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Epistemic Warrant for Ethical Beliefs in Relation to Living Freely and Patriarchal Systems of Oppression

Abstract

Regarding the epistemic warrant¹ for ethical beliefs, I will make three arguments. First, that warrant for an ethical belief can only be transferred interpersonally if the adopter fully understands the justifications for that belief or takes the reasoning of the testifier as a proxy for their own. Second, that if most or all of one's ethical beliefs are based on other's testimony, that person will be living freely only if those beliefs were adopted with proper warrant. Third, that systems of oppression are unethical in part because the oppressed are expected to take on ethical beliefs from authority figures without valid warrant, rendering the oppressed unfree. I will specifically use patriarchal systems of oppression to illustrate this final point.

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Abstract

Regarding the epistemic warrant¹ for ethical beliefs, I will make three arguments. First, that warrant for an ethical belief can only be transferred interpersonally if the adopter fully understands the justifications for that belief or takes the reasoning of the testifier as a proxy for their own. Second, that if most or all of one's ethical beliefs are based on other's testimony, that person will be living freely only if those beliefs were adopted with proper warrant. Third, that systems of oppression are unethical in part because the oppressed are expected to take on ethical beliefs from authority figures without valid warrant, rendering the oppressed unfree. I will specifically use patriarchal systems of oppression to illustrate this final point.

1. The Limited Transferability of Epistemic Warrant for Ethical Beliefs

Ethical beliefs are epistemically warranted by the reasons that justify them. The Kantian belief that lying is wrong is justified by the principle that one shouldn't abuse another's rational capacity (whether or not that belief and principle are true). If one has a belief with no justification, then that belief has no epistemic warrant. In fact, I am taking 'epistemic warrant' as simply referring to a sufficient reason or justification to hold a particular belief.

Not all types of justification are sufficient to warrant an ethical belief. To illustrate, consider this example: You are undecided on the ethical permissibility of abortion. When speaking to your friend, you take on the belief that abortion is always wrong, solely because your friend said it was true. In this case, your belief is based on a reason, but it is not justified by a sufficient reason. This raises the question, what constitutes a sufficient reason or justification for an ethical belief? I will give an account that will explain why the example above is not an instance of sufficient justification.

¹ Whenever 'warrant' is referred to, it should be understood specifically as *epistemic* warrant.

There are two types of sufficient reason that may warrant an ethical belief.² The first is understanding the principles that account for that belief being true. The Kantian is justified in believing that lying is always wrong, because they believe that abusing a rational capacity is always wrong, and they understand how that principle accounts for the wrongness of lying. In addition, for a belief to be justified, the principle that explains it must also be justified. Otherwise, we would be taking beliefs based on totally unfounded principles, and thus the beliefs would not be justified at all. As such, a justified ethical belief requires a chain of justification between increasingly fundamental principles that account for the truth of one another. Whether these principles must ‘bottom out’ in a most fundamental, self-evident principle (the sort that is self-justifying) or whether these principles may justify one another in a circular, Coherentist fashion, I will leave standing in this paper.

Now, if understanding as I have described it was the only way for us to have warranted ethical beliefs, then warrant could only be transferred in a very limited fashion. Only by receiving a complete account of the principles that justify a belief could one take on that belief with warrant. This type of transfer is reminiscent of a Socratic discussion format, whereby Socrates would lead one through a complete line of reasoning to arrive at the belief being argued for. Allan Gibbard refers to this type of transfer of ethical belief as Socratic Influence (174). One may even think of this type of discussion as not strictly constituting a transfer of warrant, but rather generating a new warrant for the one taking on the belief. This is due to the fact that the warrant is derived from one’s personal understanding of the justificatory relations between the principles that account for the belief. As such, it is more accurate to say that this type of Socratic influence leads one to generate their own warranted belief, rather than enabling the transfer of a pre-existing warrant.

However, as alluded to earlier, there is a second means of transferring warranted ethical beliefs. It involves one treating another’s reasoning as a proxy for one’s own. Gibbard refers to this idea as Contextual Authority (174). The idea I will sketch is similar to Gibbard’s, but does not involve the background of Non-cognitivism that Gibbard accepts. With the moral realist assumption that I am using, Contextual Authority refers to one taking on another’s belief by treating the testifier as a proxy or delegate of one’s own reasoning. In Gibbard’s sense, this assignment of authority is justified because it is based on the context of shared social norms. In my usage, this delegation of reasoning is justified by the assumption of shared rational capacities and logical foundations. As such, I argue that Contextual Authority can be assigned to another even if there are few shared social norms, so long as there is reason to believe that there exists a context of shared basic logic and disposition for rational thought.³ Therefore, one may derive a

² I make a single specific exception for children and certain adults in Section 1a.

