

## NORMS OF CREDIBILITY

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore whether there is a need for a multiplicity of norms governing belief due to differences in the objects of those beliefs, particularly the difference between persons and nonpersons. I call the view according to which there is a single epistemic norm governing belief *monism*, and the view that there is more than one such norm *pluralism*. I consider three different kinds of objections to monism that stem specifically from considerations unique to assessing the credibility of persons, along with corresponding pluralist proposals. I argue not only that all of the criticisms of monism fail, but also that the proposed pluralist norms face significant problems of their own. In so doing, the aim of the paper is to clear the path for there being a single epistemic norm governing belief, despite there being important epistemic differences between how we ought to treat persons and nonpersons.

We form beliefs about many things: objects in our environment, memories in our past, conclusions to which we've reasoned, but also about other persons and their status as sources of information for us. A natural question that arises is whether our beliefs about testifiers and the credibility of their testimony are governed by the same epistemic norm as are our beliefs about, for instance, coffee cups, computers, and dog breeds. Otherwise put, are all beliefs subject to the same epistemic norm?

At the very least, it is clear not only that our reliance on the testimony of others is norm-governed, but also that evidence plays a significant role in the assessment of our beliefs about the credibility of others and the reports that they offer: just as we are subject to criticism for carelessly disregarding evidence when forming our perceptual beliefs, so, too, are we open to negative evaluation for doing so in relation to our testimonial beliefs. If, for instance, I know that you are an expert

on World War II history—having studied and lectured on the topic for decades—it surely would be epistemically irresponsible of me to disregard this and prefer my own novice beliefs about the end of the war, instead of your beliefs.

At the same time, however, there are clear and important differences between our beliefs about testifiers and about everything else. For instance, we have relationships with other persons—they can be our parents, children, friends, students, and so on—and whether we trust them can be of the utmost importance to them and the health of our relationships. The stakes can also be very high for other persons—whether I regard you as trustworthy when you tell me that you've been assaulted can literally be the difference between life and death for you, whereas my beliefs about my coffee cup and computer don't matter at all to them. I can also wrong testifiers in ways that I can't wrong my coffee cup: if I judge you to be lying or exaggerating simply because

you're a woman, then you seem to be the victim of a form of injustice, and I am guilty of wrongdoing. Again, similar considerations just don't arise in my assessment of my coffee cup or computer.

Two different questions arise here: first, do these sorts of asymmetries make a difference to how we ought to treat persons and nonpersons, epistemically speaking? Second, do these asymmetries make a difference to the epistemic norm governing our corresponding beliefs? Many of those who respond affirmatively to the first question thereby answer affirmatively to the second as well—that is, many take there to be an important epistemic difference in how we should treat, say, our friends and our coffee cups, and then because of this, they embrace the more radical thesis that we need a multiplicity of norms governing belief. Let's call the view according to which there is a single epistemic norm governing belief *monism*, and the view that there is a variety of such norms *pluralism*.<sup>1</sup> My plan for the paper is as follows: I will consider three different kinds of objections to monism that stem specifically from considerations unique to persons, along with corresponding pluralist proposals. I will argue not only that all of the criticisms of monism fail, but also that the proposed pluralist norms face significant problems of their own. In so doing, the aim of the paper is to clear the path for there being a single epistemic norm governing belief, despite there being important epistemic differences between how we ought to treat persons and nonpersons.<sup>2</sup>

### I. RELATIONSHIP-BASED NORM OF CREDIBILITY

Let's begin by considering a paradigmatic monist view that is the target of pluralist objections: Miranda Fricker's version of evidentialism. According to Fricker, "there is no puzzle about the fair distribution of credibility, for credibility is a concept that wears its proper distribution on its sleeve.

Epistemological nuance aside, the hearer's obligation is obvious: she must match the level of credibility she attributes to her interlocutor to the evidence that he is offering the truth" (Fricker 2007, p. 19). More precisely:

*Evidentialist Norm (of Credibility)*<sup>3</sup> [EN]: For every speaker, *S*, and hearer, *H*, *H* should match the credibility judgment of *S* to the evidence that *S* is offering the truth.<sup>4</sup>

On Fricker's view, then, our assessment of the credibility of others is governed entirely by evidence. If one is also an evidentialist<sup>5</sup> in general, then monism about the norm of belief follows: our beliefs about persons are not importantly different from, say, our perceptual and memorial beliefs. In particular,<sup>6</sup> we should match our beliefs about the credibility of other persons to the evidence in the same way that we do with respect to our beliefs about coffee cups and computers.

As presented, the EN is a distinctively epistemic norm, and if it is the only norm of this sort governing belief, then a subject is in the epistemic clear, so to speak, when it is followed. But the EN has also been taken to have deep moral significance. In particular, Fricker argues that "[a] speaker sustains . . . testimonial injustice if and only if she receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer; so the central case of testimonial injustice is identity-prejudicial credibility deficit" (Fricker 2007, p. 28). A speaker suffers a credibility deficit when the credibility that she is afforded by a hearer is less than the evidence that she is offering the truth, and a hearer has the relevant kind of identity prejudice when she has a prejudice against the speaker in virtue of the latter's membership in a social group. Where this prejudice "tracks" the subject through different dimensions of social activity—economic, educational, professional, and so on—it is systematic, and the type of prejudice that tracks people in this way is related to social identity, such as racial and gender identity.

