



# EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT

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# MY RESEARCH

**Aim:** Articulate our responsibilities as inquiring agents



# MOTIVATING EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT

# BIDEN

Joe Biden was a longstanding supporter of the Hyde Amendment.

On June 6, 2019, he changed his mind, ostensibly after intense criticism.





# OBSERVATIONS

After the change, Biden was subject to intense criticism.

Some of the criticism appears *epistemic* in nature:

- Flawed reasoning for changing his mind ([Zhao](#))
- Insufficient reason for changing his mind *now* (Cox)
- Changed his mind in response to public pressure
- Stuck in 1987: not looking for new evidence around him (Branum)

# CASES LIKE BIDEN'S AROUND WITHIN POLITICS

- + Iraq War – poor *judgment*
- + “Should have known better” cases (Goldberg)
  - + Bernie Sanders & Soviet Union

⚠️ Admittedly, such cases contain noise.



# INTRODUCING MARJORIE

**Truther:** You and Marjorie have recently become good friends through a college class.

One day, Marjorie reveals that she used to be a 9/11 'Truther.'

She only abandoned that view six months ago.



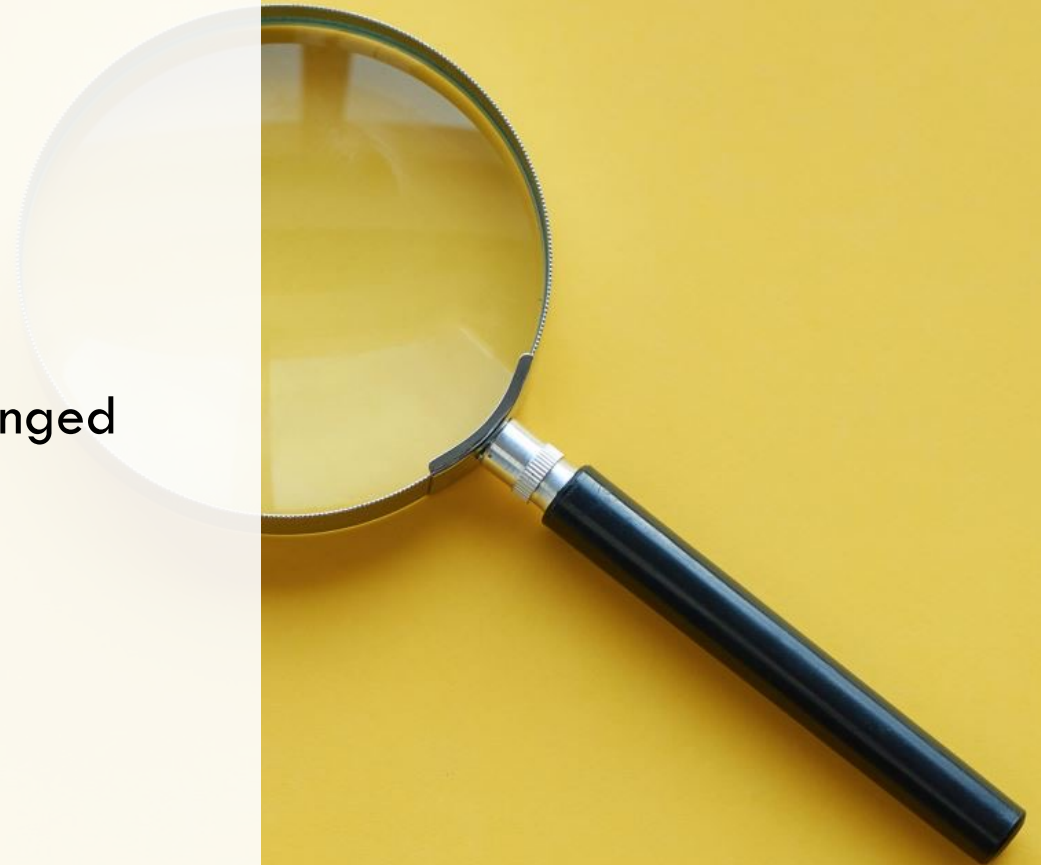
# OBSERVATIONS

## Reactions to Marjorie:

1. Do you file it away as a random fact?
2. Are you fully assuaged by the fact she changed her mind?



→ Trust-reduction







## PROBING THE ATONEMENT INTUITION

- Imagine someone criticizes Marjorie for her previous failure.
- She cannot easily dismiss this criticism.
- Compare the moral domain...



