

The Applied Moral Turn of the Ethics of Belief Debate

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1. The traditional debate and recent trends

A longstanding debate at the center of the ethics of belief literature concerns whether the fact that having some doxastic attitude would be beneficial or harmful constitutes a genuine normative reason for or against having that attitude. In other words, do practical considerations bear on what you really ought to believe? Parties to this debate have traditionally focused on cases involving benefits or harms to the believer. For example, suppose believing that there's an afterlife would alleviate your crippling anxiety about death, or believing that your son committed a violent crime would cause you suffering. *Pragmatists* say that these benefits and harms constitute normative reasons for and against you having these respective beliefs that really matter to what you ought to believe.¹ *Anti-pragmatists*, on the other hand, insist that the benefits and harms of these beliefs at best generate normative reasons for you to *want* and *cause* yourself to have or lack these beliefs, but not normative reasons for believing or withholding from belief itself.² The only normative reasons for or against you having some doxastic attitude, the anti-pragmatist claims, are *epistemic* reasons, which are considerations that have to do with believing the truth and avoiding error—e.g., the evidence.³

But recently many philosophers writing on the intersection of ethics and epistemology are turning their focus to specific issues like racial profiling and sexual assault accusations where what we believe (or don't believe) about other people seems morally significant and asking whether our doxastic attitudes can wrong *others*—not the believer. For example, consider the following cases:

Racial Profiling Karen, a police officer, knows that a very large majority of the Black residents of a particular building sell drugs. Because of this, when Karen encounters John, a Black resident of that building, she believes that John probably sells drugs.

¹ See e.g., Pascal (1670), James (1897), Stroud (2006), Reisner (2009), Rinard (2015), and Leary (2017).

² See e.g., Parfit (2001), Kelly (2002), Shah (2006), Thomson (2008), Skorupski (2009), and Whiting (2014).

³ While evidence is the paradigm of epistemic reasons, some anti-pragmatists may allow that there are some epistemic reasons that are not evidence. Moreover, while some pragmatists may take practical considerations to affect whether one is epistemically justified in believing something, others claim that practical considerations are irrelevant to epistemic justification. The pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate is thus orthogonal to the encroachment debate, which concerns whether practical considerations can affect the epistemic status of one's beliefs (Leary 2021).

Sexual Assault Accusation Justin reads in the university newsletter that a fellow student, Jessica, has reported to the campus police that Justin’s friend Bryce sexually assaulted her at a party. Justin knows that reports to police like this are extremely likely to be true, but he’s always thought Bryce is a good guy, so he’s unsure about what to believe and he suspends judgment about whether Bryce committed the assault.

The *doxastic wronging question* is whether one’s doxastic attitudes (belief, disbelief, suspending judgment) can themselves wrong another individual in a directed way, where this wrong is done by the attitude itself and not by how it was formed or its downstream effects via one’s actions. For example, does Karen’s belief that John probably sells drugs wrong John and does Justin’s suspending judgment about whether Bryce assaulted Jessica wrong Jessica, regardless of whether Karen and Justin’s beliefs are motivated by any ill will or whether they act on their beliefs in any way that harms John and Jessica?⁴ Some say, “yes”, while others say “no”.⁵

The main question that I’m interested in here is to what extent this recent turn of focus in the ethics of belief literature is useful for making progress in the longstanding pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate.⁶ My answer to this question comes in two parts—one negative and one positive. First, I argue (in §2) that one aspect of this turn—namely, the focus on the doxastic wronging question—is not useful for the debate because, contrary to what some authors seem to assume, whether our doxastic attitudes can wrong others is entirely irrelevant to the central question at the heart of the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. But I then argue (in §3) that another aspect of this turn—the focus on real-world, applied moral issues—is useful for making progress in the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate because it sheds light on a central issue underlying the debate: whether we can believe *for* practical considerations.

⁴ I’m assuming here that the doxastic wronging question is about all doxastic attitudes (including withholding belief and probabilistic beliefs like the one in Racial Profiling), following Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming), but (Basu & Schroeder, 2019) mostly discuss cases that involve full belief.