Fricker argues, then, that when a hearer violates the EN by giving a speaker a credibility deficit in virtue of, say, her race, the speaker is wronged “in her capacity as a knower” and is thereby the victim of testimonial injustice. What this means is that a speaker is also in the moral clear when she satisfies the EN, at least with respect to committing an act of, and a hearer suffering an instance of, testimonial injustice. More precisely, if a hearer satisfies the EN, it purportedly follows that (i) the hearer is not subject to epistemic criticism, (ii) the hearer is not wronging the speaker in her capacity as a knower, and (iii) the speaker thereby does not sustain testimonial injustice.

In a recent paper, Ishani Maitra challenges the monism of the EN by arguing that there is not a single norm governing credibility assessments.<sup>7</sup> In particular, she claims that “we hearers have no general obligation to match our credibility judgments to the evidence in every case. Where no such obligation exists, we do no wrong in failing to avoid a credibility deficit, regardless of the reasons for the failure” (Maitra 2010, p. 200). To see this, Maitra asks us to consider Zara, who is working through the daily news and uses a few rough heuristics to cull what she reads:

For example, though she likes to read writers from a broad range of political persuasions, there are some persuasions she can't take seriously. The tea-party movement is one such persuasion: she has seen some of their more offensive protest placards, though she doesn't know that much about them, including what precisely they want, and how they're different from other right-leaning groups. Today, she comes across an item that opens with the writer identifying himself as a “committed tea-partier.” As is her usual habit with such writers, Zara deletes the item, figuring she wouldn't be able to trust much of what the writer says anyway. (Maitra 2010, p. 198)

Now it is important to recognize that Maitra specifically intends for the case of Zara to be structurally identical to paradigmatic cases of

testimonial injustice. If it weren't, then her attempt to draw a conclusion about the falsity of a norm such as the EN would simply miss the mark, as she wouldn't have shown that the norm might be violated without the speaker suffering a testimonial injustice. Thus, we should understand Zara to be dismissing the tea-partier's testimony, not because she has evidence or good reasons to believe that tea-partiers are unreliable, but entirely because she is giving the writer a credibility deficit that is due to identity prejudice about tea-partiers. With this in mind, Maitra argues as follows:

Intuitively, I think Zara does no injustice *to the writer* by dismissing him. In refusing to engage with him, she isn't being unfair to him. That's because she simply doesn't owe it to him to avoid a credibility deficit. It may be that Zara harms *herself* by depriving herself of sources of knowledge on topics she cares about. And it may also be that she fails to fulfill some obligations (to herself) to be rational. But testimonial injustice requires more than this, for it is by definition a kind of wrong done to another (the speaker). Because (intuitively speaking) Zara does no injustice to the speaker, this shouldn't count as an instance of testimonial injustice. (Maitra 2010, p. 199; emphasis in the original)

Maitra's reasoning in this passage seems to go as follows: Zara does not wrong the tea-partier in rejecting his testimony, despite the fact that her identity prejudice about tea-partiers motivates the credibility deficit she assigns to him. If the speaker is not wronged, then he also does not suffer a testimonial injustice, which thereby provides a reason for concluding that Zara has not violated a norm of credibility. This, then, casts doubt on there being a norm such as the EN that requires of all hearers that they match their credibility judgments of speakers to the available evidence.

Maitra then goes on to argue that, instead of a general norm like the EN, hearers have obligations to speakers only in virtue of

“certain special interpersonal relationships,” such as those involving friends, family members, and professionals. Call the type of norm according to which obligations for assessing credibility vary, depending on the relationship between speaker and hearer, *relationship-based*. It can be expressed as follows:

*Relationship-Based Norm (of Credibility)*  
[RBN]: For every speaker, *S*, and hearer, *H*, if *H* and *S* already have a special interpersonal relationship, then *H* should match the credibility judgment of *S* to the evidence that *S* is offering the truth.

According to Maitra, then, when the jurors in *To Kill a Mockingbird* fail to match their credibility assessment of Tom Robinson to the evidence that he is telling the truth, they wrong him only because they already bear a special “juror-defendant” relationship to him. Subtract this relationship, and they would do no wrong to Tom Robinson in regarding him as unreliable without adequate evidence; accordingly, he would suffer no testimonial injustice.

It should also be clear that, here, Maitra is rejecting the monism of the EN and defending pluralism about the epistemic norms governing belief. In particular, it is implausible to think that Maitra holds that we should match our beliefs about coffee cups and computers to the available evidence only if we already have a special interpersonal relationship with such objects. Indeed, such a restriction doesn’t make sense when applied to nonpersons, as we don’t have interpersonal relationships with them to begin with. Given this, embracing the RBN brings with it a commitment to pluralism insofar as it holds that there are no fewer than two epistemic norms governing belief: one for forming beliefs about the credibility of those with whom we have interpersonal relationships, and at least one more for all our other beliefs.