## MORAL ANALOGY

**Airport Promise:** Your friend, Amir, fails to pick you up from the airport on time, simply because he forgot.

He admits to having forgotten and arrives 45 min late.

→ Amir cannot rebuff criticism by noting that he eventually got there.



**Structural similarity**



**Trust Withdrawal**



**Failures to Atone**

**MORAL/EPISTEMIC  
PARALLEL**

# WHAT MORE DO WE WANT FROM MARJORIE? SOME POSSIBILITIES

Explanation for initial belief

Explanation of why she changed  
her mind

Expression of responsibility

Expression of a negative attitude



# WHY DO WE WANT THOSE THINGS?

They help us  
regain trust  
in *Marjorie*.

Cf. the moral  
domain



# SKEPTICISM & THEORETICAL MOTIVATIONS

# SKEPTICISM

- Disanalogies between moral & epistemic domains:
  1. Victims?
  2. Appropriateness of certain reactive attitudes?

# SKEPTICISM FROM EPISTEMIC BLAME LITERATURE

“Epistemic failings aren’t associated with resentment, the demand for compensation or punishment. Nor would it seem appropriate for the subject of the failing to feel guilty, apologise to others or recompense them” (Brown 2020, 14).

“Genuine apologies seem out of place in cases of epistemic blameworthiness... Epistemic guilt doesn’t seem like something that we experience” (Piovarchy forthcoming, 7).