⁵ For both sides of this debate, see Baril (2022), Basu (2019), Basu & Schroeder (2019), Schroeder (2018), and Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming).

⁶ This question has not received much attention in the literature thus far. Most authors writing about doxastic wronging are more focused on how doxastic wronging bears on the encroachment debate: whether practical factors, including moral ones, can play a role in determining whether one’s belief is epistemically justified and amounts to knowledge, or whether the epistemic status of one’s belief supervenes on the evidence. But as noted in fn. 3, this issue is separate from the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. There is a tendency in some of the literature, though, to assume that, if there’s doxastic wronging, there are some moral considerations that constitute genuine normative reasons against certain doxastic attitudes (i.e., pragmatism). For example, see Enoch & Spectre (forthcoming) and Dandelet (2023).

2. The irrelevance of doxastic wronging

My argument that doxastic wronging is irrelevant to the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate comes in two parts. First, I argue (in §2.1) that, if we *cannot* wrong others with our doxastic attitudes, that doesn't imply that there are no moral considerations that constitute genuine normative reasons for or against doxastic attitudes (i.e., anti-pragmatism). Second, I argue (in §2.2) that, even if we *can* wrong others with our doxastic attitudes, this doesn't imply that moral considerations can constitute genuine normative reasons for or against doxastic attitudes (i.e., pragmatism).

2.1 No doxastic wronging doesn't support anti-pragmatism

Doxastic wronging is alleged to occur when a believer's doxastic attitude (i) wrongs another person in a directed way, (ii) because of the attitude itself—i.e., the person is wronged because of the doxastic attitude itself and not because of how the attitude was formed (e.g., because the believer had ill will towards that person) or because of its downstream effects via action (e.g., any harms that result from the believer acting on that attitude in some way).

So, if doxastic wronging isn't possible, this means that our doxastic attitudes can't satisfy conditions (i) and (ii). But that's compatible with there being moral reasons that bear on what doxastic attitudes we really ought to have, which stem from our attitudes' downstream effects. For example, consider the two cases offered earlier: Racial Profiling and Sexual Assault Accusation. Even if Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes don't themselves directly wrong John and Jessica, their attitudes may indirectly cause harm to John and Jessica via their actions. For example, Karen's believing that John probably sells drugs might cause her to stop and search him and cause him that unique kind of harm that one feels when they are being stereotyped (Moss, 2018); and Justin's suspending judgment about whether Bryce assaulted Jessica might make him unable to provide genuine and empathetic social support that he should provide to Jessica (Lloyd, 2022). The fact that these attitudes will cause harm to others via their downstream effects may be moral reasons against Karen and John having these attitudes, which really matter to what doxastic attitudes they ought to have. So, even if we cannot wrong others with our doxastic attitudes, this doesn't support anti-pragmatism.

This shouldn't be too surprising. After all, pragmatists presumably think that even if a belief doesn't all by itself directly benefit or harm the *believer*, but instead only indirectly benefits or harms the believer through its downstream effects via the believer's actions, that's still a practical reason for or against believing it. For example, if believing that God exists will get you into heaven only because it will cause you to act in a way that God rewards, or your believing that your son committed a violent

crime will cause you suffering only because it will cause you to turn your son into the police and damage your relationship, the pragmatist presumably thinks these are still normative reasons for and against you having those beliefs that really matter to what you ought to believe. So, likewise, whether there are moral considerations that constitute genuine normative reasons for or against doxastic attitudes also shouldn't depend on whether our doxastic attitudes themselves can directly wrong others or whether they can only indirectly harm others via our actions.

In fact, even if someone's doxastic attitude simply *risks* causing serious harm to others, that may be a moral reason against having that attitude. For example, suppose Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes merely create a high *risk* that they will each act in such a way that will cause the respective harms to John and Jessica described above. Just those risks of harm may be moral reasons against Karen and Justin having those doxastic attitudes. After all, there are moral reasons to not perform actions that are likely to cause harm to others. And the pragmatist presumably thinks that even if some doxastic attitude is just likely to cause some benefit or harm to the believer, that's a normative reason for or against having the attitude.

