

IS EPISTEMIC BLAME DISTINCT FROM MORAL BLAME?

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ABSTRACT: In contemporary epistemology, recent attempts have been made to resist the notion of epistemic blame. This view, which I refer to as ‘epistemic blame skepticism,’ seems to challenge the notion of epistemic blame by reducing apparent cases of the phenomenon to examples of moral or practical blame. The purpose of this paper is to defend the notion of epistemic blame against a reductionist objection to epistemic blame, offered by Trent Dougherty in “Reducing Responsibility.” This paper will object to Dougherty’s position by examining an account in favour of epistemic blame and demonstrate concerns over the reductionist methodology employed by Dougherty to argue for his sceptical position.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, ethics, blame, scepticism, reductionism, responsibility

1. Introduction

Talk of responsibilities, duties, and blameworthiness is a widespread phenomenon in the fields of epistemology and ethics. These fields frequently draw from one another, and the exploration of epistemic and moral blame is one of the most recent examples of this overlap.¹ The discussion of epistemic blame is not just limited to epistemology and ethics, but is also pervasive in our everyday lives and plays an important part in society. Our everyday language implies a concept of epistemic blame as we often talk of holding people accountable for their beliefs, stating that one ‘should have known better’ or ‘they ought to believe that x.’² We also have special kinds of words and concepts for people who are notoriously irresponsible or bad believers, as opposed to when their beliefs are excusable. These different concepts seem to rely on the idea that we can be responsible and blameworthy believers. However, it is not entirely clear how epistemic blame is distinct from moral or instrumental blame, and whether it is a form of blame in its own right. This paper examines this distinction in depth, offering an argument for the independence of epistemic blame as a distinct concept.

¹ See Jessica Brown, “Blame and wrongdoing,” *Episteme* 14, 3 (2017): 275-296.

² See Corey Cusimano, “Defending Epistemic Responsibility,” *Arché* 4, 1 (2012): 32-59.

The plan of this paper is as follows; in section two I will briefly summarize the importance of this debate and the perceived relationship between epistemic and moral blame. I will then present Trent Dougherty's reductionist objection against the distinctiveness of epistemic blame from moral blame.³ After setting up Dougherty's objection, the remainder of my paper will respond to his concerns. In section three, I will offer my first objection to Dougherty's position by presenting an argument in favour of a distinct form of epistemic blame, offered by Nikolaj Nottelmann.⁴ I aim to weaken Dougherty's objection towards the notion of epistemic blame by assessing Nottelmann's argument and Dougherty's insufficient response to it. After providing my own objection to Dougherty's challenge to Nottelmann's position, I will also assess a potential response Dougherty could offer against my defence. Despite my charitable attempt to save Dougherty's position, I will also find this objection to be unsuccessful. In the third section of this paper, I argue against the reductionist methodology employed by Dougherty to object to the possibility of epistemic blame. I will draw upon an argument provided by Scott Stapleford who defends the existence of epistemic duties against similar reductionist arguments offered against their distinctiveness from moral or instrumental duties.⁵ Developing Stapleford's argument arguably provides support for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame by demonstrating how a reductionist reasoning leads to some problematic and odd consequences. With both responses to Dougherty's epistemic blame scepticism presented, the overall conclusion of my paper will find Dougherty's argument against the distinctiveness of epistemic blame from moral and instrumental blame, unsuccessful.

2. Epistemic Blame Scepticism

We routinely make judgements about what one ought to or ought not to believe. You ought not to believe falsehoods, or believe without sufficient evidence or justification, for example. When we make these judgements, we often respond negatively when people fail to comply. We acknowledge that they have failed in some sense, or done something wrong, and we regard them blameworthy by holding them responsible for these wrongdoings. On face value, it appears that this form of blame is epistemic in its nature, in that it is an epistemic evaluation made about an epistemic action or lack of action. As Cusimano notes, philosophers

³ Trent Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility: An Evidentialist Account of Epistemic Blame," *European Journal of Philosophy* 20, 4 (2012): 534-547.

⁴ Nikolaj Nottelmann, *Blameworthy Belief: A Study in Epistemic Deontology* (New York: Springer, 2007).