Let’s now take a closer look at both Maitra’s objection to the EN and her positive

relationship-based norm. To begin, why should we think that the tea-partier in the above case is not wronged by Zara? Maitra appeals to intuition here, though for those of us who do not share the intuition, it would be helpful to explore what might underlie it. One way this might go is like this: one suffers a wrong (epistemic or moral) when one has been harmed in some way. In order to be harmed, one has to be affected or impacted by the act in question.<sup>8</sup> So even if Zara illegitimately discounts the tea-partier’s writings, if he and everyone else are wholly unaware of this fact, then he is not being affected in any way by Zara’s credibility deficit. No effect equals no harm, and thus the tea-partier is neither wronged in his capacity as a knower nor is he the victim of testimonial injustice.

But surely one can be wronged, both epistemically and morally, even without there being any clear harm or effects sustained. If a female scientist publishes a paper that is discounted entirely because she is a woman, she is still wronged in her capacity as an epistemic agent even if there are absolutely no consequences from this. Perhaps she has no idea that her paper wasn’t read, and, even if it had been, it would have made no difference to her reputation or the domain of inquiry. Still, in having her work ignored simply because she is a woman, she is denied a basic level of intellectual respect that she is owed, and in this sense, is wronged as a knower. Similarly, if a man cheats on his wife, she still has been deeply wronged even if there is not a single effect of the infidelity that we might point to. Perhaps no one, including the wife, ever finds out about the affair, the mistress is dead, and the husband’s behavior is otherwise exactly as it would have been had he remained faithful. Regardless, by virtue of being cheated on, the woman has been denied the moral respect that she deserves as a member of the marriage, and is thereby wronged in her capacity as a wife.

Moreover, if we simply substitute “woman” or “black person” in cases where Maitra

attempts to generate intuitive support for her conclusion, there are immediate problems. For instance, Maitra writes: “If I dismiss the views of the stranger sitting next to me because I have negative associations with people with strong Southern accents, intuitively I don’t do him an injustice” (Maitra 2010, p. 200). But now consider: “If I dismiss the views of the stranger sitting next to me because I have negative associations with black people, intuitively I don’t do him an injustice” (Maitra 2010, p. 200). Surely, this rings false. But then what is the difference between the two?

Maitra proposes in the RBN that it is only against the background of prior interpersonal relationships that we have duties to match our credibility assessments of testifiers to the evidence. However, to the extent that we have the intuition that dismissing the southerner’s, but not the black person’s views, is permissible, this move doesn’t help, as neither speaker bears a special relationship to his hearer.<sup>9</sup>

The RBN also doesn’t mitigate the problem above, where it clearly seems that a black speaker suffers a testimonial injustice when my racism causes me to ignore what he says, despite the fact that I have no special relationship with him because he is a stranger. That the speaker is wronged seems particularly vivid when the content of the report is one where the speaker should be regarded as an expert (here, the wrong is epistemic) or where she is rendering herself particularly vulnerable (here, the wrong is moral). Suppose, for instance, that I prefer my own judgment to a stranger’s testimony about World War II—despite the fact that he is a known expert on the topic—simply because he is black and I am racist. Or suppose that while traveling on the subway, a stranger reports to you that she has been raped, and you regard her as untrustworthy on the matter entirely because she’s a woman and you’re a sexist. In both cases, Maitra’s view says that no wrong has been done to the speakers in question, but

this is difficult to reconcile with the egregious lack of epistemic and moral respect that they are afforded from their hearers. While it is wrong enough to be ignored because of systematic prejudice, the injustice is even greater in certain contexts, such as that of being a clear epistemic superior, a victim of a brutal assault, and so on.

Still further, the RBN lends itself to justifying what we might think are particularly pernicious forms of testimonial injustice. Suppose I’m talking to two people, one of whom is my white friend and the other is a black stranger. Suppose further that with respect to the testimony offered, I have the same evidence for trusting them, but while I believe my friend, I dismiss what the black stranger tells me because he’s black. As was noted above, it certainly seems as though I’ve wronged the black stranger in such a case. But what I want to emphasize here is that this wrong is exacerbated by me *also* relying on the testimony of my friend, despite having no evidential reason for preferring one report to the other. Most of us live in societies where we are not isolated from one another, and how we treat one person, even ourselves, can profoundly impact others. If you have an inflated sense of self, this credibility surplus might be problematic by itself, but it is certainly more harmful when taken in relation to others.<sup>10</sup> Now, as stated, the RBN does not permit a non-evidentially grounded credibility surplus to those with whom we have special relationships, but it does allow a non-evidentially grounded *asymmetry* in our treatment of the testimony of, say, friends and nonfriends. And this leads to what we might call a *relational form of testimonial injustice*, that is, injustice that one suffers only in relation to the treatment of others: the black stranger is wronged both when I illegitimately ignore him *and* when I prefer my friend’s testimony. Though the obvious ways in which this is the case involve the consequences of this asymmetrical treatment—for example,

in their reputations, opportunities, future relations, and so on—this does not exhaust the wrongness. Here is one simple way to see this: if justice is understood in terms of fairness, it is not only unfair for me to reject the black stranger’s testimony; it is additionally unfair for me to believe my friend when I have no good reason for doing so. Consider an analogue: it is not only unfair for me to randomly deprive my one daughter of food; it is additionally unfair to her for me to then go ahead and arbitrarily feed my other daughter. Thus, the RBN not only permits testimonial injustice of this relational sort, but it also promotes it.

