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SINS OF THOUGHT

Mark Schroeder

According to the *Book of Common Prayer*, we have sinned against God “in thought, word, and deed.” In this paper I’ll explore one way of understanding what it might mean to sin against God in thought—the idea that we can at least potentially *wrong* God by what we believe. I will be interested in the philosophical tenability of this idea, and particularly in its potential consequences for the epistemology of religious belief and the problem of evil.

According to the formulation of the Christian confession in the *Book of Common Prayer*, we have sinned against God “in thought, word, and deed.” In this paper I’ll explore one way of understanding what it might mean to sin against God in thought and what might constitute such sinning—the idea that we can at least potentially *wrong* God by what we believe. There are other natural interpretations of what it might mean to sin against God in thought, and I will not have anything to say against them, here. My sole interest will be in whether *among* the ways in which it might be possible to sin against God in thought, is to have beliefs which instantiate directed wrongs against God. I will be interested in the philosophical tenability of this idea more than in its doctrinal tenability, and particularly in its potential consequences for the epistemology of religious belief and the problem of evil.

1. Background – Sins of Thought

Thought is a very broad category, and so there are correspondingly many possible interpretations of what might constitute sins of thought. Desires are mental states, and in the very broadest sense, “thought” is a word for mental states, so it follows that desires may be thoughts, at least in this very broad sense. So among the sins of thought might be unwholesome or repellant desires—covetous, spiteful, or vindictive desires, whether or not we act on them. Patterns of attention are also, even more obviously, a form of thought. If you occupy your attention with repeatedly imaginatively rehearsing endless variations on taking down a rival or unerringly imaginatively undress a colleague while discussing philosophy, then you are doing something deeply wrong, even if you never act and would never



act on these fantasies. These are wrongs, they are wrongs of thought, they are important wrongs, and I have no doubt that they are among the chief wrongs the authors of the confession had in mind when selecting these words.

But the question that I will be interested in—one that is prompted, but by no means forced, by the formulation of the confession—is whether the sins of thought may also involve *doxastic* wrongs. By doxastic wrongs, I mean wrongs in virtue of the doxastic states of belief or doubt.¹ Doxastic wrongs against God might include, for example, doubt or outright disbelief, or other beliefs about God or about the consequences of God's Works that somehow wrong Them. My question is whether, if we can wrong one another by what we believe about each other, we might not also be in a position to wrong God by our beliefs.

There has been very little discussion in analytic philosophy and the history of moral philosophy about the possibility that we can wrong one another in virtue of our beliefs about them, as opposed to in virtue of what we do *before* forming a belief, or *after* forming it. Indeed, philosophers often go quite far out of their way to *avoid* attributing wrongness to beliefs themselves—presumably because they take themselves to have good arguments that beliefs are not the right kind of thing to be morally wrong. I'll return to consider such challenges in section 2.

But for now I'll simply note that outside of philosophy, the idea that beliefs can wrong, and can be wrong, is often not considered absurd. Racists and sexists, for example, are naïvely held to hold beliefs that are not just false, but *wrong*.² Indeed, this commonplace idea about racism and sexism is central enough that it plausibly plays a role in preventing people from recognizing ways in which racism or sexism can be manifested that go *beyond* beliefs. But it is also *prima facie* plausible that we can wrong one another as individuals by what we believe about one another.

Suppose, for example, that after several unsuccessful attempts to get over my alcohol problem, I have now been sober for several months.³ Tonight I manage to stay away from drinking even after the visiting colloquium speaker spills wine on my arm, forcing me to smell alcohol for the whole evening, so it is my greatest achievement yet. But when I get home, my wife smells the alcohol on me and concludes that I have fallen off of the wagon. If I see the look in her eye, I will rightly be upset—her belief wrongs me.

You might doubt my description of this example. Indeed, as I've already noted, most analytic philosophers will go far out of their way to avoid

¹This is very close, I take it, to what Robert Adams means by "cognitive sins" (Adams, "Involuntary Sins"). Despite self-consciously using the word "sin" and appealing to a biblical text as his motivating thought, Adams defines sin for his purposes in terms of appropriate blame, and hence in a way that is not directional, as the concept of *wronging* that interests me in this paper.

²Again, compare to Adams, "Involuntary Sins," 19.

³This example and the term "doxastic wrong" come from Basu and Schroeder, "Doxastic Wronging."

accepting this, I think obvious, truth. But one surefire way to tell that it is the belief that wrongs me, and not the look in her eye or the care she took in forming the belief, is that I will not be satisfied if she apologizes for what she did *after* forming the belief, such as giving it away with that look in her eye, and what she did *before* forming the belief, such as the care that she took in forming it, without apologizing for her belief itself. What bothers me, is the way that her estimation of the situation brings me down—the way in which it minimizes my achievement. Since apologizing for everything else does not suffice for moral repair, the belief itself must be among the wrongs.

But if beliefs can wrong others, then maybe they can also wrong God. Indeed, this is the claim that I will be endeavoring to make plausible in the remainder of this paper. In the language of the confession, we can *sin against* God in thought. The relationship between sin and wrongs is complex, and I will have little to say about it. On one view, sins are nothing over and above morally wrong actions, and so sins against God are nothing over and above directed wrongs against God. On another view, there is more to the nature of sin than that it consists in morally wrong action, but whenever an action is morally wrong, it is a sin—so similarly, whenever an act wrongs God it is a sin against God. And on a third view, not all morally wrong actions are sins, but any sin must be a wrong, and correspondingly any sin against God must be a wrong against God. All three of these views make room for a close relationship between my thesis that we can commit doxastic wrongs against God and the terms of the confession. I will not decide between these views here.

On other views about sin, the connection between my conclusion in this paper and the terms of the confession will be less close. For example, on one view, there is no distinction between sins and sins against God—all sins are sins against God. On this view, we would not need to wrong God by our beliefs, in order for some of the sins of thought catalogued by the confession to be doxastic wrongs—even wronging one another by what we believe about them could count. This and other possible views about sin may make the implications of my primary conclusion out to be less close to the proper interpretation of this particular formulation of the confession than my first paragraph made out. That is fine with me; the confession is just one way in to seeing the interest of my question, and we will see in what follows that there are others.

