositions. Often, the reason why disengaging from an academic is viewed as problematic by many is that it involves someone whose work enjoys positive epistemic status, regardless of their moral transgression. This is what motivates the popular line of criticism as stated in Section 1. If we restricted epistemic reasons for disengaging to cases involving false propositions, this line of criticism would not even arise, and we could not discuss cases that involve true propositions, like in the case of the antisemitic historian who specialises in medieval trade laws, or a transphobic logician.

At the same time, this line of thought is overinclusive since it makes any academic who was ever mistaken about a proposition potentially subject to disengagement, by providing a reason in favour of doing so. If false propositions are the criterion for no longer reading, teaching or citing one's work, this would render eligible the work of most if not all members of the research community, since it is an inherent feature of research that we can get things wrong, despite having the required competence and exercising the required care. There is a general lesson we can draw from this suggestion: any criterion that makes available epistemic reasons for disengaging only based on falsehood will generate both too few and too many such reasons.

6.2.2. Epistemic costs

Turning to b), don't we have epistemic reasons *not* to disengage from an academic, simply because the epistemic costs of doing so would be too high? The worry here is that even if we can construct a plausible story for how moral transgressions could defeat, and hence give us epistemic reasons to disengage, this comes with great losses: while the works of philosophers like Kant and Aristotle may be inextricably linked to their racist

[22]While some may find even the narrower conclusion too strong, others would criticize the narrow (and potentially also the broad) reading for the leeway it allows. For example, Abundez-Guerra (2018: 131) argues that "it is possible that a conceptual bridge can make Kant's racism and moral philosophy consistent and inextricable from each other", and failing to acknowledge this harms both teaching and research.

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and sexist attitudes and thus defective, we still gain a lot from engaging with them.[23] No longer reading, teaching, writing about (or inviting) authors deprives us of any possible future positive epistemic goods derived from their work.

In response, let me again point to the nuance of the conclusions provided: if the conditions established earlier can be met, we can have epistemic *reasons* for disengaging. These reasons may not need to be conclusive and could be outweighed by considerations that appeal to unacceptable epistemic cost. Nevertheless, by having the status of 'epistemic reasons', the considerations speaking in favour of disengaging need to be taken seriously and reckoned with when engaging in the complex process of weighing epistemic reasons (even if ultimately outweighed).

6.2.3. Trust

With regard to c), a recent line of work in social epistemology has focussed on explaining how the fact that our esteem of an agent impacts whether we see them as an epistemically valuable source is not only a descriptively accurate feature of life but also normatively acceptable, because this can be epistemically rational. Since learning about someone's moral transgression plausibly negatively impacts our esteem of them, and if esteem can guide our epistemic practices in epistemically rational ways, could we not arrive at an epistemic reason for disengagement via this route?

Levy (2021)'s version of this argument contends that when we form beliefs, we very often rely on other people and social or institutional cues around us, which provide us with genuine epistemic higher order evidence about the reliability of sources and quality of information. The practice of relying on esteem is therefore epistemically justified, since it is just one way of responding to evidence. With this in place, he wants to answer the questions of how bad beliefs – beliefs that go against expert consensus – come about. His reply points to 'polluted epistemic environments': if the social or institutional cues we (permissibly) rely on when assessing the reliability and expertise of sources are misleading or deceiving, we may end up with bad beliefs, even without any epistemic failings of the individual believer.

As such, the problem of bad beliefs is different from the case in this paper: Aud's belief needn't be a bad belief. It can be a belief in an entirely unproblematic academic proposition and may even represent expert consensus, if other academics share Ac's conclusion. But maybe we are nevertheless dealing with a polluted epistemic environment? Aud relies on the social and institutional cues that come with Ac being an academic, to judge Ac as a reliable source. Could we argue that an epistemic environment, which contains cues that flag as a reliable source someone who is guilty of a serious moral transgression, is polluted? But note that at this point, we would return to the very question this paper investigates, which brings us back to the defeat-based reason provided by the Competence Argument: can someone's moral transgression be evidence that they are an unreliable source – that they lack the competence required to reasonably put forward propositions in an area?

The same result obtains when turning to Dutilh Novaes (2020)'s version of this line of argument, who casts epistemic practices like testimony or argumentation as epistemic exchanges of epistemic resources. Whether we trust a potential exchange partner plays an important role in deciding whether to engage in exchange with them. Although Dutilh Novaes focusses on argumentation, we may fit this paper's central case (of testimony) into her framework. If Aud learns about Ac's moral transgression, surely this decreases their trust in Ac, and if trust is an important factor for whether to engage in exchange, surely, Ac's moral transgression can provide an epistemic reason for disengagement? But this is

[23]Archer & Matheson (2019) discuss this as "intellectual reasons" to teach and cite.