Thus far, I have focused primarily on whether speakers are subject to testimonial injustice, despite the satisfaction of the RBN. Here, however, I want to point out that there is also a straightforward epistemic problem with this norm. To this end, notice that this norm permits ignoring relevant evidence. In particular, even if I have evidence that you are a trustworthy expert on a question, if I don’t have a special interpersonal relationship with you, I don’t have to match my credibility assessment of you to the available evidence. But since credibility assessments are just beliefs, the view allows the withholding of belief even when there are no good epistemic reasons for doing so, and, in fact, there are extraordinarily powerful reasons for forming a positive belief. This is obviously unacceptable in other domains, such as with respect to perception, memory, inference, and so on. Imagine, for instance, there being a norm that rationally permits my not believing that there is a dog in front of me when I clearly see and hear one. Our beliefs about the credibility of testifiers are no different in this respect, and thus there are not only moral problems with the RBN, but there are epistemic ones as well. Despite a hearer’s satisfaction of the RBN, then, (i)–(iii) above might still be false by virtue of the hearer being subject to epistemic criticism,

the hearer wronging the speaker in her capacity as a knower, and the speaker sustaining testimonial injustice.

## 2. STAKES-BASED NORM OF CREDIBILITY

In this section, I would like to explore the prospects of a different type of norm of credibility to support pluralism, one that focuses not on the relationships between speakers and hearers, but on the practical stakes involved for speakers in whether their testimony is assessed as credible. Call the type of norm according to which obligations regarding credibility assessments vary depending on the stakes of the speaker *stakes-based*.

Such a norm is suggested by Maitra when she writes: “The explanation [involving relationships] is by no means the only possible one for why hearers are obligated to match their credibility judgments to the evidence in some cases of testimony, but not in others. . . . [A] different explanation is suggested by the fact that [in *To Kill a Mockingbird*] Tom Robinson [has] a lot at stake in whether [his] testimony is regarded as credible by the jurors . . . whereas the tea-partier . . . [has] very little at stake in whether Zara . . . [believes him]” (Maitra 2010, p. 201). Let’s make this suggestion more precise as follows:

*Stakes-Based Norm (of Credibility) [SBN]:* For every speaker, *S*, and hearer, *H*, if the practical stakes for *S* are high with respect to whether *S*’s testimony is assessed as credible by *H*, then *H* should match the credibility judgment of *S* to the evidence that *S* is offering the truth.

According to the SBN, hearers do not have any general obligations to match credibility assessments of the testimony of speakers to the available evidence, and thus failure to do so renders neither the hearers as being subject to criticism nor the speakers as victims of testimonial injustice. It is only when the practical stakes are sufficiently high for a given speaker that such obligations arise.

As was the case with the RBN, it should be clear that an endorsement of the SBN carries with it a commitment to pluralism about the epistemic norms governing belief. It would be implausible to argue that we should match our beliefs to the evidence about, say, the sun rising or there being a dog in the backyard only if the stakes are high. In particular, one would surely be subject to epistemic criticism for failing to believe under ordinary circumstances that the sun rose this morning even if the stakes regarding this belief couldn't be lower. The SBN, then, must be understood as applying only to beliefs involving persons, and thus it leads to embracing no fewer than two epistemic norms governing belief: one for forming beliefs about the credibility of others when the stakes are high, and at least one more for all our other beliefs.

This approach has some central advantages over the RBN. First, recall that one objection that was raised to making the norm governing credibility contingent on prior relationships between speakers and hearers is that wrongs—both epistemic and moral—can clearly be inflicted upon testifiers even by complete strangers. The SBN seems well positioned to accommodate this: if you're an expert on World War II and testify to me about Hitler's role in the war, or if you report to me that you have been raped, then even if I have no relationship to you whatsoever, your practical stakes might be sufficiently high vis-à-vis me assessing you as credible, that I have a duty to do so. In both the case of expertise and the case of reporting a rape, for instance, the stakes might be raised simply by the psychological damage brought about to the speakers in not being judged credible. Second, the SBN also has the resources for avoiding the promotion of relational testimonial injustice, which involves a non-evidentially grounded *asymmetry* in our treatment of the testimony of those with whom we have a relationship and those with whom we do not. If a friend reports to me that she had breakfast

this morning, and a nonfriend reports to me that she has been sexually harassed, I might have a duty to properly assess the credibility of the latter, but not the former, according to the SBN.