⁵ Scott Stapleford, "Why There May Be Epistemic Duties," *Dialogue* 54, 1 (2015): 63-89.

traditionally associate the goal of truth as one of the defining features of the epistemic realm and the responsibilities associated with this are also concerned with achieving the truth.⁶ Arguably, it seems to naturally follow from this that if the epistemic responsibilities are epistemic in nature, the blameworthiness that we attribute is due to a failure to carry out an epistemic responsibility, so is itself epistemic.

However, despite the arguably initial appeal and popularity of epistemic blame, in recent literature, some epistemologists have questioned the notion of epistemic blame and rejected it in its entirety. I will refer to this stance as ‘epistemic blame scepticism.’ In short, epistemic blame sceptics reject the claim that there is a distinctive form of epistemic blame, often reducing apparent cases of such to moral or practical blame. From this reasoning, sceptics claim that the notion of epistemic blameworthiness becomes redundant, meaning there is no need for it to exist in the literature, as a distinct form of epistemic blame would over-complicate the taxonomy and direct attention away from the real type of blame at hand.

As mentioned, one prominent epistemic blame sceptic is Dougherty, who offers a reductionist objection against the notion of epistemic blame.⁷ It is his objection that this paper will focus on, and we can now turn to examine his objection in more depth.

2.1 Dougherty’s ‘Reducing’ of Epistemic Responsibility

Dougherty presents a variety of arguments in favour of epistemic blame scepticism, centred around the key claim that epistemic responsibility can be ‘reduced.’ What Dougherty means by this claim, is that cases which appear to concern a distinct type of epistemic responsibility can be ‘reduced,’ into other types of blame. Epistemic responsibility or blame identifies with other forms of blame on a base level, so arguably, there is no need to overcomplicate matters and define these types of blame as epistemic, especially not as *distinctively* epistemic.⁸

According to Dougherty, most cases of seemingly epistemic blameworthiness are either cases of moral or instrumental blameworthiness or cases where no blame should be attributed at all. More specifically, Dougherty

⁶ Cusimano, “Defending Epistemic Responsibility,” 34.

⁷ Dougherty, “Reducing Responsibility,” 534-547.

⁸ I will infer that Dougherty’s use of ‘responsibility’ is interchangeable with ‘blameworthiness.’ I am aware that the notions of responsibility and blameworthiness can come apart (for example see Thomas Michael Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), however, due to word constraints I will not be discussing this material in this paper.

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claims that cases of epistemic blameworthiness are not part of epistemology and should be understood as falling within the domain of applied ethics, on par with medical and business ethics in that it is an aspect of ethical theory applied to a certain domain.⁹

Dougherty summarises his reductionist argument in the form of his ‘identity thesis,’ understood as follows;

“TT: Each instance of [so-called] epistemic irresponsibility is just an instance of purely non-epistemic irresponsibility/ irrationality (either moral or instrumental).”¹⁰

It is important to note here that Dougherty still believes in a form of epistemic normativity, but that it does not lead to a robust ‘ethics of belief’ which responsibilists believe in. The only epistemic demands, and thus epistemic forms of responsibility and blameworthiness, are ones relating to evidential fit.¹¹

Dougherty argues that epistemic ‘oughts’ should only be understood as the following;

“(EO) One epistemically-ought to believe p if and only if p fits one’s evidence.”¹²

Dougherty provides further support for his reductionist thesis by presenting an example to demonstrate how epistemic blame collapses into either moral or instrumental blame.¹³ We can briefly sketch this example now to further illustrate how Dougherty explains away an intuitive case of epistemic blameworthiness.

Craig the Creationist

Craig is a dysfunctional agent. He believes in creationism, the view that the universe and living organisms originate from acts of divine creation, as opposed to natural processes such as evolution. Craig was raised within a community of creationist believers. His parents believed in creationism, his school taught and favoured creationism and he only read books with a creationist bias. We can now imagine that I happen to meet Craig, and upon hearing of his creationist view, offer him some books on the topic which discuss the evolutionary viewpoint.

⁹ Trent Dougherty, “The ‘Ethics of Belief’ is Ethics (Period): Reassigning Responsibilism,” in *The Ethics of Belief*, eds. Jonathon Matheson and Rico Vitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 146-168.

