

# Resistance to Evidence and the Duty to Believe

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## 1 Introduction

We have increasingly sophisticated ways of acquiring and communicating knowledge, but efforts to spread this knowledge often encounter resistance to evidence, i.e. the rejection of evidence coming from highly reliable sources. Resistance to evidence deprives us of knowledge and understanding and comes with dire practical consequences; recent high-stakes examples include climate change and vaccine skepticism.

The phenomenon of resistance to evidence, while subject to thorough investigation in social psychology,<sup>1</sup> is acutely under-theorized in the philosophical literature. Normative work in epistemology is, for the most part, negative, in that it concerns itself with restricting what we are permitted to e.g. believe, assert, or use as a premise in reasoning. Investigations into epistemic obligations are thin on the ground.<sup>2</sup> This paper is concerned with positive epistemology: it argues that we have an epistemic duty to form a belief that  $p$  just in case we have sufficient available and undefeated evidence for  $p$ . In turn, one's resistance to easily available evidence constitutes a breach of one's duty to believe.

I develop and defend a view according to which resistance to evidence is an instance of epistemic malfunctioning, and unpack the notion of evidence at work as consisting of knowledge indicators.

## 2. Resistance to Evidence

Consider the following cases:

**Case #1. Testimonial Injustice:** Anna is an extremely reliable testifier and an expert in the geography of Glasgow. She tells George that Glasgow Central is to the right. George believes women are not to be trusted, and therefore fails to form the corresponding belief.

**Case #2. Political Negligence:** Bill is a stubborn supporter of President Dump. Despite all the evidence that is readily available to him (via mainstream media, Dump's own actions and public statements etc.) suggesting that Dump is a bad president, Bill stubbornly refuses to believe that Dump is a bad president.

**Case #3. Science Skepticism:** Neda is an anxious cognizer; in particular, she is very careful when it comes to accepting science communication: whenever well recognized, reliable experts assert that

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. (Kahan 2016), (Tappin et al 2021)

<sup>2</sup> See (Fricker 2007), (Chrisman 2008), (Feldman 2008), (Goldberg 2016, 2017), (Jenkins-Ichikawa 2020, Forthcoming), (Kelp Forthcoming), (Kornblith 2001), (Lackey 2019), (Simion Forthcoming) for exceptions. In putting this distinction in terms of positive vs. negative epistemology, I follow (Jenkins-Ichikawa 2020).

anthropogenic climate change is occurring, or that vaccines are safe, Neda suspends belief thinking ‘Well, scientists sometimes get it wrong! I’ll do my own research’.

**Case #4. Perceptual Non-responsiveness:** Alice is looking straight at the table in front of her and fails to form the belief that there is a table in front of her.

**Case #5. Unwarranted Optimism:** Mary is an optimist. When her partner Dan spends more and more evening hours at the office, she’s happy that his career is going so well. When he comes home smelling like floral perfume, she thinks to herself: ‘wow, excellent taste in fragrance!’ Finally, when she repeatedly sees him having coffee in town with his colleague Alice, she is glad he is making new friends.

**Case #6. Misdirected Attention:** Professor Racist is teaching College math. He believes people of color are less intelligent than white people. As a result, whenever he asks a question, his attention automatically goes to the white students, such that he doesn’t even notice the black students who raise their hands.

**Case #7. Friendly Detective:** Detective Dave is investigating a crime scene. Dave is extremely thorough, but, at the same time, a close friend of the butler. Dave finds conclusive evidence that the butler did it – the butler’s gloves covered in blood, his fingerprints on the murder weapon, a letter written by the butler confessing to the crime – but fails to form the corresponding belief: Dave just can’t get himself to believe that his friend would do such a thing.

What is going on in these cases? Note that they involve very different sources of knowledge - e.g. testimony, perception, inductive inference - and that the failures at stake come about for very different reasons – e.g. prejudice, optimism, lack of attention, unwarranted epistemic anxiety, partisanship, bias, and wishful thinking. All these things are bad things, epistemically, in their own right. At the same time, the cases also have one important feature in common: all these subjects have excellent evidence easily available to them, which they fail to take up.

Several philosophers have offered source-bound diagnoses of particular incarnations of this phenomenon (in terms of e.g. epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), disregard for the nature and/or normativity of telling (e.g. Moran 2006, Hazlett 2017), breach of norms of attention (Siegel 2017)), but very few<sup>3</sup> have tried to offer an overarching explanation of what they all have in common. However, once we look at these cases together, it becomes clear that, on top of the case-specific problems, they plausibly exhibit a common variety of

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<sup>3</sup> Goldberg (2016, 2017) is a notable exception. For work explicitly endorsing the claim that beliefs are the proper subject of epistemic oughts see (Chrisman 2008), (Feldman 2008), (Jenkins-Ichikawa Forthcoming), (Kelp Forthcoming) (Kornblith 2001), (Smion Forthcoming), (Steup 2000). See also (Brown and Simion 2021) for recent work on reasons to believe, justification, and defeat.

epistemic failure: resistance to easily available evidence.<sup>4</sup> Let's dub this the 'Resistance Intuition.'