2. Reasons to be Skeptical

There are both philosophical and theological reasons to doubt whether we can wrong God by what we believe about Them. The theological reasons for doubt consist in reasons to doubt that we can wrong God at all, whereas the philosophical reasons for doubt consist in reasons to doubt that beliefs can wrong at all. Let's take the theological reasons for skepticism first.

Plausibly the best theological reason to think that we cannot wrong God is that God is so great that They are beyond our capacity to wrong.

If this is correct, then all talk about “sins against” God needs to be interpreted carefully so as to avoid the implication that we could somehow actually wrong God. Maybe all sins are sins “against God,” even if they do not wrong God in any way, but only wrong other people.

I suggest that this inference relies essentially on the mistaken assumption that all wrongs must involve or entail *harms*. It is highly plausible that God, at least as conceived of by traditional Theism, is so great that They cannot be harmed—by anyone, let alone by miniscule and imperfect beings such as ourselves. It is true that many moral views allow that it is possible to wrong someone only by harming them in some way. But I think that this is a mistake that may safely be set aside. It is much more obvious that it wrongs someone to fail to keep a trivial and easily kept deathbed promise to them, than that it harms them. Attempts to explain this wrong in terms of posthumous harms are more controversial than what they are trying to explain.

Indeed, we can use deathbed promises to argue against the necessity of harms for wrongs directly. Suppose that your parent is a famous and influential author, and having designated you as their literary executor, asks you to promise to destroy their greatest, nearly finished, novel after their death. If you so promise, but fail to do so, then you wrong them—they had a right that you follow through and destroy their work, which you failed to respect.⁴ But you don’t harm them. To resist this argument by insisting otherwise is to assume that no one can have a right to act in ways that harm themselves. For if anyone at all has a right to act in ways that harm themselves, then they can have a right to ask of you, that you do so—at least within bounds. And if you thereby promise to do so, then they have a right against you, that you do it. And if you violate that right, then you wrong them. So you can wrong someone by doing something that does not harm them—indeed, by doing something that even benefits them, as the deathbed novelist case illustrates.

Not only should we grant that it is *possible* to wrong someone without also harming them, cases of doxastic wrongs are particularly likely to include such harms. This is because, since it is highly controversial whether beliefs can wrong anyone at all, any putative examples of beliefs that wrong will be explained away by critics in terms of the upstream wrongs associated with the process of forming the belief, or with the downstream effects of the belief. So the only forcefully compelling examples of beliefs that wrong will be beliefs that never actually have those downstream consequences, or where the downstream consequences are apologized for but this still doesn’t seem to speak to the wrong itself. In other words, cases like my falling off the wagon, from section 1. In all such cases, doxastic wrongs will be paradigms of wrongs that do not involve harms, or whose wrongfulness exceeds the significance of the associated

⁴This gloss on the case assumes that violating someone’s right wrongs them. But I won’t assume that wronging someone requires violating one of their rights.

harms. So if there are doxastic wrongs at all, the best examples of them are particularly likely not to involve harms, and hence it should be no surprise if it turns out that it is possible to wrong God through belief, even if it is not possible to harm Them in any way.

So much for at least one obvious theological reason to doubt whether we can wrong God in virtue of our beliefs. In this paper, as I've said, I'm more concerned with the philosophical merits of this thesis. And there are also ample philosophical grounds to doubt it. In particular, many epistemologists have doubted whether we have sufficient control over our beliefs for it to turn out that there are any beliefs that we ought to have *at all*, even in some restricted *epistemic* sense of "ought." If whether there is anything we ought or ought not to believe can be cast into doubt even setting moral wrongness aside, it will be no wonder if philosophers are especially shy about attributing *moral* wrongness to beliefs.

This objection becomes particularly forceful once we consider some of the most promising answers to why there *can* be some things that we ought, or ought not, to believe, despite our lack of any ability to believe, in Bernard Williams's terms, "at will." For example, Nishi Shah points out that to believe at will is to believe what you intend to believe.⁵ So to be able to believe at will would be for our intentions to be able to control our beliefs. But there can be things that we ought to intend even if our intentions are not in control of our intentions, so this condition is clearly too strong. What is much more plausible, is that in order for an "ought" to apply to beliefs, that "ought" must derive from reasons to which our beliefs are actually sensitive. Yet our beliefs *are* sensitive to the evidence. And evidence is reason to believe *par excellence*. So insofar as what we epistemically ought to believe is derived from the evidence, we have exactly the right sort of control over our beliefs in order for such *oughts* to apply to us.

Yet if this is the best sort of answer to why we do have the right sort of control over what we believe for there to be things that we ought or ought not to believe, that might make us only *more* skeptical of whether there are any things that it is *morally* wrong to believe. For though it is highly plausible that our beliefs are sensitive to the evidence, it is much less plausible that our beliefs are sensitive to just any old moral consideration—for example, learning that it would be utility-maximizing to believe something is not the right sort of thing to convince us that it is true.

This is a very important challenge. But my answer to this challenge is that our beliefs *are*, in fact, sensitive to the *right* kinds of moral considerations. Not to the moral *benefits* of beliefs, but to the moral *costs* of *error*. It would wrong your spouse to mistakenly believe that he has fallen off of the wagon if in fact he has managed to stay sober despite adverse circumstances. Knowing that the stakes are high because this belief would malign him if it were false doesn't just require us, but also makes it possible for us, to hold out for better evidence, before jumping to that conclusion.

⁵Shah, "How Truth Governs Belief" and "A New Argument for Evidentialism."

Similarly, if some beliefs would wrong God if they were falsely held, we are perfectly capable of taking more care—of holding ourselves to higher evidential standards—before coming to accept those answers. So if sensitivity to the reasons that go into determining an *ought* is all that is required for that *ought* to apply to us, then I see no reason why there cannot be moral *oughts* governing belief that apply to us, so long as they are constrained to only depend on such reasons.