Despite these virtues of the SBN, however, such a norm faces problems of its own. To my mind, the central objection is that it is doubtful that hearers in fact have any general obligations to be sensitive to the practical stakes of speakers. This is significant since given that the SBN requires of hearers that they match their credibility assessments of speakers to the available evidence only when the practical stakes are high for the speakers, this demands that hearers have at least some ability to individuate or otherwise track these stakes, whether this is done consciously or not. Otherwise, it is entirely unclear how hearers could be expected to follow this norm short of simply aiming to always have their credibility assessments of speakers match the evidence. However, there seem to be problems with this requirement in both high-stakes and low-stakes cases.

Consider, first, an ignorant high-stakes case: suppose that unbeknownst to me, it is unusually though inexplicably important to you that others regard you as credible when reporting your identification of wild birds. In fact, a failure for hearers to do so results in months of psychological devastation for you, where you are unable to eat or sleep properly, and work becomes nearly impossible. Given that you are not an ornithologist, I have no reason to suspect that my deeming you credible when you identify a given bird is critical to your mental health. Moreover, trusting people's bird reports is generally not vital to their well-being. There is, then, no sense whatsoever in which I know, or ought to know, that the stakes are high for you here. Nevertheless, according to the SBN, given that the stakes in fact are high for you, I have an obligation that I otherwise would not have had—namely, to match my assessment of

your credibility to the evidence that you are offering the truth.

But here is the problem: stakes can vary wildly from person to person, and can be grounded in everything from rational considerations to fetishes, delusions, and superstitions. How could hearers possibly track the stakes of speakers in anything like a reliable fashion? Even more importantly, why should hearers be obligated or otherwise expected to do so? In the case above, for instance, what could possibly explain a duty that I have to be sensitive to your irrational fixation on being trusted when you say that a bird flying overhead is a red-tailed hawk?

Perhaps there are some features of the world that we are expected to track—such as the truth, the right, and so on—even when circumstances render it exceedingly difficult for us to do so. Maybe I am obligated to assert only what I know, despite the fact that my asserting a falsehood may happen through no negligence whatsoever on my part, and maybe I am required to maximize happiness, even when my failure to do so is entirely unavoidable. However, the practical stakes of others, especially when irrationally based, do not seem to be among these features of the world. Why, for instance, would I be required to track random obsessions that people have with birds, or geography, or baking, or breeds of cat? Or suppose that it is true of the person sitting next to me on the subway that unless the next report she offers about her shoe size is deemed credible, she will commit suicide. The stakes couldn't be higher, and yet it is unclear how this bizarre fact about which I am completely unaware could bring into existence a duty to assess her credibility that I didn't otherwise have.

Of course, this is not to say that there aren't any general obligations that we have to others that might require that we be sensitive to their practical stakes. An epistemic duty that I have to weigh all of the relevant evidence might lead to me needing to consider what

is important to you. Or a moral duty that I have to not unnecessarily inflict harm upon others or to treat fellow persons with respect might involve doing my best to be sensitive to what would be painful for you. What I am doubting here, though, is that we have some special requirement, independent of such general obligations, to be sensitive to the practical stakes of others. When a norm is violated, it is standard to conclude that the one doing the violating is subject to criticism of some sort. If the norm in question is epistemic, for instance, then one is subject to epistemic criticism for its violations; if it is moral in nature, then one is subject to moral criticism; and so on. What the SBN is saying, then, is that hearers are subject to criticism specifically for a failure to be sensitive to the practical stakes of speakers. And this is what seems wrong, regardless of whether the criticism in question is taken to be epistemic or moral. To the extent that I am doing something wrong in not matching my credibility judgment of you to the available evidence, it is not because I am insensitive to your obsession about being trusted when you say that a bird flying overhead is a red-tailed hawk. Instead, it is due to me ignoring evidence or failing to treat you with the respect that you deserve as a person.

Consider, now, an ignorant low-stakes case: suppose that unbeknownst to me, you do not care in the slightest how you or your testimony is treated or regarded by others. There are many possible explanations for this, such as extremely low self-esteem, masochism, self-loathing, and so on. But whatever the cause, the result is that you will be wholly unaffected psychologically by whether your testimony is assessed as credible by me. Let's also suppose that I have no personal or professional connections to you, so that my judgments about you will not have any consequences for your reputation, career, and so on. Your stakes for me judging you credible, then, are extraordinarily low. Given that people's well-being



generally depends very heavily on how others treat them, combined with me having no reason at all to suspect that you are unusual in this respect, there is no sense at all in which I know, or ought to know, that the stakes are low for you. Now suppose that while we're at a party together, you tell me that you were sexually assaulted. Because you're a woman, I judge you to lack credibility with respect to this report, despite the fact that the evidence fails to support this assessment. According to the SBN, I have violated no norm of credibility and am thereby not subject to criticism. Moreover, because of this, you do not count as the victim of testimonial injustice when I disregard your testimony because of my illegitimate credibility assessment.