One last thing to get out of the way: the failure in question is a genuinely epistemic failure. After all, while some of these cases exhibit ethically problematic features (e.g. Case #1, Case #3, Case #6, arguably Case #2), others do not (most clearly Case #4). To the contrary, some of these cases – e.g. Case #7, maybe #5 also – can be plausibly construed as cases of moral success. Furthermore, it is hard to see how, in the cases that do exhibit morally problematic features, these could be instantiated without bad epistemic underpinnings. After all, one thing that the vast majority of the theorists of blame<sup>5</sup> strongly agree with is that there is an epistemic condition on moral blame: moral blameworthiness implies that one is not epistemically blamelessly ignorant that one is doing something wrong. But this suggests that, in the morally pregnant cases above – such as Case #1 and #6 –, the sexist and the racist are doing something epistemically wrong as well. Otherwise, if they were epistemically blameless, they could not be morally blameworthy. But they are.

The next section ventures to offer an integrated, general account of what grounds epistemic duties to believe – irrespective of epistemic source –, in conjunction with a novel account of the nature of evidence as knowledge indicators.

### 3. Evidence as Knowledge Indicators

I would like to propose an account according to which what all subjects in Cases 1-7 have in common, epistemically, is that they are in breach of their epistemic duty to believe in virtue of resistance to available evidence. Here it is:

**The Duty to Believe (DTB):** A subject S has an *epistemic*<sup>6</sup> duty to form a belief that *p* if there is sufficient and undefeated evidence for S supporting *p*.

To be clear, duties to believe are very light, on my view: they need not involve much sophistication on the part of the subject of duties, nor much awareness/explicit control over the object thereof. I use duties interchangeably with 'obligations', 'shoulds', and 'oughts'.<sup>7</sup>

What grounds the epistemic duty to believe, in my view, is proper epistemic functioning.<sup>8</sup> Pieces of evidence are *pro tanto, prima facie* warrant makers: they are the proper inputs to our processes of belief formation, and when we have enough evidence, and the processes in question are properly functioning in all other ways, the resulting belief is epistemically warranted. In turn, when our belief

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<sup>4</sup> For a research project on *Knowledge Resistance* at Stockholm University that promises to shed light on related issues see here <https://su.se/knowledgeresistance/>. See also (Stromback et al 2022) for a recent edited volume on this issue. (Feldman 2008) develops an evidence-based internalist proposal of epistemic obligation. For discussion see (Kornblith 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, there is a full Stanford Encyclopedia entry dedicated to 'The epistemic condition on moral responsibility' (Rudy-Hiller 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Crucially, the duty at stake is merely epistemic. Compatibly, e.g. prudential duties might override the epistemic duty and render it all-things-considered permissible to dismiss information that we are not interested in.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Ernie Sosa for pressing me on this.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. (Graham 2012), (Millikan 1984), (Simion 2020).

formation processes either fail to take up warrant makers that they could have easily taken up, or they take them up but fail to output the corresponding belief, they are malfunctioning:

**Resistance to Evidence as Epistemic Malfunction (REEM):** A subject *S*'s belief formation process *P* is malfunctioning epistemically if there is sufficient evidence supporting *p* that is easily available to be taken up via *P* and *P* fails to output a belief that *p*.

The proper function of belief formation processes, then, on my view, is input dependent: failing to take up the right inputs – whether it occurs by taking up the wrong inputs, or by failing to take up the right inputs – is an instance of malfunctioning.

One illuminating analogy here is the proper functioning of the lungs: as opposed to functional traits the proper function of which is not input-dependent (e.g. hearts can function properly in vats with orange juice,<sup>9</sup> even though they fail to pump blood), what it is for our lungs to function properly is, partly, for them to take up the right amount of the right stuff, i.e. oxygen, from the environment. Lungs that fail to do so in oxygen-rich environments are improperly functioning – whether they fail via taking up carbon dioxide, or by just failing to take up easily available oxygen.

Our cognitive system is not like hearts, it is like lungs: inputs matter for proper function. Properly functioning hearts can take up and circulate orange juice; properly functioning belief formation processes can't take up wishes and form beliefs based on them.

Similarly, then, just like lungs, we should expect belief formation processes to malfunction in at least two input-dependent ways: via taking up the wrong kind of inputs, but also via failing to take up easily available evidence.

Let's unpack the account. I will not take a stance on what the sufficiency threshold stands for. Views will differ on this, and they will also differ on what fixes the threshold in question – whether it is a purely epistemic affair or practical and moral considerations may play a role.<sup>10</sup> My focus here will be on how to understand evidence in order to make good on REEM and, in turn, on DTB and the Resistance Intuition.