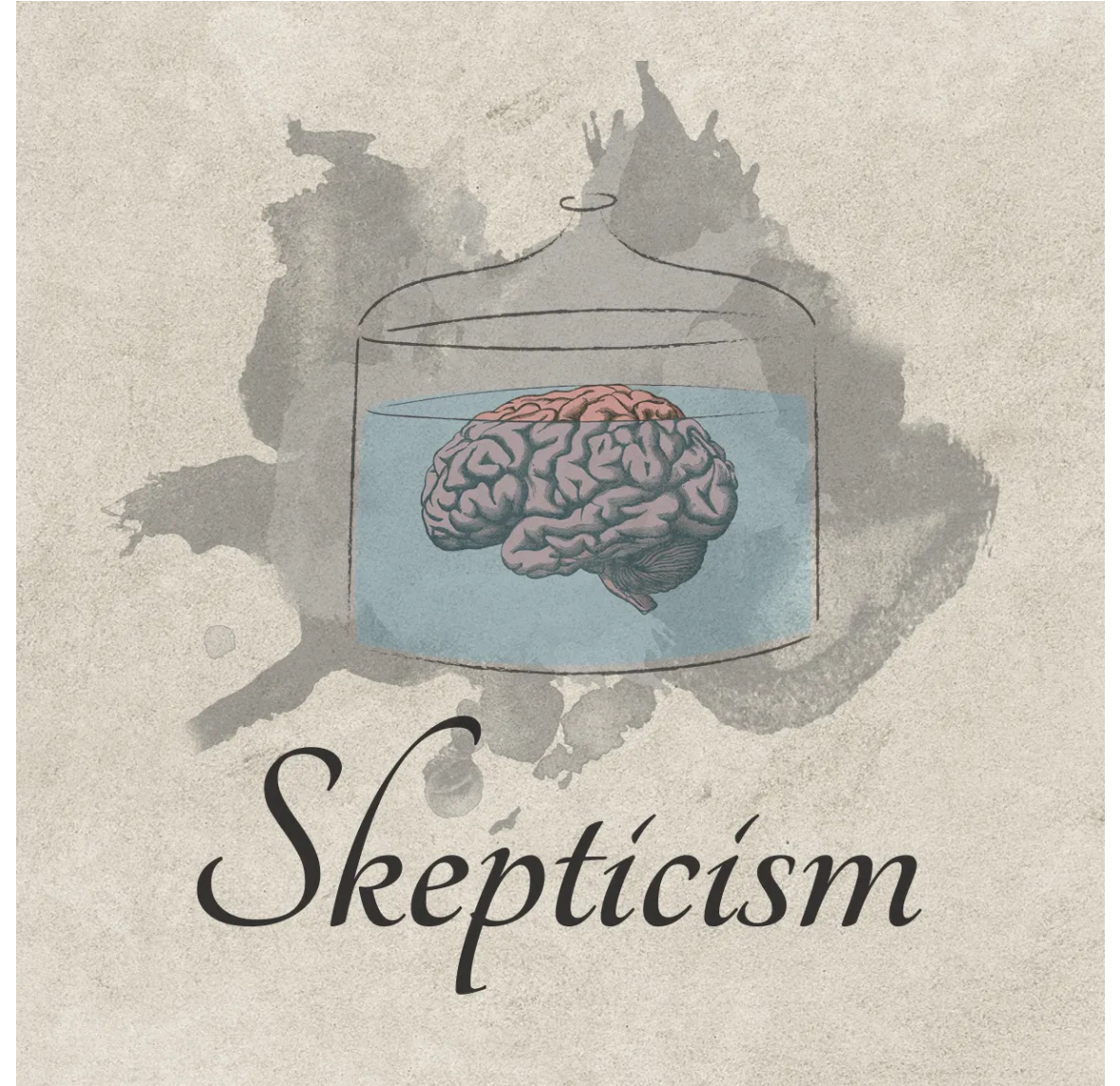




# ADDRESSING SKEPTICISM

Literature on epistemic blame demonstrates the need for such an account.

→ Theoretical arguments in favor of epistemic atonement



# 3 THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Full account of epistemic blame
2. Various roles of atonement
3. Appropriateness of emotions/attitudes

# 1: COMPLEMENTING ACCOUNTS OF EPISTEMIC BLAME



**Brown** on forward-looking desires & epistemic reasons

EA demonstrates that this desire was satisfied.



**Piovarchy** on justifying practices of epistemic blame & epistemic agency

EA demonstrates responsiveness to epistemic reasons.



**Boult** on epistemic blame as a relationship-modification

**Epistemic blame** → relationship downgrade

**Epistemic atonement** → relationship upgrade

## 2: REFLECTION ON ROLES OF ATONEMENT

Skeptics focus on *victim-centered roles* of atonement.

But atonement also plays other roles:

- **Offender:** community & commitment to norms
- **Public:** accountability & assurance

We need something to play these roles.

# 3: EPISTEMIC REACTIVE ATTITUDES



Brown and Piovarchy suggest that certain attitudes are misplaced for epistemic blame.



Some reactive attitudes & emotions are appropriate:

First-personally: Regret, Shame, Embarrassment, Guilt(?)

Second-personal: Non-retributive anger, frustration, disappointment



Blameworthy agents want to know how to respond to such reactions & render them less appropriate.



# HOW TO EPISTEMICALLY ATONE



# MY PROPOSAL

**The Trust-Restoration Account:** To epistemically atone, agents need to restore *epistemic trust* & *indicate epistemic trustworthiness*

- i.e. trustworthiness with respect to their doxastic states & belief-forming practices.

# 3 MOTIVATIONS

Epistemic blame often involves trust-reduction

- Atonement requires restoring what was lost.

Intuitively motivated

- Previewed diagnosis.

Parallel to the moral domain

- Central function of apologies is to restore trust.

# HOW TO RESTORE TRUST

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Accepting responsibility

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Offering explanations

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Expressing negative emotions

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Making a commitment to improve henceforth

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Epistemic community service

### Accepting responsibility

- “I acknowledge I ignored the evidence, and I’m sorry about that.”

### Offering explanations

- “I’m sorry I made that silly logic mistake; I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

### Expressing negative emotions

- “I feel so embarrassed of my past beliefs.”

### Commitments to Improve

- “I promise to avoid hasty judgments in the future.”