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not a *different* epistemic reason for disengagement; rather, Dutilh Novaes' framework ultimately features the same question after a defeat-based epistemic reason provided by the Competence Argument. To see this, consider her reason for why trust plays this important role: because in deciding whether to engage in exchange, we need to have reason to think that the other has valuable epistemic reasons to offer, which requires that they not act in bad faith and that they are 'sufficiently knowledgeable/competent on the topic in question' (ibid.: 221). And this is precisely the question of this paper: whether someone's moral transgression could be evidence that they lack the required competence to reasonably put forward propositions in an area (i.e. to provide epistemic resources).

To summarise, instead of providing different purely epistemic reasons for disengagement, arguments along the lines of Levy and Dutilh Novaes ultimately can be cast as assuming a similar connection between area, competence, and behaviour. Their candidates for purely epistemic reasons for disengagement can be captured under the umbrella of the defeat-based reason provided by the Competence Argument in this paper.

7. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to answer the question of whether there could be purely epistemic reasons that could underwrite a practice of disengagement from an academic; bracketing social, moral, or political concerns. After characterising disengagement as an umbrella term that captures the various ways of withdrawing support or attention, in reaction to an individual (in this paper, an academic) committing a moral transgression, I provided a model for a case of disengagement in the academic sphere: an academic Ac morally transgresses, and as a result, is no longer read, cited, or invited. Key was the observation that in this case, the audience Aud behaves as if their epistemic attitudes in the propositions that make up Ac's body of work no longer have positive epistemic status. This observation provided the strategy for looking for purely epistemic reasons: could we make sense of the idea that Ac's moral transgression *defeats* the positive epistemic status of Aud's attitude towards p? With the help of the Competence Argument, we saw that Ac's behaviour can be a higher order defeater for the positive epistemic status of Aud's attitude towards p, if dealing with an area where Ac's behaviour provides evidence for lacking the required competence to reasonably put forward propositions. This gives us an answer to the question of this paper: there could be purely epistemic reasons in favour of disengaging, if concerning an area where the moral transgression that motivates disengaging also functions as a higher order defeater.

Let me supplement this conclusion by noting and reiterating a few qualifications. First, I have not definitively argued whether there are or could be such areas. I take it that some examples (like the antisemitic Holocaust researcher) seem plausible because of the close connection between the moral transgression and the area in question. This suggests that the set of cases that admits of purely epistemic reasons for disengaging may be small, but, importantly, not empty.

Next, if we can find such cases, the arguments in this paper merely show that there are such reasons, and not that we therefore *ought* to disengage. As discussed in Section 6.1, the Competence Argument does not issue a binary requirement to disengage or engage, and could allow for degrees of removal, corresponding to strength of reason. It may also be possible that the purely epistemic reasons in favour of disengaging could be outweighed altogether by other, weightier reasons against it. Conversely, it may also be possible that we ought to disengage even in the absence of purely epistemic reasons, e.g. when moral, social, or political reasons prevail.

There are many questions to pursue in the future. For one, I have so far assumed that it is possible to isolate a purely epistemic perspective, and that we can (and would

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want to) distinguish between purely epistemic and other reasons. In the light of the burgeoning literature on social epistemology, which points to the many connections between the epistemic, moral, social and political domains, this assumption may be considered misled. Moreover, if the arguments in this paper are correct, there is a question of whether and how they can be extended to cover cases of potential disengagement that cannot be straightforwardly understood in propositional terms, such as the cases in pop culture and the arts mentioned at the beginning.

Next, as discussed in Section 2, disengaging is related to other practices like cancelling or no-platforming. It would be interesting to investigate in how far the insights of this discussion can also be used to shed light on these and other related practices. For example, if we had concluded that purely epistemic reasons for disengaging need to be ruled out definitively, there would have been little hope to find purely epistemic reasons for the broader practice of cancelling. Given that this discussion has at the very least maintained this possibility for disengaging, it equally remains at least an option that purely epistemic reasons may also exist for cancelling.

The probably most pressing question is how we should think of the relationship between epistemic, moral, social, and political reasons, assuming that they do not always pull in the same direction. By focusing on epistemic reasons, I do not mean to convey that the epistemic perspective takes priority. Rather, I hope to have carved out an area of investigation that is unaffected by the complex and often conflicting moral, social, and political reasons, to shed light on when disengaging might be epistemically justified or even called for (should the reasons be conclusive). This can improve our understanding of a common criticism, namely that someone's moral transgression may not take away from the quality of their work. Whether someone should be disengaged from, all things considered, remains an open question.

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