Here is how I think about these things: Evidence consists of facts. They can be facts about the world around us, or mere facts about a subject's psychology. My having a perception as of a table in front of me is a psychological fact; it (*pro tanto, prima facie*) supports the belief that there is a table in front of me. So does the fact that there is a table in plain view in front of me.

In my view, evidence consists of facts that are knowledge indicators, in that they enhance closeness to knowledge:<sup>11</sup> one's evidence consists of facts that one is in a position to know, and that

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<sup>9</sup> Graham 2012.

<sup>10</sup> I have extensive previous work arguing against pragmatic encroachment on the epistemic. See e.g. (Simion 2021), (Kelp & Simion 2021). For the *locus classicus* for pragmatic encroachment in epistemology, see (Fantl & McGrath 2009).

<sup>11</sup> See my 2016, 2017 (with C. Kelp) for defences of the distinctive value of knowledge, and my 2016 (with C. Kelp and H. Ghijsen) and Forthcomingb defences of knowledge as the norm of belief. See Williamson 2000 for the *locus classicus* for knowledge-first epistemology.

increase one's evidential probability – i.e., the probability on one's total body of evidence - of  $p$  being the case. The fact that there is a table in front of me is a piece of evidence for me that there is a table in front of me. It is a knowledge indicator, in that it gets me closer to knowledge: it raises the probability on my evidence that there is a table in front of me, and I'm in a position to know it.

Not just any psychological facts will constitute evidence that there is a table in front of me: my having a perception as of a table will fit the bill in virtue of having the relevant indicator property. Perceptions are knowledge indicators; the fact that I have a perception as of  $p$  is a fact that I am in a position to know and that increases my evidential probability that  $p$  is the case. The fact that I wish that there were a table in front of me will not fit the bill, even if, unbeknownst to me, my table wishes are strongly correlated with the presence of tables: wishes are not knowledge indicators, for they don't raise my evidential probability of  $p$  being the case. For the same reason, mere beliefs, as opposed to justified and knowledgeable beliefs, will not be evidence material; they lack the relevant indicator property.

Here is the view in full:

**Evidence as Knowledge Indicators:** a fact  $e$  is evidence for one for a proposition  $p$  just in case one is in a position to know  $e$ , and one's evidential probability that  $p$  is the case conditional on  $e$  is higher than one's unconditional evidential probability that  $p$  is the case.

Or, more formally, and where  $P$  stands for the probability on one's total body of evidence:

**Evidence as Knowledge Indicators:** a fact  $e$  is evidence for  $p$  for  $S$  iff  $S$  is in a position to know  $e$ , and  $P(p/e) > P(p)$ .

Conversely, defeaters are indicators of ignorance: they are facts that one is in a position to know, and that lower one's evidential probability that  $p$  is the case:

**Defeaters as Ignorance Indicators:** a fact  $d$  is a defeater for  $S$ 's evidence  $e$  for  $p$  iff  $S$  is in a position to know  $d$  and  $S$ 's evidential probability that  $p$  conditional on  $e \& d$  is lower than  $S$ 's evidential probability that  $p$  conditional on  $e$ .

Or, more formally:

**Defeaters as Ignorance Indicators:** a fact  $d$  is a defeater for  $S$ 's evidence  $e$  for  $p$  iff  $S$  is in a position to know  $d$ , and  $P(p/e \& d) < P(p/e)$ .

What is it for me to be in a position to know  $e$ ? Plausibly, a certain availability relation needs to be instantiated. On my view, availability has little to do with the limits of my skull. Evidence may consist of facts 'in the head' or facts in the world. Some facts - whether they are in the head or in the world, it does not matter – are available to me, they are, as it were, 'at hand' in my (internal or external) epistemic environment. Some – whether in the head (think of justified implicit beliefs, for instance) or in the world, it does not matter – are not thus

available to me.

Here are, for starters, some paradigmatic cases that illustrate what I'm talking about: If there is a table in front of me, but I'm not paying attention to it, there is evidence for me that there is a table in front of me. If, unbeknownst to me, you put a new table in the other room, your having put it is there is *not available* to me: it is not evidence *for me*. Similarly, if I have some mental state that is so deeply buried in my psychology that I can't access it, it is not evidence for me.

As a first approximation, my notion of availability will track a psychological 'can' for an average cognizer of the sort exemplified.

Here is some theory about this: first, there are *qualitative* limitations on availability: we are cognitively limited creatures. There are of *types* information that we just cannot access, or process: the fact that there is a table in front of me is something that I can easily enough access. Your secret decision to put the table in the other room is not something I can easily access. There are also types of support relations that we cannot process: The fact that your car is in the driveway is evidence *for me* that you are home. But it's not evidence for my three-year-old son Max to believe that you are home. Max belongs to a variety of epistemic agents that are not sophisticated enough to process<sup>12</sup> the support relation into a belief that you are home. Evidence is not available to you if the kind of epistemic agent that you are cannot access or process the particular variety thereof at stake (henceforth also *Qualitative Availability*).