### Epistemic community service

- Trying to convert others (Ex: reformed anti-vaxxer, Jitarth Jadeja)

# HOW TO RESTORE TRUST

Strategy	Example	How It Restores Trust
Accepting Responsibility	"I acknowledge I ignored the evidence, and I'm sorry about that." "I made a mistake; that's my fault for not paying more attention."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signals awareness of norms.</li> <li>• Indicates that will attempt to avoid the relevant mistakes in the future.</li> <li>• Affirms status as epistemic agents.</li> </ul>
Offering Explanations	"I'm sorry I made that silly logic mistake; I didn't get much sleep last night." "I grew up in a household of conspiracy theorists."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signals relevant type of self-awareness (relevant for prevention or mitigation).</li> <li>• Allows hearer to assess agent's epistemic dispositions vs. environment.</li> </ul>
Expressing Negative Emotions	"I feel so embarrassed of my past beliefs." "I can't believe I ever believed that." Physiological action-tendencies (e.g. reddening of cheeks to indicate shame)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps signal that the apology is genuine.</li> <li>• Serves to deflect unfavorable judgments about the transgressor.</li> </ul>
Commitments to Improve	"I promise to avoid hasty judgments in the future." "I'll try to more carefully assess the evidence in the future."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer assurance to hearers.</li> <li>• Provides mechanism for public accountability.</li> <li>• Raises stakes of future transgression.</li> </ul>
Epistemic Community Service	reformed anti-vaxxer; Jidarth Jadeja; reluctant converts as advocates ( <a href="#">DiPaolo 2018</a> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Signals genuineness of change while playing valuable epistemic advocacy role.</li> </ul>

Table 1: Summary of Epistemic Atonement Strategies



IS EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT  
REALLY *EPISTEMIC*?



# NO SUCH THING AS *EPISTEMIC* ATONEMENT(?)

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Epistemic atonement reduces to moral atonement, or to role-based atonement.

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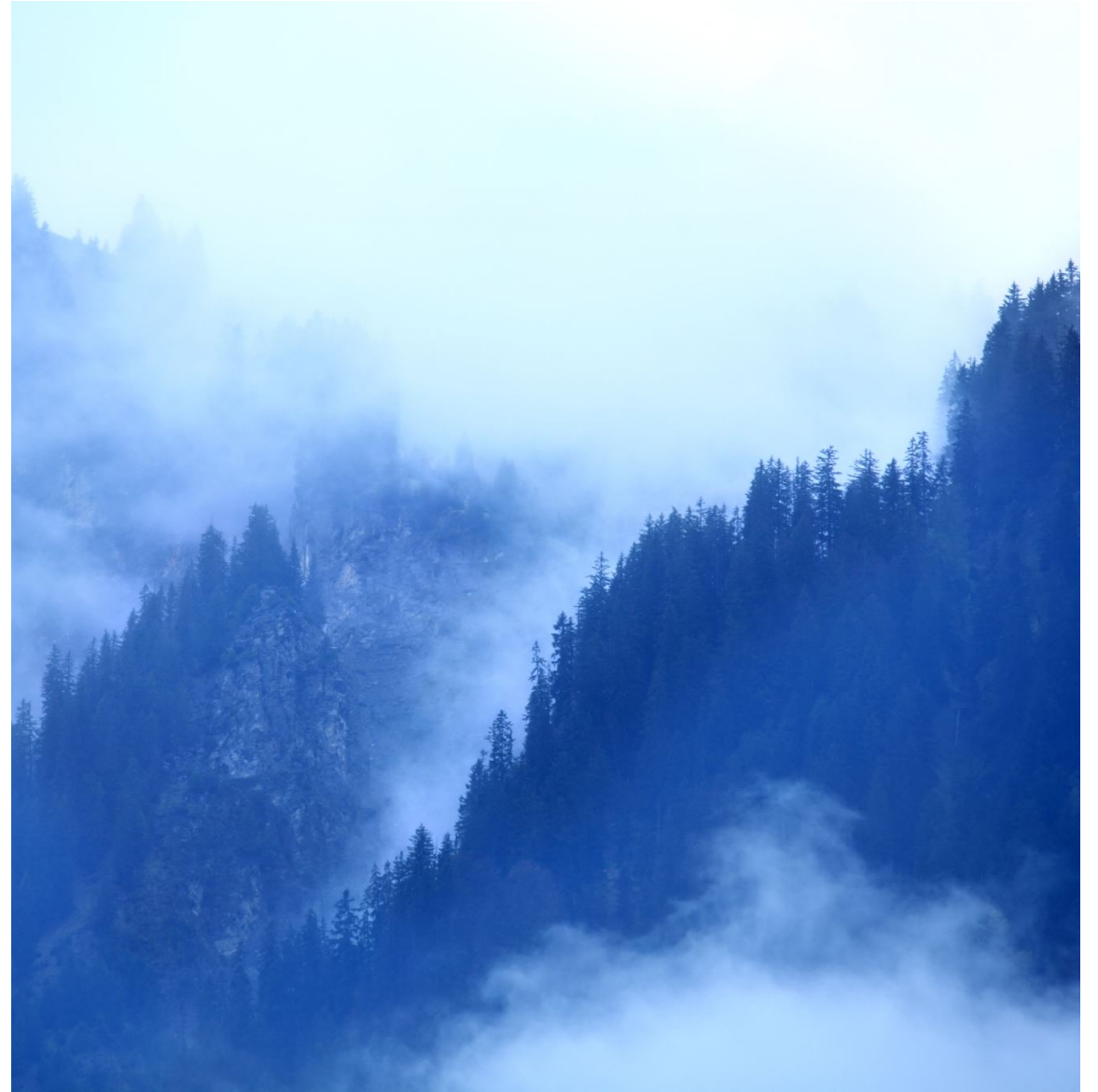
✍️ We only need to atone for our epistemic mistakes when they are tied to testimony or action.