A quite different source of philosophical doubt concerning my thesis that it may be possible to commit doxastic wrongs against God is more general. It is that our best traditional moral theories concern *actions*, rather than beliefs or other attitudes. So beliefs cannot wrong at all, let alone wrong God, because this is inconsistent with our best moral theories. There is something to be said for this objection, because it is true that at least some traditional moral theorizing does take for granted that actions are the relevant target of evaluation. But so far from being a problem for the idea that there can be doxastic wrongs, I suggest that this merely casts theories that can make no room for doxastic wrongs into doubt.

But more importantly, I want to suggest, in fact there is ample room for the idea that beliefs can wrong in many familiar frameworks from the history of moral theorizing. Instead of looking to what theorists *do* talk about, we should look to what their theories *can* make sense of. And if we look carefully in this way, I suggest that we can make sense of this idea in Aristotelian terms, in Kantian terms, and even in consequentialist terms. Aristotle's ethics, after all, is full of discussion of intellectual virtues, and what it essentially requires is simply that we desire the right things to the right degree. If desiring more strongly not to malign my character can lead you to hold out for more evidence before concluding something negative about me, then some beliefs about others will be beliefs that reflect virtue—or at least are in accordance with virtue—while others are not.

Similarly, Kant's ethics is deeply rooted in the idea that ethical conduct is fundamentally a matter of non-exceptionalism. It is just as important, on this picture, that you recognize others as moral equals as it is that you act only on maxims that you prescribe for them as well. You don't need to universalize your maxims to rocks or to squirrels, but only to rational agents. And so acting on a maxim that you do not prescribe to someone else and believing that they are not a rational agent are fundamentally very close to amounting to the same thing. So on a very natural way of taking Kant, wrongful action in *general* can be identified with or grounded in wrongful belief.⁶

And finally, consequentialism may seem to be the greatest challenge for the idea that beliefs themselves can wrong. After all, on the most familiar articulations of consequentialism, including utilitarianism, actions must wrong through their *effects*, and my most direct arguments in favor of the thesis that beliefs can wrong proceed through cases in which we have

⁶Special thanks for discussion to Matthew Lyskawa and Samantha Matherne.

tried to screen off the harmful effects of wrongful beliefs. Still, there is no obstacle at all to consequentialists accepting that beliefs themselves can wrong. Whether they do or not is simply a question of whether the ultimate list of bads includes some kinds of beliefs.

So the idea that beliefs can wrong makes sense on rights-based approaches to ethical theory, and it can be accommodated on many views which tie morality to the significance of our attitudes toward one another. I conclude once more that there is no insurmountable objection, here, to the idea that we could wrong God by what we believe about Them.

3. *Moral Encroachment*

A quite different reason to be worried about whether beliefs can wrong comes from the worry that if they do, then there will be *conflicts* between morality and epistemic rationality—cases where the only rational course is to do something wrong, and the only moral course is to do something irrational. Such conflicts, if they existed, would leave us having to make hard choices between being rational, and being good. More generally, the fact that a belief is well-enough supported to be knowledge seems like it should be a pretty good answer to any moral objection. And even things to which there are moral objections are not really wrong, if those objections have good enough answers.

Much more is required in order to make this objection as forceful as it can be—more than I can develop, here. But I believe that this objection requires an answer. And the answer, I believe, is that there will be no conflicts at all between epistemic rationality and moral requirements, so long as the two are *harmonious*. But harmony between the moral and epistemic requirements governing belief comes with a choice: either this harmony is guaranteed because the matter of which beliefs wrong is always restricted to the independent matter of which beliefs are epistemically irrational, or it is guaranteed, at least in part, because whether a belief might wrong can *affect* whether it is epistemically irrational. The latter fork of this choice is the possibility that there is *moral encroachment* on the epistemic rationality of belief—a special case of what has come to be known as *pragmatic encroachment* in epistemology.⁷

It is therefore *possible* that there could be beliefs that wrong even without conflicts between moral and epistemic norms, and even without pragmatic encroachment on the epistemic rationality of belief. But this would be

⁷Early advocates of pragmatic encroachment in the contemporary landscape include Fantl and McGrath, "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification" and *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, and Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. The specific version of pragmatic encroachment that I defend is developed in Ross and Schroeder, "Belief, Credence, and Pragmatic Encroachment," and in Schroeder, "Stakes, Withholding, and Pragmatic Encroachment," "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons," "What Makes Reasons Sufficient?," "Rational Stability under Pragmatic Encroachment," and more systematically in *Reasons First*. The argument in this section is a condensation from Basu and Schroeder, "Doxastic Wronging."

substantially less interesting. In order to preserve the harmony between moral and epistemic norms without allowing for pragmatic encroachment, beliefs that wrong must be restricted to beliefs that are independently epistemically irrational. But that means that even if some beliefs do wrong, we can never learn anything new about which beliefs are criticizable by learning which beliefs wrong—we can only learn more about *which* criticisms they are subject to.

If this possibility is correct, then when my wife smells the alcohol on my clothes and concludes that I have fallen off of the wagon—applying the very same standard of evidence that she would apply to whether it is likely to rain tomorrow, based on the forecast—she cannot have wronged me in any way.⁸ And even if I feel hurt, she should owe me no apology if she can demonstrate that her reasoning is impartially rational in this way. Similarly, if this possibility is correct, and some of our beliefs wrong God, then when we confess to sinning against God in thought, we are confessing to being epistemically irrational in ways that have nothing to do with God, and only to do how we assess evidence. I conclude that if there are to be interesting and substantial doxastic wrongs—wrongs of belief—either against God or against one another, then in order for the moral and epistemic norms governing belief to be in harmony, there must be moral encroachment on the epistemic rationality of belief.