There are also *quantitative* limitations on my information accessing and processing: the fact that there is a table somewhere towards the periphery of my visual field - in contrast of it being right in front of me, in plain view - is not something I can easily process: I lack the power to process everything in my visual field, it's just too much information. Similarly, while I might easily access any of facts  $f$ ,  $F_1$ ,  $F_2$ ,  $F_3$ ...  $F_n$  independently, I might not be able to easily access their conjunction due to my processing limitations (henceforth also *Quantitative Availability*)

The psychological 'can' at stake here will be further restricted by features of the social and physical environment: we are supposed to read the newspaper on the table in front of us, but not the letter under the doormat. That's because we can't read everything, and our social environment is such that written testimony is more likely to be present in the newspaper on the table than under the doormat (henceforth also *Environmental Availability*)

In sum: for a fact to be such that I am in a position to know it, it needs to be at hand for me in my epistemic environment: at hand qualitatively (it needs to be the *type* of thing a creature like me can access and process), quantitatively (it needs to remain within the *amount* of things a creature like me can access and process at one particular time), and environmentally (it needs to be easily *available* in my – internal or external – epistemic environment, i.e. in my mind, or in my physical and social surroundings).

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<sup>12</sup> What is the relation between processing the support relation and knowledge indicators as probability enhancers? Is one supposed to be able to form probability beliefs in order to count as being able to process the support relation? The answer is 'no:' merely treating an indicator as such is enough; awareness of its being one is not needed, neither is awareness of what makes a fact into an indicator. 'Treating' is a lowbrow affair: I can treat my cat as a friend without believing that she is.

I take this availability relation to have to do with a fact being within the easy reach of my knowledge generating cognitive processes. A fact F being such that I am in a position to know it has to do with the capacity of my properly functioning knowledge generating processes to take up F:

**Being in a Position to Know (BPK):** S is in a position to know a fact F if S has a cognitive process with the function of generating knowledge that can (qualitatively, quantitatively, and environmentally) easily uptake F in cognizers of S's type.

A couple of things about this account: First, note that BPK is a sufficiency claim: it is not necessary that F is available to me in order for me to be in a position to know F: I can also come to know F via taking up facts that increase my probability for F.

Second, note that BPK is a restricted ought-implies-can: agent obligations imply capacities in the kind of cognizer that she is – e.g. cognitive capacities that adult cognizers have. In this, the account will predict biased cognizers are in breach of their epistemic obligations: they may be unable e.g. believe women because of bias, but cognizers with their cognitive capacities can, therefore they should.

Third, it is important to distinguish between being in a position to know and being in a position to *come* to know:<sup>13</sup> I am in a position to know that there is a computer in front of me; I am not in a position to know what is happening in the other room. I am, however, in a position to come to know it. Roughly, then, the distinction will, once more, have to do with epistemic availability: if all that needs to happen for me to come to know F is that my relevant cognitive processes take up F and process it accordingly, then I am in a position to know F. If more needs to be the case – I need to open my eyes, or turn around, or go to the other room, or give you a call – I am in a position to come to know F, but not in a position to know it.

Some evidence and defeaters I take up with my belief formation machinery, while some I fail to take up, although I should. What grounds this 'should', in my view, is proper epistemic functioning.<sup>14</sup> Because they are knowledge indicators, pieces of evidence are warrant makers: they are the proper inputs to our processes of belief formation, and when we have enough thereof, and the processes in question are properly functioning in all other ways, the resulting belief is epistemically warranted. In turn, when our belief formation processes either fail to take up knowledge indicators that they could have easily taken up, or they take them up but fail to output the corresponding belief, they are malfunctioning. A subject S's belief formation process P is malfunctioning epistemically if S has sufficient evidence supporting *p* that is available to be taken up via P and P fails to output a belief that *p*.<sup>15</sup>

Two crucial notes about this view of evidence and epistemic shoulds: first, note that nothing is claimed here about the epistemic import of being in a position to come to know: compatibly, being in a position to come to know might also, in some cases, deliver epistemic

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Ernie Sosa and Matt McGrath for pressing me on this.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. (Burge 2003, 2020), (Graham 2012), (Millikan 1984), (Simion 2021).

<sup>15</sup> See (Simion 2016, 2019) for a knowledge-first functionalist account of justification.

oughts: some cases of normative defeat are cases in point (see e.g. Goldberg 2016, 2017 and Lackey 2008). This paper stays neutral on this topic (but see Simion Forthcoming for discussion).