Moreover, there may even be moral considerations that bear on what one ought to believe that don't have to do with doxastic wronging nor with the downstream effects of one's doxastic attitudes via their actions. For example, suppose Karen and Justin's attitudes don't wrong John and Jessica and their attitudes don't even risk causing any harmful downstream effects at all. That is, suppose that, even if Karen believes that John probably sells drugs, she won't stop and search him or treat him (or anyone else) in a negative way as a result of this belief; and suppose Justin's suspending judgment about whether Bryce assaulted Jessica doesn't even risk causing Jessica (or any other sexual assault survivors) any harm because Justin will just keep his attitude privately to himself. Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes may nonetheless be morally problematic because they are instances of widespread practices in our society that collectively cause serious harms: the widespread tendency of people, especially police, to believe things about people on the basis of racial profiling collectively causes harm to marginalized racial groups, and the widespread tendency of people to not believe sexual assault accusations collectively causes harm and injustice to victims.⁷ So, even if Karen and John's individual doxastic attitudes don't make any causal difference to whether those collective harms occur, there may still be a moral reason against Karen and Justin having those attitudes in order to not participate in those collective harms.

⁷ This seems to be the sort of explanation that Bolinger (2020: 2425) offers for why it's morally problematic to believe things on the basis of statistical generalizations having to do with race.

This moral reason would be analogous to the moral reasons against individuals consuming factory farmed meat or flying on a private jet. There are widespread industries and consumer behaviors in our society that collectively cause massive amounts of harm to animals and the environment (and indirectly to humans). And even if a particular individual's choice to eat meat or fly on a private jet doesn't make a causal difference as to whether those collective harms occur, it still seems like there's a strong moral reason for them to not do these things. Of course, it's puzzling and controversial what exactly this moral reason amounts to, but many agree that there is a moral reason in this vicinity that bears on what one ought to do. The challenge is just to articulate what exactly it is.⁸

All of this goes to show that even if we cannot wrong others with our doxastic attitudes, there are still plenty of other moral considerations that may bear on what we ought to believe. So, if there is no doxastic wrongdoing, this doesn't support anti-pragmatism.

This discussion highlights something important that is often obscured in the doxastic wrongdoing literature: there's a difference between an action or attitude's *being (morally) wrong* and its *wronging* someone. Even if there is no doxastic *wronging*, some doxastic attitudes can still be morally wrong. In other words, there can be cases where there is strong enough moral reason against someone's having a certain doxastic attitude such that doing so is morally wrong, but conditions (i) and/or (ii) are not satisfied.

This is illustrated by the previous discussion of the alternative moral considerations that might be relevant in Racial Profiling and Sexual Assault Accusation. For example, suppose that what's going on in Racial Profiling and Sexual Assault Accusation is that Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes *risk* causing them to act in certain ways that will harm John and Jessica. If the risks are high enough, this may not only be a moral reason against Karen and Justin having these doxastic attitudes, but it can make it morally wrong for them to do so. After all, an action that creates a high enough risk of causing serious harm—e.g., drunk driving—can be morally wrong. But this explanation of why Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes are morally wrong suggests that their attitudes don't wrong John or Jessica because they don't satisfy condition (ii)—the explanation of why these doxastic attitudes are morally wrong has to do with their potential downstream effects via action.

Alternatively, suppose that Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes don't risk causing any harm to John or Jessica (or anyone else). But their doxastic attitudes are still instances of widespread tendencies in our society that collectively harm marginalized racial groups and sexual assault victims.

⁸ See McPherson (2021), Nefsky (2017), and [others??] for recent attempts to specify what this moral reason amounts to.

So, while their doxastic attitudes don't make any causal difference to whether those collective harms occur, there's still a moral reason against them having those doxastic attitudes that stems from these collective harms. This moral reason might be strong enough to make it wrong for Karen and Justin to have these attitudes—just as it may be wrong to consume factory farmed meat and fly on a private jet. This explanation of why Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes are morally wrong suggests that these attitudes are morally wrong without *wronging* because condition (i) is not satisfied: Karen and Justin's doxastic attitudes are wrong but not in a directed way—there's no particular person that is the victim of the wrong.⁹

So, if there is no doxastic wronging, not only can there still be plenty of moral considerations that bear on what one ought to believe, but also some doxastic attitudes can still be morally wrong.