Every one of these conclusions, however, seems clearly wrong. The mere fact that you are unaffected by my actions does not mean that I haven't violated a norm or wronged you. Even if you have the thickest skin possible, if I hurl racist slurs at you, I am still subject to moral (and possibly epistemic) criticism, and you are still the victim of racism. Similarly, even if the stakes are as low as possible for you because you positively welcome people doubting your credibility, if I judge you to be untrustworthy because you're black, I am nonetheless properly open to criticism, and you are the subject of testimonial injustice. In particular, I have erred both epistemically—in ignoring the available evidence about your credibility—and morally—in doing so in virtue of being a racist. And you are still wronged in your capacity as a knower, even if you're wholly unharmed, by virtue of failing to be treated with the respect you deserve. Moreover, consider this: it certainly seems possible that the dead can be the victims of testimonial injustice. If I read the diary of an author who reports being raped by an acquaintance, and I doubt her credibility simply because she is a woman, I am subject to criticism both epistemically and morally: the former because I have formed a belief

on the basis of inadequate evidence, and the latter because I have wronged the author by permitting my sexism to guide my assessment of her trustworthiness. But the SBN is fundamentally incapable of accounting for this, as the stakes are neither high nor low for the dead. Thus, just as we saw with the RBN, the SBN is subject to both epistemic and moral objections.

### 3. CONTENT-BASED NORM OF CREDIBILITY

Thus far, we have considered norms of credibility challenging monism that focus either on the relationships between speakers and hearers or on the practical stakes involved for speakers in whether their testimony is assessed as credible. In this section, I would like to look at norms where *what speakers say* makes a difference to what the hearers are obligated to do. Let's call the type of norm according to which obligations for assessing the credibility of speakers vary, depending on the content of the proffered report, *content-based*.

One kind of testimony that is an obvious candidate for such a content-based norm involves what we might call *astonishing or highly implausible reports*, which I will understand as reports that are difficult for one to believe—though to varying degrees—depending on the extent to which they call into question, or conflict with, one's other beliefs. At the far end of this spectrum lie reports about miracles that clearly violate the laws of nature, such as that someone was witnessed having risen from the dead or that five ordinary loaves of bread fed five thousand hungry people to satisfaction. At the other end lie reports involving states of affairs that, while very implausible, are consistent with almost everything else that one believes, such as that a wild wolf was spotted in downtown Chicago or that a man single-handedly ate six large pizzas in one sitting. And, of course, there is a range of reports in between.

Despite these differences, there are a couple of features that are true of astonishing reports generally and that are worth noting. First, what is regarded as astonishing or implausible can vary among persons, depending on their past experiences, background beliefs, context, and so on. For instance, while it would be nearly unbelievable to an atheist to hear that a friend's cancer responded to treatment because of God's intervention, such a claim might strike a theist as perfectly ordinary. Second, what strikes one as astonishing might depend in large part on the social groups to which one belongs. It might, for instance, strike you as astonishing that someone would be pulled over by a police officer simply because he is black, or that someone's report of being assaulted would be doubted merely by virtue of being a woman, or that someone's being treated disrespectfully is entirely the result of being disabled, while such states of affairs might be utterly familiar for others.

Related to these features of astonishing reports are considerations that not only have both epistemological and moral significance, but that also can pull in different directions. Regarding the epistemological dimension, such reports can, on the one hand, have an evidential swamping effect—that is, despite having vast amounts of evidence on behalf of a speaker's reliability, a single astonishing report might call into question not only her testimony, but even her general reliability. For instance, even if I know you to have been completely trustworthy for the two decades during which we have been colleagues, your telling me that you were abducted by aliens this morning might rightly lead to me rejecting your testimony both on this occasion and in the future. Here, the effect of a report being astonishing is epistemically positive in that it prevents the acquisition of a false belief that might have otherwise been accepted. On the other hand, though, such reports might elicit a kind of close-mindedness that puts us at an epistemological disadvantage. Many new

discoveries or theories, especially those that are profoundly paradigm-shifting—such as evolutionary theory or general relativity—might initially seem outrageous, and thus we might be closed off to acquiring important bits of new knowledge.

From a moral point of view, astonishing reports also pull in different directions. The testimony of the injustices suffered by members of minority groups, for instance, might be quite reasonably regarded as incredible by those in positions of power since they might be fundamentally at odds with the latter's experiences in the world. The thought that one might be shot dead by a police officer for simply being a young black man, for instance, might strike a white CEO living in a sheltered suburb as too incredible to be believed. The negative moral impact here should be clear: the speaker's true testimony is rejected simply because it conflicts with the perspective of the privileged—with all of the wrongs that follow from this, such as a failure for justice to be pursued on his behalf—and the hearer is deprived of the awareness of the depth of racism in his own community. At the same time, however, many calls to moral and political action that involve radically changing the status quo are grounded in reports that are astonishing to many. For instance, one might find it nearly incomprehensible to believe a report that one in four women is the victim of sexual assault on college campuses,<sup>11</sup> and yet it might be precisely the shocking nature of this fact that inspires massive reform to the culture at such institutions. The positive moral effects here should also be clear: the speaker's true testimony, when accepted, enlightens the hearer to harmful moral wrongs and thereby has the capacity to motivate social change.