4. Pragmatic Intellectualism

How, then, can we reconcile the thesis that there is moral encroachment on the epistemic rationality of belief with the compelling orthodox idea that what it is rational to believe depends only on your evidence or on other truth-related factors? Well, according to standard formulations of evidentialism, what it is epistemically rational to believe depends only on what is supported by adequate evidence. This makes it seem like evidence is all that matters for epistemic rationality. But a lot is covered up by the word “adequate.” If whether evidence is adequate depends on moral or other pragmatic features of the situation, then evidentialism in this sense is *true*, but there is still moral or more generally pragmatic encroachment on the epistemic rationality of belief, or even on knowledge.

According to the form of pragmatic encroachment that I favor, which I call *pragmatic intellectualism*, the fact that it is epistemically rational to believe something just in case it is supported by adequate evidence follows from the more general principle that it is rational to do *anything* just in case it is supported by adequate *reasons*, together with the fact that the only properly epistemic reasons for belief are *evidence*.⁹ Reasons are

⁸It is of course possible that the evidential standards vary between topics such as the weather and spouses without this variation depending on what is morally or pragmatically at stake. If so, then this point needs to be put with a different comparative example—but so long as the variation in standards is not driven by moral or pragmatic considerations, there will always be some such example to drive it.

⁹Schroeder, “Stakes, Withholding, and Pragmatic Encroachment,” “The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons,” “What Makes Reasons Sufficient?,” and *Reasons First*.

adequate, in turn, roughly speaking just in case they *beat all comers*—or more carefully and precisely, just in case the reasons in favor of something are *at least as good* as the reasons *against* it. So, for example, with respect to action, an action is rational just in case the reasons that favor it are at least as good as the reasons against it (and not otherwise), and similarly, with respect to belief, a belief is epistemically rational just in case the epistemic reasons that favor it are at least as good as the epistemic reasons against it.

Now, I have said that evidence is the only kind of epistemic reason *in favor* of belief. If evidence were also the only kind of epistemic reason *against* belief, then it would follow that it is epistemically rational to believe something just in case the evidence in favor of its content is at least as good as the evidence against it. But this is false—when the evidence is tied, typically the only rational course is to remain agnostic. Indeed, its falsity is the main reason why many philosophers have been led to believe that the epistemic rationality of belief must be a very different kind of thing from the practical rationality of action.¹⁰ But rather than leading us to conclude that the epistemic rationality of belief is so different from the practical rationality of action, I think it should instead lead us to conclude that evidence is not, after all, the only kind of epistemic reason against belief.

Indeed, given that believing that $\sim p$ is not the negation of believing that p , because we always have the third option of having neither belief, it would be quite surprising indeed if the only reasons against believing that p are the reasons to believe that $\sim p$. Yet this is what would be true, if the only epistemic reasons against believing that p are the evidence that $\sim p$. Since the question of what to believe always has a *tripartite* structure, therefore, while the question of whether to act always has only a *bipartite* structure, we should *expect* there to be epistemic reasons against belief that are not evidence against its content.

Indeed, there are quite promising candidates for epistemic reasons against belief that are not evidence. For example, all of us form beliefs about philosophical questions and about matters of ancient history on the basis of paltry evidence—evidence that would never suffice to form a belief about how many people are in the next room. If you had the same quality of evidence about how many people are in the room next door as you have about your favorite philosophical theory, you would never believe on that basis—and indeed, it would be epistemically irresponsible for you to do so. The reason that it would be irresponsible is not that your evidence does not support one conclusion over the others, but rather that it is so meager in comparison to the much more decisive evidence that you could so easily come by, by simply looking around the corner. Despite being a fact *about* evidence, the fact that you could easily come by much more decisive evidence about how many people are in the room next door is not *itself* evidence against your hunch about how many are in

¹⁰Compare Harman, "Practical Aspects of Theoretical Reasoning."

the room—but it does raise the bar for how good your evidence must be in order to believe without it. This explains why it is sometimes rational to believe things about philosophy and paleozoology.¹¹

I conclude that it is not so strange, after all, to think that there are epistemic reasons against belief that are not evidence for or against the content of that belief. Indeed, the other most natural though much more controversial example of such reasons are broadly speaking *pragmatic*—concerning the costs of error. If you believe *falsely* that you have no allergy to penicillin, you expose yourself to great harms. These harms, moreover, are not incidental to the nature of belief—like if an evil demon threatens to punish you if you falsely believe that you have an allergy to penicillin.¹² Rather, they flow from the belief doing its job correctly. If it does its job correctly, then you will take it for granted, in most situations or at least by default, that you are not allergic to penicillin, and hence you may accept penicillin as an antibiotic when you are suffering from a bacterial infection or suspected bacterial infection. If this belief is *false*, then this will have drastic consequences, since allergic reactions to penicillin can be quite severe. In a slogan, the *stakes* for believing that you have no allergy to penicillin are *high*.¹³ You should only believe this on the basis of good evidence.

As with the availability of further evidence, moreover, it is not mysterious how we can respond to such stakes-related reasons. When your spouse reminds you that your mortgage payment is due over the weekend and your balance is low, you will find it easy to double-check your evidence that the bank will be open on Saturday, before driving home to avoid the long line on Friday afternoon.¹⁴ And if you love someone, you will give them the benefit of the doubt—literally, you will doubt negative conclusions about them under circumstances that you would not doubt predictions about the weather.¹⁵

So Pragmatic Intellectualism, I suggest, makes room for the possibility of doxastic wrongs—beliefs by which we can wrong one another, and by extension, possibly, God—without creating any tension with epistemic rationality. If Pragmatic Intellectualism is true, then among the costs of some false beliefs may be that such a belief, if false, would wrong someone. When this is so, the stakes for rationally believing that claim will be higher, and it will be harder to know, even if it is true.

5. *Is It True?*

So far I've been trying to explain how Pragmatic Intellectualism makes room for the possibility of doxastic wrongs. But is it *true*? We can triangulate on the existence of these epistemic reasons against belief, I believe,

¹¹Schroeder, "The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons."

¹²Ross and Schroeder, "Belief, Credence, and Pragmatic Encroachment."