³ Here I make the assumption that rationality itself should be considered a fundamental cognitive capacity, rather than merely a social norm.

warranted ethical belief from another where there exists an assumed or demonstrated shared foundation of common rationality.

To make this point clear, I would like to sketch several illustrative examples. Imagine that a detective is investigating a murder case and has a suspect. You and the detective share similar rational capabilities, and you both believe that murderers should be jailed if there is sufficient evidence of guilt. However, the detective is privy to more information about the case than you are. You are aware of this disparity in relevant information. The detective tells you that the suspect is guilty based on the evidence and so should be jailed. Based on the assumption of shared reasoning, you assign Contextual Authority to the detective, and take on her belief. This means that you believe that if you were in the detective's position, you would personally reason to the same conclusions that the detective did. In doing so, you take on her belief that the suspect is guilty and so should be jailed, with an epistemic warrant for that belief.

However, there are comparable circumstances in which you couldn't assign Contextual Authority, if you have reason to believe that there is not sufficiently shared rational capacity. Suppose that an acquaintance attests to you that the suspect is guilty based on what logically follows from the evidence. However, you know that your acquaintance has a chronic cognitive impairment, which has severely limited her ability to reason clearly and construct valid logical arguments. As such, you could not assign Contextual Authority to the acquaintance and take on her belief with warrant, because you know that she does not have the same reasoning capacity as you. Therefore, you could not treat her reasoning as a proxy for your own. In other words, you do not have sufficient reason to think that, if you knew what she did, you would reach the same conclusions based on your own reasoning. Similar examples will arise where a testifier's rationality is temporarily impaired by certain drugs or brain damage, based on the same principles.

Contextual Authority may only be applied where one has reason to believe that there is shared rationality between the participants of the conversation. That judgment is a limiting requirement that reduces the circumstances in which Contextual Authority may be applied. This requirement is also what justifies one's using Contextual Authority: one must use their own reason to judge whether there is sufficiently shared rationality. While one may use Contextual Authority based on an assumption of shared rationality, it must be a reasonable assumption. In this way, beliefs from Contextual Authority are still justified by one's personal reason, even though they are allowing for a particular type of delegation of that reasoning.

1a. On Children and Mentally Impeded Adults

One point to address is that most children wouldn't have many if any warranted ethical beliefs, according to what I have said thus far. Young children rarely if ever develop

complete justificatory chains of reasoning for an ethical belief, nor do they generally seem to treat the reasoning of others as a proxy for their own (see Gelman). This appears especially true for children and their parents. For example, when a parent tells their child that it is wrong to steal, and the child takes on that belief, they are most likely not reasoning that they would arrive at the same conclusion if only they had all the information their parent has. In other words, it seems that children are not often if ever assigning Contextual Authority to their parents. Rather, they seem to be assigning a different kind of authority, based on the hierarchical and protective relation between parent and child.

At first glance, this may seem to be a problem for my previous theorizing, due to the fact that it simply seems strange that children have no epistemic warrant to believe what their parents say they should do. I address this issue by allowing for another type of authority assignment, limited in its application to young children and certain adults. I will designate this type as ‘Benevolent Authority’. One assigns this type of authority to their caretaker, when they have reason to believe that the caretaker genuinely has the person’s best interests in mind. For most unabused children, I will assume that this type of trust exists towards their parents as a biologically innate disposition supported by nurturing interactions. As such, children who have not been abused or otherwise given reason to distrust their parents have reason to believe that their parents act with the interests of the child in mind. Due to this fact, the child has a further reason to treat as true and justified the ethical testimony of their parents and other trusted caregivers.

The same type of authority may be used by those adults who have their rational capacity impeded by cognitive impairments, whether those are sourced in disease or injury. For these adults, where their impediment is so severe that they require a caregiver, the same type of authority can be extended to that caregiver (see Etters, Goodall, & Harrison). The reasoning follows as with children: a person with a relatively lower capacity for reason who is dependent on another person to look after their wellbeing, has a warrant to believe what the caregiver says. This principle seems intuitive when considered by example. If a caretaker is walking with their ward, who has some cognitive impairment, and the caretaker says “You shouldn’t walk into the road without looking”, the dependent person has a sufficient reason to believe the ethical statement is true.