Second, note that, quantitative limitations on being in a position to know will deliver *prima facie* disjunctive epistemic obligations: since I can only take up a limited number of facts with my knowledge-generating processes, I will most often be in a situation where I can take up any of F<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>2</sub>, F<sub>3</sub>...F<sub>n</sub>, but not their conjunction. In these cases, I will shoulder an epistemic obligation to take up a subset of F<sub>1</sub>, F<sub>2</sub>, F<sub>3</sub>...F<sub>n</sub> that is as large as my quantitative take-up limitations. When looking straight at my computer, my visual field is populated with very numerous facts, each of which I can take up, but the conjunction of which exceeds my quantitative take-up limitations. I am thereby, on a first approximation, under a *prima facie* disjunctive obligation to take up any of the manageable subsets of facts. The question that arises is: which is the set that takes *ultima facie* normative primacy, and thereby delivers my set of evidence? Availability rankings will deliver the relevant set, on my view: the most easily available subset of facts that I can take up delivers the set of evidence I have: in the case of visual perception, for instance, facts located right in front of me, in the centre of my visual field, which are the brightest, and clearest etc – in general facts that are most easily available to the cognitive processes of a creature like me.<sup>16</sup>

Here are also a few theoretical virtues of this view of evidence; first, it is naturalistically friendly, in that it situates the epistemic normativity of epistemic oughts to believe within an etiological functionalist picture of normativity: epistemic duties to believe have to do with the proper function of our cognitive processes, just like biological oughts to take up oxygen have to do with the proper function of our respiratory systems.

Second, in line with intuition, it predicts that there is evidence for the Gettierized victim that there is a sheep in the field: the fact that they have a perception as of a sheep is a fact that they are in a position to know and that raises their evidential probability that there is a sheep in the field.

Also, there is evidence for the (recently envatted) Brain in the Vat for *p*: ‘There is a tree in front of me’ when she has a perceptual experience as of a tree, since that is a fact that she is in a position to know and that raises their evidential probability that there is a tree in front of her.

There is no evidence for Norman the clairvoyant that the President is in New York: clairvoyant experiences are non-evidential probability raisers when one is ignorant of the reliability of clairvoyance.

Last, most importantly, when plugged into REEM, this view of

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<sup>16</sup> Tim Williamson (p.c.) worries that there will be cases where too many facts (too many for my quantitative limitations) will have the same availability ranking. I see the worry (although I suspect it can be alleviated for most cases by our relation to space, time, complexity, brightness, etc.). Maybe the easiest case to imagine along these lines is the case of very simple arithmetical truths. In these cases, other normative constraints will have to decide the relevant set: I will have an all-things-considered obligation to attend to a particular range of simple arithmetical truths, and among these, the most easily available will constitute my evidence, in virtue of them delivering the corresponding epistemic obligation to take up. Thanks also to Matt McGrath for many discussions on this topic.



evidence delivers the straightforward Resistance Intuition, and thus explains that subjects in Cases 1-6 are in breach of their duty to believe for failing to take up available evidence. Anne's testimony in Case 1; media testimony, Dump's statements etc. in Case 2; the scientific testimony in Case 3; the perceptual experience as of a table in Case 4; the partner's behavioural changes in Case 5; the hands raised by the black students in Case 6; and the DNA sample etc. in Case 7, all constitute facts that are indicators of knowledge in virtue of being evidential probability enhancers that these subjects are in a position to know. These evidential probability raisers are easily available to creatures such as our protagonists: the subjects in Case 1-6 are members of a type of cognizer that hosts cognitive processes with the function of generating knowledge that can easily uptake these facts. Since they fail to do so, their epistemic processes are malfunctioning, just like their lungs would be, were they disinclined to take up the right amount of easily available oxygen. The account predicts that these subjects are all exhibiting resistance to evidence (by REEM) and are in breach of their duty to believe (by DTB).

Crucially: real-world high-stakes cases of climate change denial and vaccine skepticism will sometimes be diagnosed by this account as evidence resistance: this will happen in cases of cognizers that have easily available evidence that climate change is happening, and vaccines are safe, but they fail to take it up and update their beliefs accordingly. It is compatible with this account, however, that this is not always the case: not all evidence rejection is evidence resistance. Sometimes, cognizers inhabit an epistemic environment heavily polluted with misleading defeat: if reliable testifiers in one's community testify against *p*: 'climate change is happening', and one has every reason to trust them (say, because they have an exceptional track record of reliability as testifiers – although they get it wrong on this particular occasion), it can happen that one justifiably rejects evidence for *p*, due to being in a position to know 'heavier' evidence against *p* (i.e. evidential probability decreaseers). Note, however, that these cases – cases of justified evidence rejection in virtue of misleading defeat – will be fairly specific cases, epistemically: e.g. cases in which the cognizer has more reliable (although misleading) testimony that not-*p* than evidence that *p*, or cases in which the cognizer has overwhelming undercutting defeaters (based e.g. on reliable, although misleading, testimony) for the source of *p*. While this may happen in isolated communities, the more one has access to evidence for *p*, the less justified their evidence rejection will be.