¹³Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.

¹⁴DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions."

¹⁵Keller, "Friendship and Belief"; Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship."

in several ways. We can argue for them by observing that the existence of these reasons would explain the difference between what it is epistemically rational to believe about paleozoology and about how many people are in the next room, and that they would explain the difference between what it is epistemically rational to believe about the weather, and what it is epistemically rational to believe about whether you are allergic to penicillin. This form of argument is fine so far as it goes—indeed, I believe that it is sound—but since both of these claims about what is epistemically rational—particularly the one that I have made about the penicillin allergy—are contentious, it is not dialectically effective.

Second, we can argue for the existence of epistemic reasons against belief by seeing how our actual belief practices are sensitive to them in ways that are characteristic of how we are responsive to actual reasons for and against belief and other attitudes. For example, just as you can become convinced that your friend will come to the party by her telling you that she will, you can become convinced to withhold for now on whether your friend will come to the party by learning that she has just sent her RSVP, which you have not yet opened. Similarly, just as you can become convinced that someone won't win the soccer tryouts by watching him play goalie, you can be convinced (in marginal cases) to withhold until soccer tryouts are over if you are reminded how much being good enough to make the soccer team means to his self-conception.¹⁶

But the most helpful and systematic way to argue for the existence of these kinds of epistemic reason against belief is to show why it flows from a general account of the nature of epistemic reasons, that there must be such reasons. This is important, because the most important and common reason for *doubting* that there could be such non-evidential epistemic reasons against belief, is the naïve idea that the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons *just is* the distinction between evidence and other reasons. Some philosophers even propose that this is a matter of stipulation. But although people can use the word “epistemic” stipulatively however they like, we should be doubtful whether this is an interesting use of “epistemic.” I propose that we restrict “epistemic reason” to those reasons that bear on the strongest kind of rationality entailed by knowledge.¹⁷ On this use, it is a substantive matter, rather than a stipulative one, whether there are non-evidential epistemic reasons. And those who hold that there are none should have no complaints about using “epistemic” in this way, because they can still identify what is false about the thesis that there are such reasons.

Since it is a substantive matter whether there are non-evidential epistemic reasons, we can investigate it by looking into the nature of the “epistemic”/“non-epistemic” distinction more generally. And here I suggest

¹⁶Compare Schroeder, “The Ubiquity of State-Given Reasons.”

¹⁷I argue in more detail for the helpfulness of this proposal in Schroeder, “What Makes Reasons Sufficient?”

that this distinction is on a par with similar distinctions that we can draw for every other attitude. There are distinctive conditions governing the rationality of intention, fear, hope, admiration, and awe, and being offered money if one does, or having one's family threatened if one does not, have one of these attitudes, is *not* the right kind of thing to make them distinctively rational in the manner appropriate to each of these attitudes. On the contrary, benefits of action, dangers, advantages, excellence, and rare achievement, are each the kinds of thing to make these attitudes distinctively rational. So I propose that the question of which the *right* kind of reasons are to make belief rational, should be delegated to the question of what makes reasons the right kind for attitudes in general, together with the answer to what makes belief different from other attitudes.

In all of these cases, I believe, the right kinds of reasons for each attitude concern its proper function. Reasons to intend come from benefits of performing the intended action, because the *function* of intention is to coordinate action over time. Similarly, the availability of further evidence is a reason *against* intention, because given the function of intention in coordinating action over time, it is evidence that this decision could be better coordinated at a later decision time. Similarly, dangers are reasons to fear, because the job of fear is to cultivate alertness and avoidance—and so on for each of the other attitudes.¹⁸

But I suggest, and have argued at length elsewhere, that the job of belief is to allow us to settle some questions in order to be able to rely on their answers by default in further reasoning and action.¹⁹ This explains why we should expect evidence to matter for belief—beliefs formed without evidence will not represent our best efforts to secure the truth. It also explains why we should expect the availability of further evidence to matter, for beliefs formed when much better evidence is easily available will be settled at a disadvantageous time. And finally, it explains why we should expect the potential costs of error to matter for belief formation, because in disposing us to rely on some claim by default, belief exposes us to the risk of our actions having bad consequences, if the information that we rely on is mistaken—and worse consequences, if the costs of error are higher. A good believer, therefore, should form beliefs when the evidence is best, and be reluctant to form beliefs that carry high risks associated with error.

Although there is much more to be said about every point made so far, I conclude that there are excellent independent reasons to expect the contours of epistemic rationality to match those laid out by Pragmatic Intellectualism. Consequently, I believe that we should take seriously both the idea that some beliefs may wrong, and that whenever beliefs carry risks of wronging, this raises the standards both for epistemically rational belief, and consequently for knowledge.

¹⁸Schroeder, *Reasons First*.

¹⁹Ross and Schroeder, "Belief, Credence, and Pragmatic Encroachment"; Schroeder, *Reasons First*.

6. Which Beliefs Wrong?

So far, I've said nothing about which sorts of beliefs wrong. But the most plausible cases of beliefs that wrong other human beings are beliefs that falsely assign less positive agency to them than they really possess—a thought that I'll gloss by saying that they “diminish positive agency.” So to say that a belief diminishes someone's positive agency is not to say that it prevents or hinders them from acting positively—that, after all, would turn on the downstream effects of the belief and I am throughout assuming that wrongfulness of beliefs cannot turn on their harmful effects. Rather, it means simply that the belief constitutes an underestimate of someone's positive agency.²⁰

If my wife compliments my gardening, and I falsely conclude that something nice must have happened to her at work that day, to put her in such a good mood, my belief wrongs her—it brings her down, diminishing her capacity to make a positive contribution to our relationship.²¹ Similarly, if your friend is trying to quit smoking and you assume, in accordance with the statistical evidence, that he will fail, your belief brings him down—it diminishes his positive agency in the world. And as a result, if he turns out to succeed, making your belief false, then you will have wronged him.²²

It is important, I think, that the right account of *which* beliefs wrong is evaluatively laden in this way. It does not wrong your friend to falsely believe that he is capable of making the soccer team, or that he didn't commit the crime. But it *does* wrong your friend to falsely believe that he is *incapable* of making the team, or that he *did* commit it. But the question of which beliefs wrong cannot be exhausted by any simple positive/negative assessment, either. The belief that someone is good at math just because they have a Chinese last name, for example, can wrong even though it seems positive. The reason that it does so, I conjecture, is that it diminishes her *agency*—her own responsibility for her ability at math, relegating it to the causal background of the influence of race or culture.