Given these features of astonishing reports, it might be thought that there are special norms governing our acceptance of them, ones that aim to counter some of the negative epistemic and moral pitfalls discussed above,

while also preserving their positive effects. Indeed, Karen Jones attempts to do just this when she argues on behalf of specific rules that “are intended to guide epistemic practice in all cases involving astonishing reports” (Jones 2002, p. 169), the first of which is the following:

*Independence Rule:* Conduct *separate* assessments of the trustworthiness of the witness and the plausibility or probability of what they say; then, and only then, determine the credibility of the statement or story given that it is testified to by that witness. (Jones 2002, p. 159)

The purpose of the Independence Rule is to prevent what Jones regards as some of the problematic effects of astonishing reports. In particular, she claims that influence from either of the following directions is problematic: an astonishing report that leads one to question a speaker’s credibility, or an initial judgment about a speaker’s lack of trustworthiness that causes one to question her testimony. With respect to the former, Jones says that the Independence Rule “enjoins us against using the implausibility of a person’s *current* utterance, whose truth is still the subject of investigation, to tell against her trustworthiness with respect to it, and recommends that these two lines of inquiry be pursued independently” (Jones 2002, p. 162). And regarding the latter, she writes:

If we approach a testifier with a low initial assessment of her trustworthiness—perhaps because she is a member of a suspect class, or because she has a motive for lying—and we do not follow the independence rule, we can be led to assign a lower plausibility rating to the content of her testimony than we otherwise would. In this way, the low trustworthiness rating gets to count twice over: first in its own right and second insofar as it depresses the value of the prior probability assigned to the content of what is said, where the prior probability is the probability assigned to the truth of what a witness says independently of her so testifying. (Jones 2002, p. 159)

Like the RBN and the SBN, the Independence Rule has, as a consequence, pluralism about the norm governing belief. This is because the primary motivation for embracing such a rule comes from concerns unique to persons, such as biases about social group membership affecting our probability assignments. Since such worries don’t apply to sources beyond the testimonial ones, this leads to there being no fewer than two epistemic norms governing belief: one for our beliefs about the content of testimony that is astonishing and at least one more for all our other beliefs.

The considerations leading Jones to reject monism and endorse this Independence Rule are of both an epistemic and a moral nature. Epistemically, Jones is worried about both (a) an astonishing report undermining a speaker’s credibility before it is even properly investigated, and (b) the double counting of a low credibility rating, once in its own right and another insofar as it lowers the prior probability of the content of the report in question. Morally, she is concerned with (c) an astonishing report being doubted and leading to injustices against members of marginalized groups, and (d) a lack of trustworthiness attributed to a speaker specifically because she is a member of a marginalized group, thereby leading to a lower plausibility rating being assigned to the content of her testimony. Thus, the Independence Rule, in requiring separate assessments of speakers and reports, attempts to prevent all of these concerns.

Even if this rule successfully handles these epistemic and moral problems, however, it incurs ones of its own. The first is with the requirement that we assess all speakers independently of the astonishing reports that they offer. How precisely is this supposed to work with strangers, about whom we know virtually nothing beyond that they are offering a wildly implausible report to us at a given moment? For instance, suppose that the woman next to me on the train in Chicago tells me that

she saw a jaguar in her backyard this morning. The Independence Rule tells me to first assess her credibility, independent of this jaguar report. But what do I have to go on here? I suppose I could look at features about her, such as facial expressions, manner of presentation, and so on. These judgments, though, surely will depend heavily on my beliefs about the social groups to which she belongs, which will be highly unreliable because they are subject to both explicit and implicit bias. Moreover, relying on such judgments opens the door to precisely the kinds of testimonial wrongs that Jones is aiming to avoid: rather than assessing this stranger's trustworthiness by what she says to me, I might instead rely on my beliefs about what a reliable speaker looks like, and this category might exclude women, black people, the disabled, and so on.

The second problem concerns the requirement that we assess all astonishing reports independently of our judgments of the speakers offering them. This simply flies in the face of not only what we are capable of doing in many cases, but also what we ought to do. Consider the implausible testimony of experts, such as the first report offered about evolutionary theory: often the epistemic gap between experts and novices is significant, and so there is simply no way for the latter to even begin assessing the testimony of the former, as what is being said might be barely comprehensible to the nonspecialist. In such cases, we as novices believe the testimony of experts, and justifiedly so, precisely because we take the evidence for their expertise to bear on the likelihood that what they are saying is true. To do otherwise is to deny the role of crucial evidential relations: just as my belief that you are incompetent in a domain might serve as an undercutting defeater for what you say,<sup>12</sup> so, too, my belief that you are competent might serve as a "supporter" for what you say.

Still further, and adding to the point above, the Independence Rule lends itself to a whole

new set of testimonial wrongs. Suppose, for instance, that you report to me that you were assaulted by a mutual friend of ours, which, when evaluated independently of *you* telling me this, is nearly impossible to believe. Both epistemically and morally, should I not have my assessment of your trustworthiness bear directly on the likelihood that what you're testifying to me is true? Or suppose that I know that you're as committed a sexist as they come, and you tell me that the recent reports of sexual assault on our campus have been wildly exaggerated. If I evaluate your testimony independently of you having reported this, I might regard it as just as likely as not to be true. But is it not appropriate for me, from both an epistemic and a moral point of view, to have my knowledge of your sexism affect my assessment of your claim? Indeed, in this case and the earlier one, to do otherwise would involve not only the ignoring of relevant evidence but also the perpetuation of clear wrongs to testifiers.