2.2 Doxastic wronging doesn't support pragmatism

So far, I have only claimed that, if there is no doxastic wronging, there *can* still be other moral considerations that bear on what one ought to believe. Whether the moral considerations that I've pointed to above actually do bear on what one really ought to believe depends on whether pragmatism is true. For all the moral considerations that I've pointed to, the anti-pragmatist may say that these moral considerations don't constitute normative reasons for or against doxastic attitudes, and so don't bear on what one ought to believe, but instead only constitute normative reasons to *want* and *cause* oneself to have certain doxastic attitudes—just like they say about prudential considerations.

This brings me to my next main point: even if we *can* wrong others with our doxastic attitudes, the fact that someone's doxastic attitude wrongs another person is just one more moral consideration regarding our doxastic attitudes for which it's an open question whether that moral consideration really bears on what we ought to believe. So, even if doxastic wronging is possible, this doesn't entail pragmatism.

To see the point, recall what the anti-pragmatist says about prudential considerations. Even anti-pragmatists admit that sometimes our beliefs can be *directly* good or bad for the believer, independently of their downstream effects via the believer's actions. For example, your believing that there's an afterlife can by itself make you happier and not just because it will cause you to act in certain ways that will benefit you; and your believing that your son committed a violent crime can by itself make you deeply sad and not just because believing it will cause you to act in certain ways that make

⁹ Condition (ii) is satisfied because this explanation of why these doxastic attitudes are wrong does not have to do with the way the attitude was formed or its downstream effects.

you sad. The anti-pragmatist doesn't dispute this. What the anti-pragmatist denies is that these direct benefits and costs of these respective beliefs are normative reasons for and against believing them—that they bear on what you really ought to believe. Instead, the anti-pragmatist insists that these direct benefits and costs only generate normative reasons for you to *want* and *cause* yourself to have or lack these beliefs.

Similarly, then, the anti-pragmatist may admit that our doxastic attitudes by themselves can wrong someone but deny that this moral consideration is a normative reason against having the relevant doxastic attitude. For example, the pragmatist may admit that Karen would wrong John by believing that he probably sells drugs and that Justin would wrong Jessica by suspending judgment about whether Bryce assaulted her, but deny that these moral considerations are normative reasons against Karen and Justin having their respective doxastic attitudes and insist, instead, that these moral considerations are only normative reasons for Karen and Justin to want to not have these attitudes and do whatever actions they can to avoid them.

One might object to this analogy between moral and prudential considerations because one might think there's an important difference between harming yourself and wronging someone else. If your belief would harm yourself, that doesn't entail any requirement for you not to believe it. But if your belief would wrong someone else, that does entail a moral requirement to not believe it, and that moral requirement entails that you have decisive normative reasons against doing so. So, one might think that doxastic wronging is different from prudential harms: it's an open question whether prudential harm generates normative reasons against the relevant belief, but it's a closed question that doxastic wronging generates a moral requirement and thereby moral reasons against the relevant belief. So, there's no conceptual space for doxastic wronging without pragmatism.

But while this reasoning is tempting, it's not quite right. First, even if there's a tight conceptual connection between wronging, moral requirements, and moral reasons, it's an open question whether doxastic wronging generates a moral requirement to not have the relevant doxastic attitude itself or only a moral requirement to want and cause oneself to not have that attitude. Again, given what the anti-pragmatist says about prudential considerations, they would presumably claim that doxastic wronging only generates the latter moral requirement. In fact, suppose there's such a thing as prudential requirements and that believing that there's an afterlife is not just beneficial to you but necessary for your wellbeing. Presumably the anti-pragmatist would still say that this fact only generates a prudential requirement (and thereby prudential reasons) to want and cause yourself to have this belief.