¹⁰ Dougherty, “Reducing Responsibility,” 537.

¹¹ As an evidentialist, Dougherty claims that ‘lack of evidential fit’ is a genuine epistemic criticism which one is blameworthy for.

¹² Dougherty, “The Ethics of Belief is Ethics (Period),” 153.

¹³ Dougherty, “Reducing Responsibility,” 538.

However, Craig blindly refuses to read them, not wishing for his beliefs to be challenged.

From this information, it would appear that Craig's initial belief in creationism satisfies the standards for synchronic rationality (as his beliefs fit the evidence he had at the time, prior to our conversation), but he fails on diachronic rationality, i.e. an assessment of rationality across time. If we focus on the time in which I offered Craig the evolutionary books and he refused to read them, this arguably appears to be a case of epistemic irresponsibility. Craig had plenty of free time to read the books if he desired, and they are relatively short. By refusing to do so, however, he appears to be willfully ignorant, which is epistemically irresponsible. Upon closer examination, however, Dougherty argues that the irresponsibility at hand is really a case of moral or instrumental irresponsibility.¹⁴ Dougherty argues for this statement by appealing to stakes, claiming that either there is something at stake for Craig, or not. If there is not something at stake, then Craig does nothing irresponsible or blameworthy in not being over-scrupulous in his creationist beliefs. If, on the other hand, there is something at stake for Craig, then it either relates to his own interests or the interests of others. If the former, then it would be instrumentally irresponsible and irrational for Craig to continue to sustain his beliefs in creationism, for he is actively believing in a falsehood which is a personal disadvantage to him. If the stakes regard the interests of others, as we have a duty to promote the interests of others, Craig's beliefs would be deemed morally irresponsible. As such, Dougherty explains away the intuitive attribution of epistemic irresponsibility to Craig's action by reducing it to cases of instrumental and moral irresponsibility. The form of blameworthiness which we would attribute here would be either instrumental or moral, as it would only be appropriate to blame Craig epistemically if there was something epistemically at stake, which there is not.

In summary, Dougherty is claiming that perceived cases of epistemic blame can be reduced to cases of moral or instrumental blame. Applying a form of Ockham's razor, there is no need to overcomplicate matters by arguing for a new species of blame, which arguably only distracts from the other types of blame we should be really focusing on. The remainder of this essay will aim to resist Dougherty's claims, arguing against his identity thesis.

¹⁴ Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility," 540.

3. Nottelmann's Account of Epistemic Blame

Having outlined both epistemic blame and epistemic blame scepticism, we can now turn to critically assess the argument put forth by Dougherty. We can begin by presenting an argument in favour of a distinct form of epistemic blame, offered by Nottelmann which is discussed and dismissed briefly by Dougherty.¹⁵ I will critically assess Dougherty's objection to Nottelmann's stance, in turn providing a novel defence of Nottelmann argument for epistemic blame.

Nottelmann argues for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame by establishing a theory of epistemic deontology built upon epistemic blame. By appealing to legal considerations, Nottelmann makes the claim that moral culpability presupposes epistemic culpability, which demonstrates how moral and epistemic blame are distinct. Nottelmann opens his argument for this by detailing a historic rape case from 1975, which caused widespread controversy when three men were not deemed blameworthy for their act of rape.¹⁶ The case consisted of three men, who were invited by their friend, Mr. Morgan, to have sexual intercourse with his wife. Mr. Morgan informed his friends that his wife was 'kinky' and would feign protest. When arriving at the Morgan household, all four men forcibly dragged Mrs. Morgan from her son's bed where she was sleeping, and each had forcible intercourse without her consent whilst the other men held her down. Mrs. Morgan attempted to scream for her son to call the police but was choked by the men. At the trial, the three men pleaded that they believed Mrs. Morgan had consented to sexual intercourse. In conclusion, The House of Lords held that the men made an honest, but mistaken, belief that Mrs. Morgan was consenting, which provided a complete defence.