This concludes the defense of my view. In the next sections, I will examine the potential of what I take to be the main epistemological frameworks currently defended on the market – knowledge-first epistemology and virtue epistemology – to account for the Resistance Intuition.<sup>17</sup> To this effect, I look at Tim Williamson's (2000) E=K account of evidence and extant virtue epistemological accounts of reasons to believe (Sosa & Sylvan (2018), Burge (2013)) and propositional warrant (Turri (2010)) – and argue that they miss the requisite resources to do well on this datum.

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<sup>17</sup> I will restrict my analysis to broadly externalist accounts, for reasons pertaining to space (see Kornblith 2001).

### 3. E=K

Consider, first, Tim Williamson's E=K view: according to Williamson, for any subject S, S's evidence is S's knowledge. Since knowledge implies belief, and since all the protagonists in Cases 1-7 lack the relevant beliefs, E=K will predict that the subjects in question lack evidence; e.g. Bill, the fervent supporter of President Dump, does not believe, and therefore does not know, that Dump is a bad president; furthermore, he does not believe, and therefore does not know, any of the statements by the media, etc. that suggest as much and thus, on this view, has no evidence that Dump is a bad president. And the same will hold for all of the protagonists of Cases 1-7. In this, E=K cannot make good on the Resistance Intuition - at least not when unpacked as resistance to evidence one has. Furthermore, several knowledge-first theorists explicitly embrace this result: according to people like John Hawthorne & Amia Srinivasan (2013), for instance, short of knowing, one should withhold belief.

One alternative way to account for our cases within an E=K framework would be by employing a E=K-friendly notion of being in a position to know to account for evidence that is easily available but not possessed by the agent. Of course, a lot will hinge on how the relevant E=K-friendly notion is spelled out: Consider, first, a view on which I am in a position to know that  $p$  iff there is evidence for  $p$  available to me, and evidence is available to one just in case it consists of facts that follow from or are made probable by one's extant knowledge. On this view, Bill is in a position to know  $p$ : 'Dump is a bad President' in virtue of the fact that it follows from his other extant knowledge - like his knowledge that presidents shouldn't lie, shouldn't make racist and sexist comments etc., together with his knowledge that Dump engages often in all of the above.

Unfortunately, this view will not deliver the needed result if we describe the case as one in which Bill's system of (false) beliefs about Dump being a great President is perfectly coherent (in that Bill either doesn't believe that lying etc. is bad, or doesn't believe Dump lies etc.), although unjustified:  $p$  will not follow from any piece of knowledge Bill has. To bring this point into even sharper relief, consider also Perceptual Non-Responsiveness: What is the knowledge that a table belief would follow from here?<sup>18</sup>

Here is one alternative E=K-friendly way to unpack being in a position to know: S is in a position to know that  $p$  iff, were S to believe that  $p$ , S would know that  $p$ . Bill, then, on this account, is in a position to know that Dump is a bad president iff, were he to form the relevant belief, he would come to know that Dump is a bad president.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with this account is that if, on one hand, we keep Bill's psychology otherwise fixed, and all that changes is his forming the relevant belief, it will fail to constitute knowledge in virtue of its

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<sup>18</sup> The view should also be rejected on independent grounds, for being too liberal about available evidence. The view predicts, for instance, that all arithmetical truths constitute evidence available to me, in virtue of the fact that they follow from Peano axioms, which I know. I find this flattering but highly implausible.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Carlotta Pavese for suggesting that I should discuss this route.

acute incoherence with the rest of his belief system. On the other hand, if, in order to assess Bill's actual epistemic situation, we go and look at the closest world where Bill's psychology is radically different, such that, indeed, were he to form the belief that Dump is a bad president, it would constitute knowledge, our account of being in a position to know becomes too strong. To see this, consider Alvin Goldman's (1988) benighted cognizer, Ben. This fellow lives on a secluded island where he's been taught that reading astrology is an excellent way to form beliefs, and where he has no access to any clue to the contrary. Plausibly, there is no evidence available to Ben for p: 'Astrology is an unreliable way to form beliefs,' nor is he in a position to know it. However, at the closest world where things are different enough (say that Ben leaves his benighted community), such that now he believes the relevant proposition, he knows it. As such, the account construed along these lines will mistakenly place Ben in the same boat with the Case 1-7 protagonists, in spite of the fact that Ben has no way to access information of the unreliability of astrology.

One last move available to the defender of E=K is to argue that what is present in Cases 1-6 and explains the Resistance Intuition is *potential* evidence: evidence that Bill, the Dump supporter, would have had, had he not had bad epistemic dispositions. Since, plausibly, one should have good epistemic dispositions rather than bad epistemic dispositions, the view predicts that Bill is in breach of an epistemic 'should.' Williamson (2000, 95) gestures at a view like this.