So far, we're looking at intuitive judgments of which cases of false beliefs are plausible examples of doxastic wrongs. But the question of which beliefs wrong is also fruitfully constrained by the commitments of my defense of the possibility of doxastic wrongs. According to my defense, part of what opens up the possibility of doxastic wrongs is that the moral and epistemic norms governing belief don't actually pull apart, because of Pragmatic Intellectualism's thesis that costs of error raise the standards for the epistemic rationality of belief, and wronging someone is a relevant kind of cost of error.

Of course, it is important for my defense of Pragmatic Intellectualism that not *all* costs of false belief matter, but only costs that accrue through the normal functioning of belief. So someone can raise the stakes for you by

²⁰Schroeder, “When Beliefs Wrong.”

²¹Schroeder, “Persons as Things.”

²²Compare Marusic, *Evidence and Agency*.

offering you a wager, for example, but she cannot raise the stakes for you by threatening to punish your family if you believe something falsely. This means that wrongful beliefs must be wrongful because of the normal role that beliefs play—because of what makes them beliefs—rather than because of their consequences more generally. But beliefs that falsely diminish someone's positive agency in the world are precisely the beliefs that, when they function in the normal way, will affect how you relate to them as an agent.

So I believe that the cases in which we wrong people like ourselves by what we believe about them are all cases in which those beliefs diminish their positive agency in the world—beliefs that make them out to be less, or worse, or more a product of circumstances than they really are. Negative beliefs about friends, as discussed by Keller and Stroud,²³ the belief that you or a friend will fail at some task, as discussed by Marusic,²⁴ the belief that some major accomplishment of your own was actually a mistake, as I discuss elsewhere,²⁵ and others all fit into this category. Much more could be said to make this idea precise, but those refinements are I think orthogonal to the main lessons that I want to draw from this idea.

7. *The Problem of Evil*

If beliefs can wrong people, and the beliefs that wrong people are those that diminish their positive agency in the world, then if beliefs can wrong God at all, it is reasonable to suspect that the kinds of belief that would wrong God would be beliefs that diminish God's positive agency in the world. This is plausible both as an extension of the general reasoning about how beliefs can wrong at all, and in light of the idea that we are in some sense "created in God's image." If we are, indeed, created in God's image, then it should be no wonder that some of the ways in which we can be wronged are reflections of ways in which God can be wronged.

So now suppose, just for the sake of discussion, that God sometimes works for greater good through natural disasters, famine, or war, and consider the case of a single such tragic event, through which God is working for the greater good in this way. Let us suppose, without loss of generality, that it is a tsunami that kills thousands. As we know from many of the most forceful presentations of the problem of evil, it is often extremely unobvious what greater good could possibly be achieved through the suffering and death of millions. And the reasoning behind the problem of evil asks us to conclude, about cases like this one, that in fact no greater purpose is served—that these are preventable evils which serve no purpose.

And now suppose, as standard presentations of the problem of evil encourage, that you believe that the tsunami is a senselessly violent natural disaster that God could have prevented if He really exists and is

²³Keller, "Friendship and Belief"; Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship."

²⁴Marusic, *Evidence and Agency*.

²⁵Schroeder, "When Beliefs Wrong."

truly omnibenevolent. Under our assumption from the last paragraph, this belief is *false*—as a matter of fact, God is actually working through this tsunami in mysterious ways for the greater good (the assumption is just for the sake of discussion, recall). But it is not just any false belief—it is a false belief that brings God down—it reduces God’s positive agency in the world. Indeed, it does so several times over. First, it brings God down by taking an act that is actually a very positive one and taking it to be a negative one. Second, it brings Them down by taking Them to be less active in the world than They really are. And finally, just as it hurts particularly much for my wife to take me to have fallen off the wagon on the very night that it is my greatest triumph to stay sober given adverse circumstances, so also it particularly brings God down to take this tsunami to be merely a senseless natural disaster, when in fact wringing greater good out of such tragedy is surely one of God’s greater achievements.

So, I conclude, if it is possible to wrong God by virtue of our beliefs at all, wrongly identifying cases of God’s work for good as exemplars of the problem of evil are likely to be leading cases. Now set aside our assumption that there are any such cases. Maybe God never works for the greater good through apparent tragedies, either because They have no master plan, because They do not exist, or for some other reason. Still, the fact that beliefs identifying exemplars of the problem of evil *would* wrong God, if these beliefs were false, means that these beliefs have a high cost of error, in the same way as beliefs that would wrong our friends, if they were false.

But in this paper I have defended the claim that beliefs can wrong by defending Pragmatic Intellectualism, according to which the reason that there is no fundamental conflict between epistemic and moral norms governing belief is that the risks of wronging someone by what you believe about her raise the stakes, and with them, the amount and preponderance of evidence required for knowledge or epistemically rational belief. So I conclude that if my defense of the possibility of doxastic wrongs is on the right track, then if it is possible to wrong God at all by what we believe about Them, it must be harder than we might have thought to identify test cases for the problem of evil. It is harder, because the heightened stakes make it harder to know of any given case, such as the tsunami, that it really is an exemplar of the problem of evil. And it is harder to know this, even if there are in fact many such cases. It is harder to know, simply because of the *risk* of being wrong, just as it is harder to know that the bank will be open on Saturday, even if it really is open.

Whether this is enough to show that we do not in fact know of any concrete examples that they exemplify the problem of evil is of course a further question. Even when the stakes are high, we sometimes know, when the evidence is good enough. But on this picture it becomes much less obvious that we do.