However, Nottelmann claims that the men should have been considered blameworthy for their actions by arguing for a distinctive form of epistemic blameworthiness. From this, he argues that if epistemic blameworthiness is not reducible to moral blameworthiness, moral blameworthiness must presuppose epistemic blameworthiness. Nottelmann locates the blameworthiness of the rape in the men's belief that Mrs. Morgan consented to sexual intercourse, stating it has "epistemically undesirable properties (such as unreasonableness)."¹⁷ It is this unreasonable belief which motivates the immoral act of rape, which leads Nottelmann to make the claim that epistemic culpability is presupposed by moral culpability. He appeals to a classic distinction in law known as the *actus reus* and

¹⁵ Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility," 536.

¹⁶ Nottelmann, *Blameworthy Belief*, 3-5.

¹⁷ Nottelmann, *Blameworthy Belief*, 10.

the *mens rea* distinction, to further this presupposition.¹⁸ The *actus reus* refers to the conduct element of a crime, which the defendant must have proven to have done. The *mens rea* is the psychological element of the crime, the intention or forethought which makes one morally culpable. Nottelmann compares the moral blameworthiness to the *actus reus*, and epistemic blameworthiness to the *mens rea*. As the intention comes prior to the action, this means that an agent must hold an epistemically undesirable belief prior to carrying the immoral action. This demonstrates how a clear-cut distinction can be made between the two forms of blame.

It is worth noting here that so far, Nottelmann appears to have demonstrated that there are cases in which the basis for blameworthiness is epistemic, but only with regards to the rape case. It may be true that this is not always the case, and Nottelmann offers little insight as to what other types of cases he also believes the basis for blame is epistemic. However, I do not take this as a concern of Nottelmann's argument, for he arguably does not need more than this modest claim to make his point. If there are examples where epistemic blame comes prior to moral blame, it simply cannot be the case that it reduces to moral blame. An agent must hold an epistemically unreasonable belief prior to the immoral act which the belief stems from, meaning epistemic blame must come prior to moral blame.¹⁹

In summary, Nottelmann has argued for a distinctive form of epistemic blame by locating blameworthiness in an agent's unreasonable belief. With an appeal to legal considerations, Nottelmann has argued that moral culpability presupposes epistemic culpability, which demonstrates how moral and epistemic blame are distinct.

3.1 Dougherty's Objection to Nottelmann's Position

Having briefly summarized Nottelmann's main argument for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame we can now turn to examine the concerns raised with his view by Dougherty.

Dougherty rejects Nottelmann's position by arguing that just because the target of the blameworthiness is the belief, it does not follow that the nature of the blame is epistemic; beliefs can also be governed by moral, prudential norms.²⁰ Additionally, Dougherty claims that blame is located in the moral consequences of

¹⁸ Nottelmann, *Blameworthy Belief*, 10

¹⁹ I thank Mona Simion for raising this point in personal conversation.

²⁰ Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility," 537.

the act itself, and this is distinctively moral, not epistemic.²¹ Taking both of Dougherty's concerns into consideration, it seems Nottelmann fails to locate epistemic blameworthiness in the belief of a guilty agent or demonstrate how the blameworthiness we speak of is distinctively epistemic. It thus appears that Nottelmann fails to successfully argue for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame by appealing to the priority of epistemic blame over moral blame.

Despite Dougherty's concern, I believe we can resist his objection by claiming that the denial of epistemic irresponsibility results in the eradication of any moral irresponsibility too. If this commitment is correct, then it demonstrates how epistemic responsibility must come prior to moral responsibility, as Nottelmann originally claimed. So how can one deny the existence of epistemic irresponsibility? One could argue that the rapists may have searched for more evidence about Mr. Morgan's claim that his wife wanted to partake in sexual intercourse and found positive reasons to believe it. Alternatively, perhaps they had no way to improve their epistemic situation, for example, they had no epistemic defeaters against the claim. Despite the intuition that the three men were aware Mr. Morgan was lying, these epistemic situations do not seem too far-fetched. With this in mind, how does denying any claims of epistemic responsibility deny claims of moral responsibility? If we argue that there was nothing the men could do to better their situation and were therefore truly justified in believing that Mrs. Morgan enjoyed non-consensual sexual intercourse, there no longer seems to be any attribution of blame, moral or epistemic. Their epistemic situation may, at most, make them ignorant, but not culpably ignorant.