One important problem with this move, however, is that it is both too weak and too strong.

To see why the view is too strong, note that one need not have bad epistemic dispositions in order to fail, epistemically, in the way in which Bill does: it can be a one-off affair. Maybe Bill is an excellent epistemic agent in all other walks of life: it's only this particular belief – that Dump is a bad president – that he refuses to form against all facts speaking in favor of it.<sup>20</sup>

To see why the view is also too weak, note that a version of the E=K account thus construed will miss one important distinction between epistemic shoulds: that between the synchronic 'should' of epistemic justification and the diachronic 'should' of responsibility in inquiry.<sup>21</sup> Proceeding responsibly in inquiry – e.g. pursuing worthwhile questions and thoroughly searching for evidence, diachronically – is one thing; synchronically responding well to available evidence is another. However, both are governed by epistemic shoulds.<sup>22</sup>

To see this, think back to the case of Friendly Detective again. Say that, this time around, Dave is investigating the crime scene with his colleague, Greg. Greg is rather lazy and distracted: he fails to find any evidence at the crime scene, and concludes that there is no

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<sup>20</sup> One way for Williamson to escape this problem is by making the view one that not only asks for the relevant dispositions to be present, but also manifested. Furthermore, the account would remain problematic in virtue of being too weak.

<sup>21</sup> For excellent work on the nature and normativity of inquiry, see (Friedman 2017) and (Kelp 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Ernie Sosa (2021) helpfully distinguishes between *Narrow-scope*: (Forbearing from X'ing) in the endeavor to attain a given aim A. and *Broad-scope*: Forbearing from (X'ing) in the endeavor to attain a given aim A). The 'should' of properly suspending belief in the face of extant evidence pertains to the former; the should pertaining to proper inquiry pertains to the latter.

evidence to suggest that the butler did it. In contrast, as we've already seen, Dave is extremely thorough, but, at the same time, a close friend of the butler. Dave finds conclusive evidence that the butler did it at the crime scene but fails to form the corresponding belief.

Both Dave and Greg are rather rubbish detectives, in that they fail to conduct their inquiry well – they are both in breach of the diachronic epistemic should of inquiry. Also, both Dave and Greg display pretty bad epistemic dispositions: Dave is a sloppy epistemic agent, while Greg fails to believe what the evidence supports. Compatibly, I submit, there is an important epistemic difference between Dave and Greg: Dave, but not Greg, is aware of all the evidence in support of the hypothesis that the butler did it, and fails to form the relevant belief nevertheless; Dave is resistant to available evidence.

The view, then, is too coarse grained to do the work needed to account for this datum. What is needed is a principled way to identify the epistemic dispositions and the corresponding epistemic should that matter in resistance cases.

Sandy Goldberg (2016) has a view of evidence one should have had according to which the relevant 'should' here is social: social norms are such that one is supposed to read the newspaper on the table, but not the letter under the doormat. Two things about this: first, it is not clear that we want to allow social normativity to interfere in our epistemic affairs so abruptly: after all, social norms can be bad, epistemically. In many places, social norms are such that one should believe white men but not women or people of color. We don't want to license the corresponding belief formation strategies. Second, the view will not do better than E=K in identifying the relevant epistemic should: both Dave and Greg (socially) should do better in acquiring evidence.

#### **4 Virtuous Reasons and Warrant**

This section looks into whether virtue epistemology has the resources needed to account for what is going wrong in Cases 1-6.

For the most part, virtue epistemologists distance themselves from talk of evidence. However, they have other resources that they could employ: the market features well-developed virtue-theoretic views of reasons to believe (Sylvan and Sosa 2018, Burge 2013), permissible suspension (Sosa 2020), and propositional warrant (Turri 2010).

According to all these authors, broadly speaking, competences come first in epistemic normativity.

According to Sylvan & Sosa, a fact is an epistemic reason to believe for S just in case it is competently taken up and processed by S. At root, then, reliable epistemic competence is doing the epistemic warranting work, even when reasons are involved. In turn, epistemic competences are traditionally unpacked as dispositions to believe truly (Sosa 2016, 2021), or know (Kelp 2018, Miracchi 2015, Schellenberg 2018).

The view, whether construed along truth-first or knowledge-first lines, is too weak: Think back to the case of Bill, the Dump supporter; on this view, we get the result that there are no reasons for

Bill to believe that Dump is a bad president, since he is not uptaking the relevant facts – i.e., media testimony, Dump’s own actions etc. – via his cognitive competences. The same will hold for all Cases 1-6: there will be no epistemic reasons for sexist and racist subjects to believe women and black people; there will be no reason for Anne to believe that there is a table right in front of her; there will be no reason for Alice to believe her partner is cheating; and finally, there will be no reason for Detective Dave to believe the butler did it. All these facts fail to constitute epistemic reasons on this view, since they are not competently processed by the subjects.

