

Epistemic Atonement

Elise Woodard
ewoodard@umich.edu

Goals: (a) Motivate epistemic atonement, (b) give an account of how to atone, and (c) respond to objections.

1 PRACTICAL MOTIVATIONS

Biden: Joe Biden was a longstanding supporter of the Hyde Amendment, which bars the use of federal funds to pay for abortion in most cases. This changed on June 6, 2019, when he reversed his position and denounced the Hyde Amendment, ostensibly after intense criticism from fellow Democrats and people on the Left.

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,’ committed to the view that 9/11 was an ‘inside job.’ She only abandoned that view six months ago. She now believes that al-Qaeda was responsible for the attacks.

2 THEORETICAL MOTIVATIONS

Apparent disanalogy: epistemic mistakes rarely have victims, and certain reactive attitudes seem inappropriate.

“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” (Piovarchy forthcoming, 7).

Even if we grant these disanalogies, epistemic atonement can be motivated in spite of them:

1. An account of epistemic atonement is necessary for a full account of epistemic blame and its dynamics.
2. Atonement is important even when there are no victims: it plays roles for both the offender and the public.
3. Certain emotions and attitudes *are* appropriate in light of epistemic failures.

3 HOW TO EPISTEMICALLY ATONE

The Trust-Restoration Account: To epistemically atone, agents must restore rational *epistemic trust* and indicate *epistemic trustworthiness*, i.e. trustworthiness with respect to their doxastic states & belief-forming practices.

Motivations:

1. Atonement requires restoring what was lost, i.e. trust.
2. Intuitively motivated by our diagnoses of the cases.
3. Parallel to the moral domain: a central role of apologies is to restore trust.

Strategy	Example
Accept Responsibility	“I acknowledge I ignored the evidence, and I’m sorry about that.”
Offer Explanations	“I’m sorry I made that silly logic mistake; I didn’t sleep well.”
Express Negative Emotions	“I can’t believe I ever believed that.”
Commit to Improve	“I promise to avoid hasty judgments in the future.”
Epistemic Community Service	reformed anti-vaxxer; Jidarth Jadeja; reluctant converts as advocates

Table 1: Epistemic Atonement Strategies

4 IS EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT REALLY *Epistemic*?

The Belief Falls in the Forest Problem:

- P1. If epistemic atonement is purely epistemic, then there must be cases where one ought to atone for *purely private* epistemic mistakes.
- P2. We never ought to atone for private epistemic mistakes.
- C. Therefore, epistemic atonement is not purely epistemic.

Response: Deny Premise 2

1. Agents may need to restore *self*-trust.
2. This objection risks conflating how we *find out* about errors with what we ought to atone *for*.
3. Compare private errors in the moral domain.

Moreover, we don't need epistemic atonement to be *purely* epistemic, as long as it's *distinctively* epistemic.

5 IS EPISTEMIC ATONEMENT REALLY *Atonement*?

On my view, a central role of epistemic atonement is to offer others evidence that one is epistemically trustworthy.

This gives rise to two worries.

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

Responses to Worry 1:

1. It's practically difficult to get this evidence without atonement.
2. There are reasons to prefer atonement over—or in addition to—more impersonal evidence.

Worry 2: If epistemic atonement only has impersonal evidential value, then this would motivate a stark asymmetry to the moral domain.

Response to Worry 2: We can now appreciate that atonement *also* has interpersonal value.

- For example, you would trust someone's commitment more than an oracle. If they violated the commitment, they would be doubly criticizable.

Worry 2a: The interpersonal element is more central for moral atonement.

Responses to Worry 2a:

1. We should make room for the possibility of victims of epistemic mistakes.
2. The interpersonal element is most central in apologies, but apologies are just one type of moral atonement.
3. Both moral and epistemic atonement may be finally valuable.

Nonetheless, even if we concede this point, it doesn't threaten the claim that epistemic atonement is really *atonement*.

6 OBLIGATIONS AND DEMANDS TO ATONE

Being epistemically blameworthy for one's mistake is *sufficient* for an obligation to atone for that mistake.

It's less clear whether it's necessary. But there's reason to think we can need to atone for our *excused* beliefs.

Problematic Demands: unfair; unfitting; violate standing conditions; imprudent

Upshot: Practical reasons to celebrate changes of mind.