The standards for what constitute a sufficient reason to believe something are relative to the reasoning ability of the person in question. Children do not simply have adult minds in smaller bodies. Children develop their reasoning capacities over a span of many years (see Gelman). As a healthy adult has a substantially greater capacity to reason than a young child, it makes sense that there would be differences in what constitutes a sufficient reason for belief between these two. Why one shouldn’t continue to assign

benevolent Authority as one enters rational adulthood will be explained in the context of living freely, in Section 2a.

One may find that the type of paternalistic, benevolent authority I have been describing is unpleasantly reminiscent of the authority claimed by men over women in many patriarchal societies. The same goes for imperialistic and racially segregated societies, as well as other types of social oppression. I will address this exact point in Section 3.

2. Living Freely and Ethical Belief

Whether someone can count as living freely, when most or all of their ethical beliefs are adopted from other people, depends on what we mean by ‘living freely’, and how those beliefs are adopted. I will understand ‘living freely’ as living autonomously, according to one’s own thoughts and beliefs, based on reasons from one’s own unimpeded rationality. I limit this definition as only applying to cognitively healthy adult human beings; I will not address what ‘free living’ constitutes for children or cognitively impaired adults. What I have argued for on understanding, Contextual Authority and Socratic Influence will be used to demonstrate the requirements for living freely in the context of adopted ethical beliefs.

I’ve claimed that someone who is living freely must be living according to beliefs that are justified by their own reason. However, this does not entail that if someone lives according to any number of adopted beliefs, that person is necessarily unfree. In fact, I will argue that even if all of the ethical beliefs someone has are adopted from others, they may still be living freely. As I have said above, one may reasonably adopt beliefs where one delegates Contextual Authority to another based on an assumption of shared rationality. Likewise, one may be guided through a line of reasoning to arrive at a belief, which I have referred to as Socratic Influence. Each of these, Contextual Authority and Socratic Influence, are types of interpersonal influence that leads one to an epistemically warranted ethical belief. As such, I argue that one will be living freely only if their interpersonally adopted ethical beliefs are sourced from valid Contextual Authority or Socratic Influence.

The reason that one may preserve their freedom while utilizing these interpersonal means of reaching ethical beliefs is because their personal reason is still the basis for the adoption of said beliefs. Contextual Authority is entirely based on the assumption or demonstration of common rational capacities. With common rational capacities, one’s reason is taken to be functionally equivalent to another’s. The reason Contextual Authority is justified is because it’s based on the belief that one would personally reason to the same conclusions if they had all the same information. With this explanation, we can see why Contextual Authority maintains one’s own capacity for reason, even though it is an interpersonal delegation.

That Socratic Influence does not impede one's personal reason is clear: Socratic Influence depends on one using their own reason to follow the steps of an argument presented to them to understand its conclusion. Essentially, Socratic Influence leads to a personal understanding that I referred to at the outset: understanding a chain of justifications which together account for the final conclusion or belief. I would go so far as to say that Socratic Influence is not a subjugation of one's personal reason but is actually a stimulation of it.

According to these understandings of Socratic Influence and Contextual Authority, there are legitimate means for one to live freely even if one's ethical beliefs are mostly or all adopted from other people.

2a. Benevolent Authority and Living Freely

The freedom of a rational adult is dependent on that person living according to their own thoughts and beliefs, justified by their own reason. Although one may validly take on another's ethical beliefs, there are restrictions as to how one may do so while preserving their freedom. A rational adult's ethical beliefs cannot be derived by assigning Benevolent Authority to others, because this constitutes a subjugation of one's reason to another's. For children, we are prepared to say that the dependence on their parents is justified by the fact that adults have a greater capacity to reason for the interests of the child than children do for themselves. However, between two rational and sober adults, there is no such inequality of basic rational capacity. Of course, there may be disparities of information or expertise that will warrant degrees of deference on particular matters; but these are already accounted for by the applicability of Contextual Authority.

Benevolent Authority functions with the less rational child deferring to the judgments of the more rational parent. Between equally rational adults, there is no justification for this type of deference. As there is no justification for it, beliefs adopted by rational adults through Benevolent Authority are unwarranted. If someone is to live freely, they must be living according to their own reason. If one is living according to the unexamined reasoning of another, they are not living freely, by the established definitions. With the assumption that one ought to live freely, we conclude that a rational adult should not adopt beliefs by assigning Benevolent Authority to others.