8. Consequences for Theism?

The problem of evil is not the only place where the views that I have defended in this paper may have further striking consequences. We might also wonder whether they have consequences for the knowability of Theism, itself.

Pascal's original wager attempted to argue that we ought to believe in God on decision-theoretic grounds. On the standard characterization of this decision problem, it assumes that if you believe in God but God does not exist, you experience some finite or relatively small costs—time spent on prayer and in church or temple, for example. Whereas if you don't believe in God but God does exist, you will experience infinite costs—or at least, costs that are completely off-scale with respect to the costs you experience in the alternative. Consequently, Pascal argued on decision-theoretic grounds, you should believe in God.

There are a variety of familiar problems with Pascal's original wager. For one, on its most natural interpretation, it only provides grounds for believing in a god who would punish non-belief with eternal suffering and/or reward belief with eternal bliss. And it does not discriminate among possible punitive/rewarding gods—if there are both possible omnibenevolent and omnimalevolent gods who would both punish non-belief and/or reward belief, the argument supports believing in *both*. It does no good to believe in the bare existential that some god exists, either, because that might not be good enough to escape the punishment of the god who actually exists.

Another familiar problem with Pascal's original wager is that it seems to show that belief in God is *practically* rational, but not that it is *epistemically* rational—rational in the way required for knowledge. And still another is that so long as this is not the kind of reasoning that we can actually respond to, even once we are convinced by the argument, we can only respond to it by taking indirect means to get ourselves to believe—by spending more time taking communion, for example, or hanging out with our friends who are theists.

But Matthew Benton has argued that views which allow for pragmatic encroachment on knowledge or epistemic rationality can bring back a version of a Pascalian argument—at least against atheism, if not for theism outright.²⁶ Benton's thought is at least initially promising. If we reconstruct Pascal's wager not as an argument for theism, but as an argument against atheism, it assumes that there is a high cost associated, not with non-belief *per se*, but rather with *false belief*. And this is how all familiar high stakes cases work in the literature on pragmatic encroachment—in all of these cases, there is a high cost of believing something specifically on the condition that it is false. So pragmatic encroachment reasoning looks at least on the right track to apply to this case.

²⁶Benton, "Pragmatic Encroachment and Theistic Knowledge." Benton also has an interesting idea about how the argument can be extended to an argument for theism, based on some general principles about what he calls "knowability asymmetries."

Moreover, if the pragmatic encroachment thesis is *true*—for example, if pragmatic intellectualism is true, as I have argued in the preceding sections it is, then when high costs of error raise the standard of evidence required for rational belief in some proposition, or to know it, they don't just make it *practically* or *decision-theoretically* irrational to hold that belief—they make it properly *epistemically* irrational to hold it in the absence of greater evidence. They make it genuinely ineligible for knowledge—something that no one that I know of has ever claimed for what Pascal's wager can show about atheism.

Finally, if Pragmatic Intellectualism is true, then if it genuinely applies in the case of an argument against atheism, we should not need to employ indirect means in order to be convinced by it. Instead, once we understand the greater costs that are at stake, we should find it natural to hold out for greater evidence for atheism than we otherwise would, just as we naturally do about the proposition that we have no allergy to penicillin or negative conclusions about our friends.

Nevertheless, as initially promising as this idea seems, I don't think either that Benton's argument as it stands is a successful application of Pragmatic Intellectualism or that it would escape the full range of problems surmounting Pascal's original wager. The reason that it is not a successful application of Pragmatic Intellectualism—and the reason why I don't think it would be a successful application of any defensible pragmatic encroachment theory—is that Pragmatic Intellectualism is defensible in part because it does not allow just *any* costs of false beliefs to affect the stakes, but only the costs that accrue through the belief playing its normal functional role. But being rewarded for belief or punished for non-belief is not a consequence of it playing its normal role. So if the stakes of the wager are supposed to come from the fact that God tots things up at the end of the day and rewards theism or inflicts punishment for atheism, then Pragmatic Intellectualism does not apply at all, and I would argue, any form of pragmatic encroachment that does will be indefensible for that very reason.

The only way to fix the argument in order to make Pragmatic Intellectualism apply, will therefore be to find a different source for the high costs of error. And it is not hard to find ideas that might help. For example, suppose that God punishes not atheism, but failure to attend church (or that They reward not theism, but church attendance). In that case, if being an atheist would lead you not to attend church by reasoning out that there is no point in the normal way, the costs of punishment for not going to church (or of missing the reward for going to church) would indeed render the proposition that God does not exist high stakes by the lights of pragmatic intellectualism.

But this just brings out more clearly one of the central problems with Pascal's original wager, which Benton's "new" Pascalian problem does nothing special to evade, which is that it only supports belief in a punitive/rewarding God, and does not discriminate between, for example, omnibenevolent and omnimalevolent punitive/rewarding Gods. If the revived

form of Pascalian argument worked, therefore, it would show not just that it is harder to know that God does not exist, but also that it is harder to know that God is not omnimalevolent. Indeed, this problem may even get extra force, for conditional on the hypothesis that They punish anyone who does not attend church with eternal suffering, it is more plausible *a priori* that God is omnimalevolent than that They are omnibenevolent.

9. Sins Against God

For these reasons, when I first considered Benton's proposed revival of the Pascalian argument using the tools of pragmatic encroachment, I believed that it could not succeed. But in this paper, I have been interested in pragmatic encroachment primarily from the perspective of how it helps us to make sense of a kind of *moral* encroachment—primarily from the perspective of how it allows us to make sense of how beliefs can wrong, and in particular, how it could be possible that we could wrong God, by what we believe about Them. But now we can flip this path of inquiry on its head. If our beliefs *themselves* can wrong God, then that opens up the possibility that a false belief in atheism could wrong God—opening up a quite different path for how to identify the costs of error to those envisioned in the last section. On this possibility, we might be able to reconstruct a Pascalian argument against atheism not by identifying high *costs to us* of error, but by identifying high *moral* costs of error.