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∴ There is nothing *genuinely epistemic* here.

# “THE BELIEF FALLS IN THE FOREST” PROBLEM

1. If epistemic atonement is purely epistemic, then there must be cases where one ought to atone for *purely private epistemic mistakes*.
2. But, we never ought to atone for private epistemic mistakes.
3. Therefore, epistemic atonement is not purely epistemic.



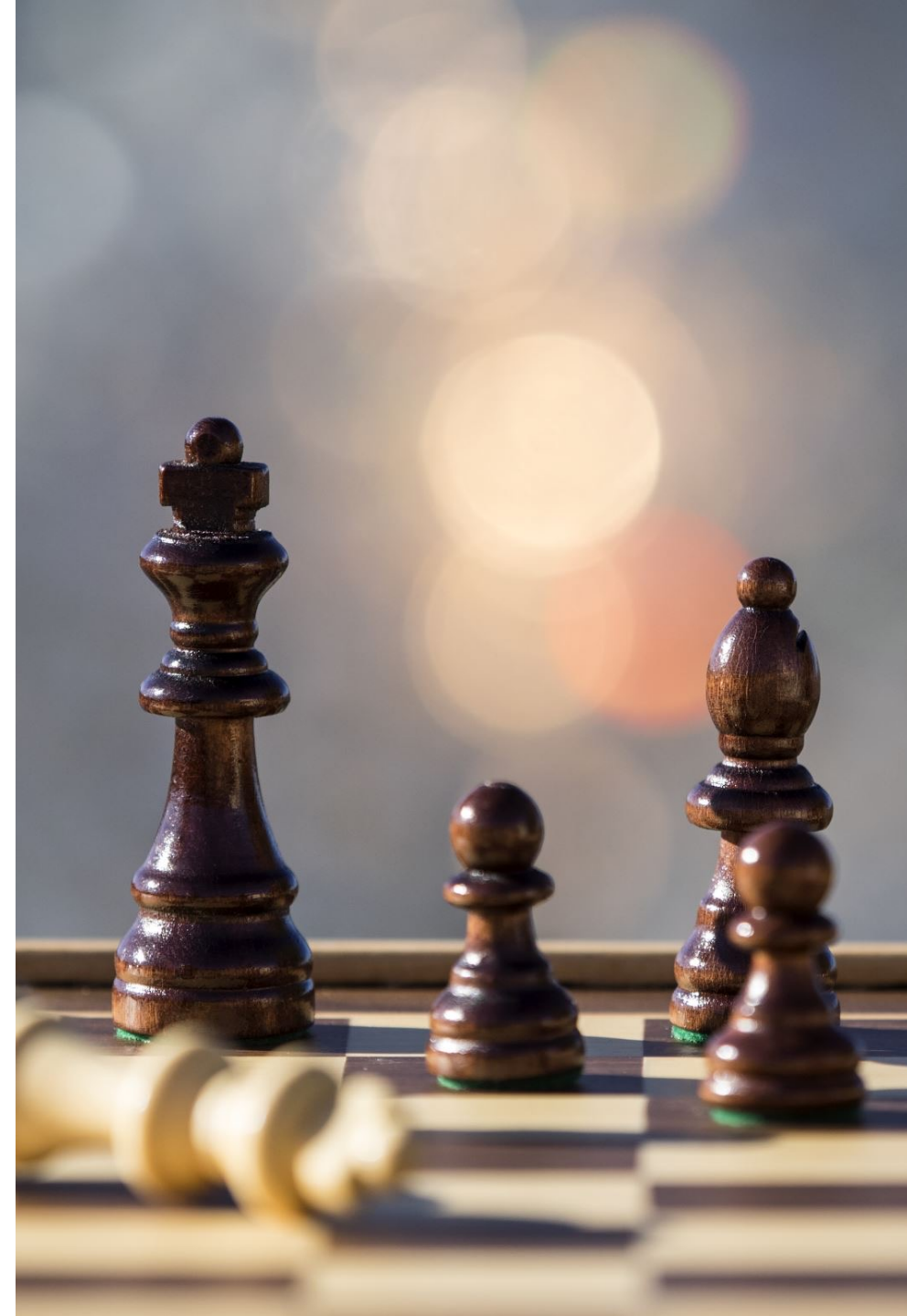
# RESPONSE: DENY P2

We sometimes *do* need to epistemically atone for purely private errors.

1. Need to restore *self*-trust.
2. How we *find out* about errors vs. what we must atone *for*.
3. Compare private errors in the moral domain.

# PURELY VS. DISTINCTIVELY EPISTEMIC

Even if epistemic atonement is not *purely epistemic*, there is something *distinctively epistemic* about it.





IS EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT  
REALLY *ATONEMENT*?

# DISANALOGY?

**Central role of epistemic atonement:** to offer others evidence of trustworthiness.

Purely evidential role?







## 2 WORRIES

1. Epistemic atonement would be unnecessary.
  2. Seemingly stark disanalogy to the moral domain.
- Is epistemic atonement is *really* atonement?

# RESPONSES

**Worry 1:** Atonement is easily supplanted by other evidence of trustworthiness.

1. Practical difficulties
2. Reasons to prefer atonement

Hence, both have *interpersonal* value.

- This addresses worry 2.

# A DIFFERENT DISANALOGY?

**Amended Objection:** The interpersonal element is more central for moral atonement.

**Concessive response:** This might be true.

- No Victims?
- Overlap remains

# QUESTIONING THE WEAKER DISANALOGY

1. Possibility of victims of epistemic mistakes
2. Interpersonal element most central in apologies
3. Both moral and epistemic atonement may be finally valuable.



# OBLIGATIONS AND DEMANDS TO ATONE



## WHEN OUGHT ONE ATONE?

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**Starting point:** Being epistemically blameworthy is *sufficient* for a *pro tanto* obligation to atone.





# IS BLAMEWORTHINESS NECESSARY?

Do we ever need to atone even when we're not *blameworthy*?

→ E.g. What about **excused** beliefs?