Of course, one might think that it's strange and unprincipled for the anti-pragmatist to insist that doxastic wrongdoing only generates moral requirements and reasons to want and cause oneself to have or lack certain beliefs when the wrong occurs because of the doxastic attitude itself and not one's desires or actions. I agree and I think the anti-pragmatist thereby owes an explanation for why the normative reasons get generated in this way. But this is an old problem for anti-pragmatism that arises even when just considering the direct benefits and harms of beliefs for the believer. That is, the anti-pragmatist already owes an explanation for why, if it's my *belief* that there's an afterlife that would be beneficial to me—the benefit isn't gained by merely wanting that belief or acting in ways that will cause me to have it—why does that generate normative reasons to want and cause myself to have that belief but not a reason to believe it itself (Reisner 2009: 270, Leary 2017: 530)? While the anti-pragmatist has some responses to this challenge, I find them unsatisfying (e.g., Leary, 2017). But regardless, this dialectic is about whether the anti-pragmatist's view is plausible; it's not about whether anti-pragmatism is compatible with there being doxastic attitudes that have direct prudential and moral costs. So, this worry doesn't show that anti-pragmatism is incompatible with doxastic wrongdoing.¹⁰

Moreover, there's another way for anti-pragmatists to accept that doxastic wrongdoing generates moral requirements and moral reasons to lack the relevant doxastic attitudes themselves. Anti-pragmatists can appeal to the distinction between *merely formal* normativity and *authoritative* normativity. A certain set of requirements and reasons is authoritatively normative if they by themselves matter to what you really ought to do, whereas they are merely formally normative if they are requirements and reasons that do not by themselves bear on what you really ought to do. Morality is often taken to be the paradigm example of the former, while etiquette is the paradigm example of the latter: while it may be true that etiquette requires you to set the table a certain way and provides an etiquette-based reason to do so, presumably this doesn't by itself make it the case that you really ought to set the table in that way for dinner, unless you have some further authoritative reason to abide by the norms of etiquette at the dinner. When pragmatists and anti-pragmatists disagree about whether practical considerations (whether prudential or moral) are *really* or *genuine* normative reasons for and against doxastic attitudes, they're talking about whether such considerations can constitute authoritatively normative reasons for and against doxastic attitudes: pragmatists say “yes,” while anti-pragmatists say “no.” The anti-pragmatist may thus be fine with talk about practical requirements and reasons to have

¹⁰ Focusing on doxastic wrongdoing also doesn't add anything new to this dialectic—it just shows that the challenge for anti-pragmatism arises in the moral domain too. So, focusing on the doxastic wrongdoing question isn't even useful for the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate in an indirect way.

certain doxastic attitudes, so long as such reasons are understood as merely formal and not authoritative. So, the anti-pragmatist may claim that doxastic wrongdoing generates moral requirements and moral reasons to lack doxastic attitudes themselves but insist that these moral requirements and reasons are merely formal, rather than authoritative.¹¹

Of course, this requires the anti-pragmatist to say that moral requirements and reasons are authoritative with respect to one kind of response (action) but not another (doxastic attitudes) and they should have an explanation for why this is the case. But the anti-pragmatist is already committed to saying this about prudential reasons, so this explanatory challenge isn't new. In fact, it's basically the same explanatory challenge mentioned earlier but in slightly different terms: why do the direct benefits or costs (whether prudential or moral) of doxastic attitudes generate authoritative normative reasons to want and cause oneself to have or lack those attitudes but only merely formal reasons for or against those doxastic attitudes themselves? And, again, while we can debate whether the anti-pragmatist's responses to this question are satisfying, this is ultimately a debate about whether anti-pragmatism is ultimately plausible, and not about whether it's compatible with doxastic wrongdoing and merely formal moral requirements and reasons.

So, here's the main upshot of this whole section: the question of whether our doxastic attitudes can wrong others is entirely irrelevant to the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. This is because, first, if there is no doxastic wrongdoing, there are still plenty of other moral considerations that may constitute (authoritative) normative reasons for and against doxastic attitudes, and some doxastic attitudes may even be morally wrong; and second, even if there is doxastic wrongdoing, this is just one of many moral considerations about which it's up for debate whether they constitute (authoritative) normative reasons for doxastic attitudes.

But these two points also suggest a broader important upshot: even if certain doxastic attitudes are *morally wrong*—regardless of whether they are wrong because they wrong someone, or because of their potential downstream effects, or because they participate in widespread practices that cause collective harms—that doesn't itself entail pragmatism. For the anti-pragmatist may always insist that, just as they say about prudence, morality is not authoritative with respect to doxastic attitudes.