We can apply Goldman's case of the 'benighted cognizer' here to explain this point further, which I believe strengthens my response to Dougherty.²² Goldman details a society which uses unreliable methods to form beliefs about the future. The society uses astrology and oracles to assist in belief formation, thus ignoring proper scientific practice. We can imagine that a member of this society forms a belief about the outcome of an upcoming battle based on zodiacal signs. Goldman refers to this individual as a benighted cognizer, someone who has formed a belief via bad methods but knows no better way to inform himself.²³ Arguably, it seems wrong to attribute any type of blame to the benighted cognizer for his faulty belief formation, despite the potentially disastrous consequences, for the individual has good reason to trust his cultural peers and has no way of acquiring better belief

²¹ Dougherty, "Reducing Responsibility," 537.

²² Alvin Ira Goldman, "Strong and Weak Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 51-53.

²³ Goldman, "Strong and Weak Justification," 57.

formation methods. We therefore find it hard to fault or blame them for believing what they do.

Bringing our argument back to Dougherty's objection, we can argue in defence of Nottelmann that blameworthiness is not located in the moral consequences of the act itself, for all moral consequences are eradicated if epistemic responsibility is also eradicated. The cognizer appears to be epistemically justified in their belief, and this excuses any sort of epistemic blameworthiness. It thus appears that blame can be distinctively epistemic and presuppose moral blameworthiness, for the men escape any attributions of moral blameworthiness if they are not deemed epistemically blameworthy.

It is worth addressing here however, a possible attempt Dougherty could present to deny our above objection. One way Dougherty may respond could be to claim the benighted cognizer is not morally blameworthy. Goldman's case of the benighted cognizer is similar to Dougherty's own case of Craig the creationist, where Craig also formed faulty beliefs under bad epistemic situations. With this in mind, perhaps it is possible for Dougherty to appeal to the same argument for this and claim that the benighted cognizer was not morally blameworthy, as nothing was at stake for him. This way, the reason we do not intuitively want to attribute blame does not rest upon there not being any attribution of epistemic blame. However, I think it seems quite clear that there is something at stake for the benighted cognizer, (e.g. the battle could go wrong), and yet, we still do not attribute blame. It seems then that Dougherty would be wrong to argue that cases which are not blameworthy are cases where nothing is at stake, meaning blame is not necessary located in what is at stake morally or practically, for there are cases of such where we do not attribute blame.

4. A Concern for the Reductionist Methodology

One way to resist Dougherty's scepticism is to demonstrate how his reductionist methodology results in some odd and worrisome consequences. It is worth reminding ourselves that Dougherty offers a reductionist argument in favour of epistemic scepticism, claiming that epistemic blameworthiness is a disguised form of moral or instrumental blameworthiness, and therefore is not a distinct field of blame. Examining the literature on epistemic deontology can be helpful to demonstrate how taking this reductionist approach to the normative domains, can be problematic. Drawing from an argument offered in defence of epistemic deontology against reductionism, I will now outline how this raises concerns for Dougherty's methodology.

Epistemic deontology is the view that there are certain duties pertaining to a distinct epistemic domain which we are subject to qua rational beings.²⁴ Sceptical arguments, similar to those offered by Dougherty are used to object against the possibility of distinct epistemic duties. Taking the same form of argument, epistemic duty sceptics argue that epistemic duties can be reduced to moral or practical duties, meaning there is no need for a distinct epistemic deontology.²⁵ Whilst no parallels have been made between the literature to date, I believe the similarities between the reductionist objection of epistemic duties bears a clear resemblance to Dougherty's reductionist objection towards epistemic blameworthiness. With this in mind, objections made against the reductionist objection to epistemic duties may be valuable in defending epistemic blame against reductionist approaches to epistemic blame scepticism. We can now turn to assess such an objection, offered by Stapleford in his "Why There May Be Epistemic Duties" who defends the distinctiveness of epistemic by demonstrating how a reductionist reasoning leads to some problematic and odd consequences.²⁶