Along similar lines, in more recent work, Sosa (2020) proposes that one properly suspends belief on a question if one suspends based sufficiently on one’s lack of the competence required in order to answer that question aptly – where apt belief is knowledgeable belief (2020, 85). It is easy to see that this account predicts, against intuition, that it is permissible for (at least some of) our protagonists to suspend belief on the issues at hand if they do so based on their lack of competence to believe aptly. Sexist George, for instance, would be permitted to suspend based on his sexism-generated lack of competence to believe aptly what Anna tells him.

Similar problems arise for the virtue-theoretic view of propositional warrant. According to John Turri, for all  $p$ ,  $p$  is propositionally warranted for a subject  $S$  iff  $S$  possesses at least one means to come to believe  $p$  such that, were  $S$  to form the relevant belief via one of these means,  $S$ ’s belief would be doxastically warranted. In turn, doxastic warrant is unpacked in terms of epistemic competence:  $S$  is doxastically warranted to believe  $p$  iff  $S$ ’s belief is the product of a reliable belief formation competence of  $S$ ’s.

On this view, since sexists, racists and wishful thinkers are, by definition, people who lack the dispositions to form true or knowledgeable beliefs on the relevant issues, we get the counterintuitive result that these subjects lack propositional warrant and thus are not doing anything wrong, epistemically, in not forming the relevant beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

What to do? Here is one move the virtue theorist might want to make here: Dispositions can fail to manifest themselves when ‘masked:’ consider the fragility of a vase. When in a room filled with pillows, the vase is still fragile, although its disposition to break cannot manifest itself. Similarly, virtue theorists could argue, Bill has an epistemic ability to form the relevant true belief about Dump, but it’s ‘masked’ by the presence of many incompatible – though false – beliefs about Dump. Similarly, sexist George’s epistemic competences are masked by its sexism, Professor Racist’s by his racism, and so on.

There are two problems with this move, however. First, the view thus construed overgeneralizes, for it, once more, threatens to mistakenly place Goldman’s benighted cognizer and the protagonists of Cases 1-6 in the same epistemic boat. After all, Ben the benighted

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<sup>23</sup> Turri sees the worry and proposes an error theory: according to him, there are times when we attribute propositional warrant based on what the agent herself has the ability to believe, and times when we do so based on what the *type* of agent at stake has the ability to believe. I don’t think an error theory will do the work here: on pain of prior implausibility, we don’t want to say that, merely in virtue of the fact that you are a vicious, or incompetent believer, you are exempt from the normative pressure of available evidence.

cognizer is the straightforward epistemic counterpart of a vase in a room full of pillows: were he to move to a friendlier epistemic environment, he would employ the right kinds of methods of belief formation. In this, he has a masked disposition to do well, epistemically.

Second, factors that ‘mask’ dispositions are commonly believed to be environmental factors (Choi & Fara 2018) – recall again the vase in the room full of pillows – rather than factors somehow ‘internal’ to the item in question; indeed, when the problem lies within the object itself – say that we inject all the pores of the vase with glue, for instance – , the more plausible diagnosis is lack of disposition – no fragility – rather than masked disposition. However, in many of the 1-6 Cases (e.g. #1, #2, #5), it is the subject’s own mental states (biases, wishful thinking etc.) that interfere in the formation of the relevant beliefs.<sup>24</sup>

In a nutshell, then, since virtue theorist conceives of epistemic normativity as sourced in agent’s competences, and since the agents in Cases 1-6 are incompetent believers by stipulation, she has difficulties explaining the datum at hand.<sup>25</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

On my view, sloppy cognizers are not exempt from epistemic norms: available evidence has normative strength in virtue of indicating knowledge. This normative strength, in turn, grounds the epistemic duty to believe.

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<sup>24</sup> What the literature on dispositions dubs ‘intrinsic finks’ might deserve investigation as a better way to go here (see Choi and Fara 2018).

<sup>25</sup> More recently, in *Epistemic Explanations (2021)*, Sosa has started theorising about epistemic negligence within his virtue epistemological framework. Most importantly for present purposes, he suggests that epistemic negligence may preclude competent performance. Sosa’s key idea is that if you can assess your first order competence by more reliable means but fail to do so, then you are negligent. In particular, you fall foul of a kind of negligence that precludes what he calls the competent attainment of aptness. The problem with this account of negligence, however, is that it is too strong: it makes negligence, and hence defeat too easy to come by. To see this, consider a case in which I ask my flatmate who is currently in the kitchen whether we have any milk left. He tells me that we do. Now, I do have several more reliable means of assessing my first order competence available to me. For instance, I could go to the kitchen and have a look myself. Crucially, however, failure to avail myself of these means doesn’t make me negligent. And, most importantly for present purposes, it doesn’t preclude my judgement that there is milk in the fridge from being competent.

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