¹¹ This is akin to how some pragmatists claim that *epistemic* requirements and reasons are merely formal, rather than authoritative (Maguire & Woods, 2020).

3. The relevance of applied moral issues

Thus far my task has been purely negative: to show that focusing on the doxastic wrongdoing question is not useful for making progress in the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. In this section, however, I offer a more positive take on the recent turn in the ethics of belief literature: I argue that the recent focus on applied moral issues is useful for making progress in the debate. Specifically, I argue that focusing on applied moral issues like racial profiling and sexual assault accusations can shed light on a dispute that often underlies the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate: whether we can believe *for* practical reasons.

The most common explanation anti-pragmatists offer for why practical considerations only generate (authoritative) normative reasons to want and cause oneself to have certain doxastic attitudes, and not (authoritative)¹² normative reasons for those attitudes themselves, is that our actions can be explicitly guided by practical considerations, but our doxastic attitudes cannot. That is, many anti-pragmatists embrace a deliberative constraint on normative reasons: for some consideration R to be a normative reason to do some action or have some attitude A, it must be possible for someone to take R to be a reason to A during conscious deliberation about whether to A, and thereby A on that basis (Shah, 2006). This constraint captures the intuitive idea that the essential role of normative reasons is to guide our actions and attitudes. But many anti-pragmatists insist that, while our beliefs can surely be causally influenced in an implicit way by non-evidential factors, we cannot explicitly take practical considerations to be normative reasons for believing p during conscious deliberation about whether to believe p, and thereby believe p on that basis.¹³ For example, they think that while consciously deliberating about whether to believe that there's an afterlife, you can't explicitly take the fact that believing it will make you happier to be a normative reason for you to believe it and thereby form that belief on that basis. Instead, the only considerations that we can be moved by during conscious deliberation are those that have to do with whether p—i.e., the evidence. Anti-pragmatists take this to explain why practical considerations constitute authoritative normative reasons for action, but not for doxastic attitudes.

¹² From now on, I'll drop this clarification, but whenever I use the term "normative reasons", I'm talking about authoritative normative reasons.

¹³ In other words, these anti-pragmatists admit that practical considerations can be *merely explanatory* reasons for our beliefs (i.e., they can be part of the overall explanation for why we hold certain beliefs) but deny that such considerations can constitute *motivating* reasons for our beliefs (i.e., they can't be reasons *for which* we believe—or what our beliefs are based on).

Some pragmatists disagree, however, by claiming that our doxastic attitudes can be explicitly guided by practical considerations. I argue that, even during conscious deliberation, we can take practical considerations to be reasons for believing *p* and that can cause us to be more responsive to evidence in favor of believing *p*, so that we thereby come to believe *p* *partially* on the basis of practical reasons (Leary, 2017). Similarly, Rinard (2019) argues that we can explicitly take practical considerations to be reasons to believe *p* and then use evidence as a mere means by which we believe *p*, in which case the practical reason is the full basis of our belief.

This dispute about whether we can believe for practical reasons has become the central underlying issue in the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. But it seems to have reached a standstill. Anti-pragmatists complain that the above pragmatist stories about how we can believe for practical reasons is psychologically unrealistic. They claim that if a believer is really consciously aware that they take the practical benefits of believing *p* to be a reason to believe it, this would undermine their assessment of the evidence as being strong enough to justify believing *p*, and thereby prevent them from being able to form the belief that *p* on the basis of that evidence. Moreover, anti-pragmatists claim that, if you ask people what their reasons are for believing something, they never cite practical benefits, but instead cite their evidence, which suggests that we don't explicitly take practical considerations to be reasons for belief during conscious deliberation. On the other hand, pragmatists insist that there's no reason to think that one *cannot* take there to be good enough evidence to believe *p* and form the belief that *p* when one is consciously aware that they take there to be practical benefits of believing *p* (Rinard, 2019: 776); and they appeal to anecdotes where people explicitly cite practical benefits as reasons for their religious or political beliefs.¹⁴