Here is the beginning of an explanation for why I think Jones's Independence Rule went awry: she generated it by focusing on the problematic cases, that is, on those where the assessment of untrustworthiness and the astonishing nature of the report illegitimately influence the other. If we start by looking at the case where my assessment of you as untrustworthy because I'm racist and you're black leads me to reject your claim that you were the victim of racial profiling, then it might be tempting to regard the culprit as the evidential trickle-down effect from my assessment of your credibility to your report. Or if we model our view on the case where I take your report that you were assaulted as incredible because I am a sexist and you're a woman, and this leads to me having further reason to count you as untrustworthy, then it might seem natural to target the effect that the former has on the latter. But notice that if we look, not at racist beliefs leading to the rejection of the testimony of black people, but

at beliefs about racists leading to the rejection of their testimony about black people, the intuition is very different. My knowing that you're a white supremacist and allowing this to influence my assessment of your claim that a black friend was not the victim of racial profiling seems not only epistemically and morally appropriate, but called-for. Similarly, if we look, not at the incredibility of reports about sexual assault leading sexism to regard women as untrustworthy, but at the astonishing claim that nearly all women lie about sexual assault, leading to regarding sexism as untrustworthy, the verdict is quite different. Again, my permitting your astonishing report about the general unreliability of women when reporting assault to affect my assessment of your credibility seems to be exactly what ought to be done from both an epistemic and a moral point of view.

To my mind, the real problem with the cases motivating Jones is not the influence between credibility assessments and reports but, rather, having unjustified beliefs at the outset. If we start with racist and sexist beliefs, for instance, then their influencing our other beliefs, no matter the direction, can be both epistemically and morally illegitimate. On the other hand, if we begin with completely reasonable beliefs about racists and

sexists, then their affecting our other beliefs seems not only permissible, but necessary. This diagnosis, however, not only fails to support the need for a content-based norm, but it also provides support for monism insofar as it appeals only to considerations that are true of all of our beliefs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We have seen that the central arguments on behalf of pluralism with respect to the norm governing belief fail. In particular, considerations about interpersonal relationships, stakes, and astonishing reports do not motivate the need for one norm governing persons under certain conditions, and at least one other norm for all our other beliefs. It should be emphasized, however, that this does not thereby force us either to embrace the monism of the EN or to deny that there are important epistemic differences in how we should treat, say, our friends and our coffee cups.<sup>13</sup> Thus, there may still be a single epistemic norm governing belief, despite there being very significant epistemic differences between how we ought to treat persons and nonpersons.

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#### NOTES

I am indebted to Baron Reed for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. I should note that while there is a significant amount of literature specifically on the "norms of belief," here I will be engaging only with monist and pluralist views that take the difference between persons and nonpersons to have particular epistemic significance.
2. I defend what I call a "Wide Norm of Credibility" in Lackey (forthcoming).
3. For the sake of ease of expression, I will speak simply of norms of credibility. But this should be understood as the norms governing our assessment of speakers' credibility and the corresponding acceptance of their testimony.
4. In Lackey (forthcoming), I distinguish between what I call a "categorical" and a "conditional" reading of the EN. According to the former, but not the latter, hearers are required to not only have their credibility judgments of speakers track the available evidence, but also to make such judgments in the first place. For our purposes here, however, I will set aside this nuance.

5. See, for instance, Conee and Feldman (2004).
6. Though I am focusing here on Fricker's particular evidentialist version of monism because it has been the central target of pluralist objections, it should be noted that monism does not in any way require evidentialism. For instance, a monistic version of reliabilism would hold that there is nothing interestingly different from an epistemic point of view about the processes that produce beliefs about persons and those that produce beliefs about nonpersons. For a classic defense of reliabilism, see Goldman (1979).
7. See Maitra (2010).
8. I am grateful to comments from Alex Papulis here.
9. I, of course, do not have this intuition, as I think both strangers suffer testimonial injustice.
10. I develop this point in detail in Lackey (forthcoming).
11. Pérez-Peña (2015).
12. For discussions of defeaters, approached in a number of different ways, see BonJour (1980; 1985); Goldman (1986); Pollock (1986); Fricker (1987; 1994); Chisholm (1989); Burge (1993; 1997); Plantinga (1993); McDowell (1994); Audi (1997; 1998); Williams (1999); Lackey (1999; 2008); BonJour and Sosa (2003); Hawthorne (2004); Bergmann (2006); and Reed (2006).
13. Indeed, in Lackey (forthcoming), I raise objections to the EN on the very grounds that there are features unique to persons that render a straight evidentialist norm governing belief unacceptable. But pluralism about the norm of belief does not follow from this.

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