This path of reconstructing the Pascalian argument *does* seem much more promising. If beliefs that wrong are beliefs that diminish someone's positive agency in the world, then if God does indeed exist and is active in the world, no belief could diminish Them more than the belief that They do not exist at all.

This, moreover, would solve our problem from the last section about whether Pragmatic Intellectualism or any other defensible version of pragmatic encroachment can be successfully applied to the case of atheism. For while being *punished* for atheism is a kind of incidental cost of false belief—one that does not stem from it playing its normal functional role in our cognitive economy, the wrongfulness of wrongful belief is not a matter of what it *causes*—we saw that if beliefs wrong at all, it is not in virtue of their harms—but simply in virtue of being the kind of state that they are.

Another problem for both Pascal's original argument and for Benton's new Pascalian problem was that in order to derive the costs of error, we need to assume that God, if They exist, would be concerned with eternal punishments or rewards. Otherwise, eternal punishment for disbelief (or failure to obtain eternal reward for belief) is not a consequence of the falsity of the belief that God does not exist, at all. Yet even if God does exist, it is far from obvious that They are punitive in this way, so this certainly does not seem like a safe assumption in the argument. Worse, if we try to solve it by restricting the belief in question to the belief that a *punitive* God does not exist, then we run up against the problem that now we have an argument that it is not rational to believe that a punitive/rewarding God does not exist

but no argument at all that it is not rational to believe that a universalist God does not exist. So this now starts to look like the new Pascalian problem is a better argument against universalism than it is against atheism.

But again, by appealing to the costs of wrongful belief against God, rather than to the high personal costs of damnation, we get an argument against atheism that does not require making strong—or unappealing—assumptions about God’s nature. Indeed, it does not require any assumptions about God’s nature at all. If *any* God exists, and They are active in the world in any way, the belief that God does not exist will diminish Their positive agency in the world. So this allows the argument to target atheism as such, rather than disbelief in any particular conception of God.

Finally, one of the central problems surrounding Pascal’s original argument is its indiscriminacy. It offers just as good a reason to believe in an omnimalevolent deity as in an omnibenevolent one, provided that each is assumed to reward belief or punish non-belief. If what I have said here is correct, then my new revival of the Pascalian argument against atheism is even *more* indiscriminate—because it requires virtually no assumptions about the nature of God, except that if they exist, they are active in the world and would be subject to being wronged in similar ways to those in which people like you and I can be wronged. But this means that it raises the evidence required not only for rational atheism *simpliciter*, but also the evidence required for rational disbelief in any *particular* god—for example, in not just the God of traditional theism, but also in Thor, Jupiter, or the Manichean version of Satan.

But notice that whereas it would substantially dampen the ambitions of Pascal’s original argument to learn that it supports belief both in the traditional Christian God and in Manichean Satan, my proposed revival of the Pascalian argument does not aim to tell us what we should believe, at all—merely what there are heightened standards for believing. So one perfectly reasonable conclusion to draw from this problem is that it is not rational to disbelieve in *any* possible God—and hence that it is not rational, either, to have positive beliefs about God that rule out the existence of other conceptions of God. On this reading, the revived Pascalian argument does much to dissuade atheism, but little to lead us toward positive endorsement of Theism.

But another conclusion is possible, as well. Pragmatic Intellectualism does not tell us, after all, that we can’t know atheism to be true—only that the evidence that we need in order to know it is great—perhaps substantially greater—than the evidence required to believe predictions about tomorrow’s weather. So even if you accept everything that I have said in this paper, you may still think that it is nevertheless rational to believe that God does not exist—because the evidence is simply so good. Similarly, you may accept everything that I have said here and think that it is *not* rational to believe that God does not exist, but that it *is* rational to disbelieve in Thor and the Manichean Satan—because the evidence against *them* is at least good enough.

Or, of course, you could take all of this as a thoroughgoing argument for agnosticism. Neither Pragmatic Intellectualism nor the additional possibility that we can wrong God—if They exist!—by our beliefs about Them can settle this question. The framework that I have been exploring in this paper is therefore, in that sense, ecumenical.

10. Wrapping Up

In this paper I have been exploring the idea that we could potentially wrong God directly in virtue of what we believe, as an extension of the idea that we could commit doxastic wrongs against other persons. Far from being an extreme or bizarre view, I have been endeavoring to suggest that the view that we could is entirely natural. Indeed, I now want to suggest, in closing, that insofar as we are able to wrong others by what we believe about them at all, if we are in any plausible sense created in God's image, it *must* be possible to wrong God by what we believe.

The reason for this is simple. The beliefs that wrong us are beliefs that diminish our positive agency in the world. But beliefs formed about the weather, or about the eruptions of Mt. Kilauea, do not wrong the weather, and do not wrong Mt. Kilauea, when they are formed under analogous circumstances. The relevant difference, I believe, is that we are *persons*, and the weather and Mt. Kilauea are not. There is something about being a *person* that makes beliefs that diminish your positive agency in the world *wrong* you, when analogous beliefs do not wrong other kinds of thing.

I believe that this is because of the kind of thing that persons are.²⁷ But whether that diagnosis is correct or not, the underlying fact remains, that beliefs wrong us and not the weather or Mt. Kilauea. It is a consequence of this fact that to the extent that God resembles us and not the weather or Mt. Kilauea, we should expect similar beliefs to wrong God. So what I suggest, is that to the extent that you believe that we are created in God's image, you should expect that God resembles us, in relevant respects, more than They resemble the weather or Mt. Kilauea. So it should not be surprising if the same sorts of beliefs that wrong us, also wrong God.

If what I have been suggesting in this paper is on the right track, then, it follows not only that one of the ways in which we have at least the potential to sin against God in thought, as well as in word and deed, lies in virtue of holding beliefs that directly wrong Them, but that this fact itself bears striking consequences for the epistemology of Theism itself, as well as for the problem of evil.²⁸

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²⁷Schroeder, "Persons as Things."

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