As has been alluded to, there are circumstances where adults may have warrant to adopt beliefs according to Benevolent Authority. Where there is a disparity of sobriety, if the intoxicated adult has a temporarily impeded rationality, then Benevolent Authority may have a legitimate roll. Again, this would also apply to those with certain types of mental illness that affect their reasoning abilities. However, the realistic exceptions to this rule are limited to only mental illness and intoxication.

3. Systems of Patriarchal Oppression and Ethical Belief

With all that has been previously said, the resources are established to give a thorough account for the ethical failure of oppressive societies such as patriarchies. At the outset, I will note that while I am specifying only one flaw of patriarchal and oppressive societies, that does not entail that this is the only flaw. Of course, there are many ethical problems with patriarchy that are unrelated to freedom and epistemic warrant, but those will not be discussed here.

There are many ways to understand social oppression, but I will take a specific meaning, with oppression being the systematic restriction of free thought and action of a given social group by another group. According to the definitions I've developed, oppression prevents a certain social group from living freely.

In patriarchal societies, there usually exists an expectation that women should defer to men as authorities, and therefore heed what men tell them about what they should do (see Gisborne). In this way, they are expected to take up men's ethical beliefs for themselves. This demonstrates the oppressive nature of patriarchies, in that the independent ethical thought and subsequent action of women is usually restricted, manipulated and subjugated by men. Due to the fact that the free thought and action of women is partially or wholly obstructed in patriarchies, women are restricted from living freely in those societies.

There are often narratives developed that attempt to justify the domination of women by men. Many of them boil down to this message: women are mentally inferior to men, and therefore they should listen to men about what they should do (see Gisborne). This is similar to how children are treated by their parents, with our description of Benevolent Authority. In some patriarchies, men claim a type of Benevolent Authority over women: they claim that, because they know best, it is really in women's interests that they should listen and heed men's directives (see Gisborne). Sources of patriarchal oppression may be external restrictions to the actions of women, but also take the form of manipulation designed to control the thoughts and beliefs of women. This latter type of oppression is equally if not more obstructive to the freedom of women. One may be able to think and believe freely, while having their actions externally restricted. However, if one's very thoughts and beliefs have been manipulated and subjugated by an oppressor, then one's actions will not be sourced from one's own reason and will, rendering their oppression total.

The argument for the Benevolent Authority of men over women crumbles with a rudimentary biological fact: there is no substantial difference between the reasoning capabilities of healthy adult men and healthy adult women (see Lynn). This use of Benevolent Authority is altogether unjustified, because women are fully equal to men

in their capacity for reason. It is true that there is some degree of sexual dimorphism in human psychology due to differences in hormones and brain structure (see Lynn), but clearly not to an extent that justifies treating women as a subordinate group, as one would children. To categorize adult women as a dependent class of people alongside children and the severely mentally ill is absurd not only in light of sound science, but also in light of the intellectual achievements of both famous and everyday women throughout history. This fact is in agreement with the experiences of any non-woman who has come to know unoppressed and even highly oppressed women to any significant degree.

Now, there are some feminists that claim that in a patriarchal society, no woman should ever take on an ethical belief testified to her by a man (see Frye). I disagree respectfully with this overly strong conclusion. Healthy adult women, as fully capable rational beings, have the cognitive means to assign Contextual Authority to others, including men, to take on their beliefs with epistemic warrant. Healthy adult women have the capacity to follow a line of reason to reach its conclusion, as with Socratic Influence. Whether or not that line of reasoning is presented by a man or a woman should not affect the logical validity of the reasoning itself, which the woman is capable of accepting or rejecting according to her rational abilities. I do believe, however, that a healthy dose of skepticism towards men's testimony is justified in light of the long history of patriarchy and the continuing struggles of sexual inequality. That said, we are not rationally led to the conclusion that women are incapable of taking on the beliefs presented by men without being conned or tricked into acting against their own interests.

The argument I have presented on patriarchy can be immediately applied to other types of oppression, such as those involving racism, imperialism, or class-based discrimination, to demonstrate the unethical nature of these systems. A rational adult human being, in order to live freely, should only take on those ethical beliefs that are justified by their reason, be it directly or through a delegation based on common reasoning. As such, all systems of oppression, including patriarchy, as categorically limiting the freedom of a group of people, are unethical and indefensible.

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