Whilst Stapleford does not offer a positive argument for the possibility of epistemic duties, he arguably highlights how the reductionist reasoning is ineffective in dismissing the possibility of epistemic duties. The epistemic sceptic (now understood in both senses of duty and blameworthiness) argues that all cases of epistemic blame or epistemic duties can be reduced to moral blameworthiness or moral duties. However, Stapleford argues that cases where there is a legal duty or blame, which also imposes a moral duty or blame, should be reduced to just cases of moral duties or blame by the reductionist methodology.²⁷ For example, it seems to be the case that situations which pose a legal duty to do x, also imposes a moral duty to do x, in the sense that laws are often perceived as providing guidance for promoting fairness.²⁸ However, it seems right that we want to keep legal and moral

²⁴ See Anthony Robert Booth, "Deontology in Ethics and Epistemology," *Metaphilosophy* 39, 4-5 (2008): 530-545.

²⁵ The main proponent for this view is Wrenn who, in short, argues that if distinct forms of epistemic duties existed then they would conflict with our other type of obligations, such as our moral, legal and prudential duties. When it appears to be that we have an epistemic duty conflicting with another source of obligation, what we really have is a disguised moral duty competing with some other non-epistemic requirement. Thus, epistemic obligations simply do not exist. See Chase Wrenn, "Why There Are No Epistemic Duties," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne De Philosophie* 46, 1 (2007): 115-136.

²⁶ Stapleford, "Why There May Be Epistemic Duties," 63-89.

²⁷ Stapleford, "Why There May Be Epistemic Duties," 70.

²⁸ See Andrei Marmor, "Authority, Equality and Democracy," *Ratio Juris* 18, 3 (2005): 315-345, and Andrei Marmor, "How Law is Like Chess," *Legal Theory* 12, 4 (2006): 347-371.

duties distinct; what is considered legal is not always considered to be moral. For example, I may have a legal duty to pay my parking ticket fines, however, it would be odd to claim that my legal duty is also a moral one.

For the reductionist, however, it cannot be true that we have both legal and moral obligations, for reductionism demands that we simplify legal duties or legal forms of blameworthiness into moral duties and blameworthiness. Stapleford argues that this line of reasoning also applies to instrumental duties.²⁹ Instrumental duties can be understood as legal duties in that it is beneficial to conform one's actions to the law. Take for example paying taxes, not speeding or running red lights, here it is instrumentally good to conform to one's legal duties to avoid fines or imprisonment. This seems puzzling then when we realize that cases of what seems like a prudential duty can be collapsed into legal duties, and legal duties can be reduced to moral duties. The same applies to blameworthiness. Failing to carry out one of these practical duties may seem practically blameworthy, which in turn can be reduced to legal blameworthiness, which can be understood even further as moral blameworthiness.

It appears then that the very same reductionist reasoning employed by epistemic blame and normative sceptics creates a total collapse of the normative realms. Stapleford argues that this is extremely concerning for the epistemic normativity sceptic, for they need to preserve the autonomy of the moral realm to make the claim that epistemic obligations are really disguised moral requirements. For this claim to be considered as credible, it cannot preclude genuine legal and prudential requirements, for we readily do recognise these as independent sources of obligation.

Arguably the epistemic sceptic may attempt to resist these consequences would be to bite the bullet and accept that only moral sources of blameworthiness or obligations exist. However, this is arguably a commitment Dougherty would struggle to accept, for as mentioned previously, Dougherty prescribes to an evidentialist viewpoint, and is therefore committed to the view that there are epistemic ought's regarding evidential fit. Dougherty would therefore be strongly against the idea that these epistemic duties should be collapsed into purely moral obligations, meaning this concern over his reductionist methodology creates a worrying objection to his view.

²⁹ Stapleford, "Why There May Be Epistemic Duties," 74.

5. Conclusion

I have examined the distinction between epistemic and moral blame, with regards to Dougherty's reductionist argument against the existence of epistemic blame. I found his argument to be unsuccessful, particularly when pitted against the arguments offered by Nottelmann and Stapleford. The main aim of this paper has been to defuse Dougherty's reductionist argument. With this aim in mind, I have not yet attempted to provide a positive reason for the distinctiveness of epistemic blame. However, a denial of Dougherty's reductionist argument provides a necessary preliminary to make way for prospective arguments for the possibility of epistemic blame.