Turning the focus to applied moral issues like racial profiling and sexual assault accusations, however, can help shed light on this dispute. This is because the pragmatist stories above about how we can believe for practical reasons seems especially psychologically realistic in these real-world moral contexts. Let's start with the issue of sexual assault accusations in the context of the #MeToo movement. It seems quite common for both supporters and critics of the movement to consider moral considerations when deliberating about what to believe about sexual assault accusations. Supporters often consider the moral risks of not believing such accusations: e.g., the risk that doing so will cause further harm and injustice to the accusers or at least be complicit in the collective harms done to sexual assault victims, more generally. On the other hand, critics of the movement often focus on the moral

¹⁴ This standstill is what I usually encounter at conferences or seminars while discussing pragmatism.

risks of believing accusations: e.g., that doing so might cause harm to those who are falsely accused or at least be complicit in the collective harms done to people who are falsely accused. For both sides, it seems natural to explicitly consider these moral considerations and take them to be reasons for or against (respectively) believing a particular sexual assault accusation when consciously deliberating about whether to believe it. And it also seems natural for this to make one more or less responsive to the evidence in favor of believing the accusation and thereby form a doxastic attitude on that basis: supporters may believe the accusation because their recognizing the moral reason to believe it makes them more responsive to the evidence in favor, whereas critics may suspend judgment about (or disbelieve) the accusation because their recognizing the moral reason against believing it makes them less responsive to the evidence. This fits my pragmatist story about how we can believe, in part, for practical reasons. Moreover, it also seems that in some cases people explicitly take there to be a moral reason for or against believing the accusation and then use certain available evidence about the particular accusation as a mere means by which they form some doxastic attitude about it, just as Rinard claims.

Indeed, the anti-pragmatist's response to these stories seems much less plausible in this moral case. That is, it doesn't seem like one's being aware that they take there to be moral reasons for or against believing an accusation has any undermining effect on their assessment of the evidence. Supporters of the #MeToo movement often seem to explicitly take there to be moral reasons to believe sexual assault accusations while also judging that there's good enough evidence to believe them; and critics of the movement seem to explicitly take there to be moral reasons for withholding belief about accusations while also judging that the evidence warrants withholding.

The issue of racial profiling is also a context in which the pragmatists' stories about how we believe for practical reasons seems quite psychologically realistic. For example, suppose Karen is a conscientious police officer who cares about racial justice and is consciously deliberating about whether to believe that John probably sells drugs, considering the statistical evidence she has. It seems natural for her to consider the moral risks of this belief in her deliberation and explicitly take that to be a reason against believing it, and for that to cause her to judge that the statistical evidence she has is insufficient to justify her believing it, thereby resulting in her withholding belief.¹⁵

¹⁵ It might sound like I'm endorsing moral encroachment here, but I'm not. I'm merely making a psychological claim: that people tend to take these moral risks into account and then raise their bar for how much evidence they take to be sufficient for believing the relevant claim. One can accept this psychological claim without endorsing moral encroachment, which is a specific normative claim that this tendency is *epistemically rational* and that believing in such cases would be *epistemically unjustified*.

Focusing on these applied moral issues thus makes it more plausible that we can, and do, explicitly believe for practical reasons. Of course, this doesn't settle the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. The fact that we can explicitly believe for practical reasons doesn't entail that we *should*—i.e., that practical considerations constitute (authoritative) normative reasons for belief. But since many anti-pragmatists defend their view by claiming that we cannot believe for practical reasons, this is substantial progress in that debate. It shows that anti-pragmatists have not satisfied their burden of explaining why practical considerations—including moral ones—only generate normative reasons to want and cause ourselves to have certain beliefs.

4. Conclusion

So, let's return to the question we started with: to what extent is the recent “applied moral turn” in the ethics of belief literature useful for making progress in the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate? The answer is mixed. One aspect of this turn—the focus on doxastic wrongdoing—is not useful because whether our doxastic attitudes can wrong others is irrelevant to the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate. But another aspect of this turn—the focus on real-world moral issues—is useful because it sheds light on whether we can believe for practical reasons, which is one of the central issues underlying the pragmatism-anti-pragmatism debate.

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