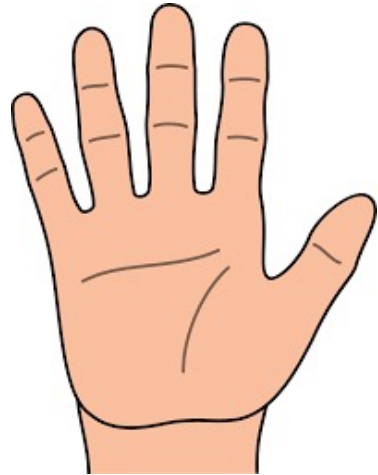


# EXCUSED BELIEFS: TWO ROUTES

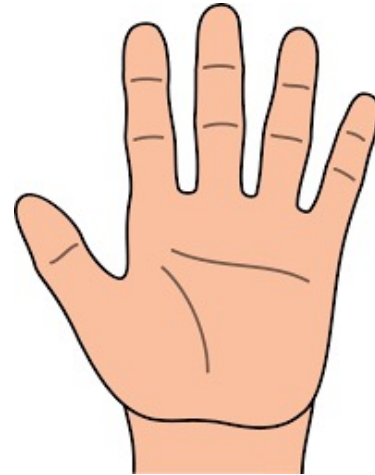
- Environment
  - Ex: Epistemic bubbles; Echo chambers
- Agent
  - Ex: Delusions



# DO EXCUSED AGENTS EVER NEED TO ATONE?



- Unless they atone, we may not trust or rely on them
- Obligations to atone for *excused* moral mistakes



- Unfair to demand atonement

# DO EXCUSED AGENTS EVER NEED TO ATONE?

- *Tentative conclusion:* Excused agents *can* (at least sometimes) be obligated to atone.
  - Cf. moral domain – *expressive* harms
- However, it can still be problematic to *demand* atonement.

# PROBLEMATIC DEMANDS

## ***Unreasonable or unfair:***

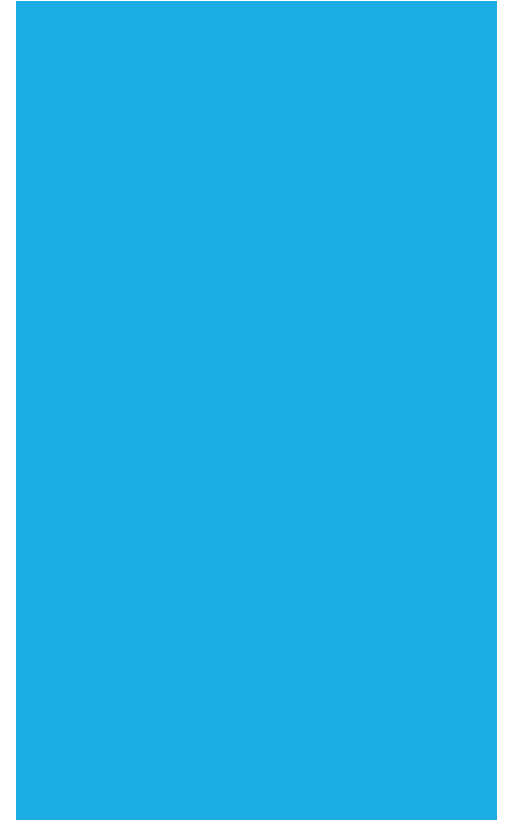
- unfair expectations; expectations of infallibility

## ***Unfitting:***

- e.g. if no epistemic mistake was made

## ***Standing considerations:***

- e.g. non-hypocrisy; business condition



# IMPRUDENT DEMANDS

- Risk of further disincentivizing changes of mind
- Exacerbates existing disincentives:
  1. Greater regret when change mind but first answer was correct (Kirkebøen et al. 2013)
  2. Dogmatism can be rewarded
  3. Can involve rethinking values
  4. Revising one's beliefs can result in alienation from community



# UPSHOTS

- Worth practicing **humility** (*cf. Bovens 2008*)
- Practical reasons to *celebrate* changes of mind





**FUTURE WORK**



**Obligations to Atone**



**Moral-Epistemic Parallels**



**Epistemic forgiveness**

**FUTURE WORK**

# SUMMING UP

1. Offered *practical* and *theoretical motivations* for epistemic atonement.
2. Proposed an account of how to epistemically atone.
3. Defended epistemic atonement against skepticism.
4. Discussed obligations and demands to atone.
5. Sketched avenues for future work.



THANKS!

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