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How (Not) To Wrong Others with Our Thoughts: A Liberal Challenge Against the Possibility of Doxastic Wronging[1]

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In recent years, a number of authors have claimed that we can wrong each other simply by having certain beliefs—in particular sexist, racist, ableist etc. beliefs—about each other. So far, those who argue for the possibility of so-called doxastic wronging have tried to defend this idea by focusing on issues of doxastic control and coordination. In this paper, I raise a distinctly moral challenge against the possibility of doxastic wronging. I show that the idea of doxastic wronging runs afoul of the liberal principle according to which all moral obligations have to be justifiable vis-à-vis those they presume to bind. In addition, I argue that there is a better way to account for the fundamental intuition driving the debate: instead of assuming the possibility of doxastic wronging and the morally grounded epistemic duty it implies, we should conceptualize what is morally problematic about bigoted beliefs in terms of the harm they constitute for their targets.

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1. Introduction

Consider the following example:

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> *Conference*: Twenty years ago, Anna studied philosophy. Now she wants to reconnect with the field and attends a prestigious philosophy conference. According to the conference program, professor Özdemir, someone Anna has never heard of before, will give the keynote address. When Anna gets to the lecture hall early, a young woman is setting up a laptop at the lectern. Anna concludes that this woman must be part of the conference staff, since someone who's just a girl would never be invited to give a lecture at such an important event. She is taken aback when she realizes that the woman is in fact professor Özdemir. Anna takes care not to let her astonishment show in any way.

Examples such as this one have recently sparked a debate about the possibility of *doxastic wronging*. According to Rima Basu and others, cases like "Conference" show that we can wrong each other simply in virtue of the beliefs we have about each other (Basu 2018; 2019a; 2019b; Basu & Schroeder 2019; Schroeder 2018; Keller 2018). In their opinion, Anna wrongs the speaker by believing that a young woman like her could not possibly be the keynote speaker at an important philosophy event even though Anna neither articulates her sexist and ageist assumption nor acts upon it in any way.

While the term "doxastic wronging" is a fairly new invention, the idea that holding certain beliefs is wrong as such can be found in many places. Basu herself cites the Book of Common Prayer as a source, which speaks of people sinning against God "in thought, word and deed" (Basu & Schroeder 2019: 181). Seiriol Morgan uses the concept to show why even a fully consensual sexual act is morally problematic when it results from sexualized contempt (Morgan 2003). Similarly, Benjamin Eidelson claims that discrimination is wrongful insofar as it involves disrespect, which in turn consists in failing "to recognize and afford the appropriate deliberative weight" to another person's equal moral value and autonomy (Eidelson 2015: 79). I bring up Morgan's and Eidelson's views specifically because they illustrate a claim central to arguments for the possibility of doxastic wronging. Proponents of this position maintain that it is necessary to assume the possibility of doxastic wronging to spell out "the wrongs of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice" (Basu & Schroeder 2019: 182). In their opinion, bigots wrong their targets not only by treating them badly but also by thinking of them as less valuable and less important than members of their preferred (usually their own) social group.

So far, philosophers who defend the possibility of doxastic wronging have elaborated on the issue mostly by engaging with two important objections. The first objection argues that doxastic wronging is impossible because it would imply doxastic voluntarism, that is, that we have voluntary control over our beliefs. The second objection points out that the possibility of doxastic wronging

presupposes the existence of morally grounded norms of belief; assuming such norms is risky because they might conflict with their widely accepted epistemically grounded counterparts such as "hold no contradictory beliefs" or "believe according to the evidence available to you". My first aim in this paper is to add to this discussion a further consideration which I call *the liberal challenge*. Unlike the two objections (upon which I will only touch briefly in the last section), this challenge does not arise from philosophy of mind or the theory of normativity but from moral concerns. In a nutshell, the liberal challenge questions the possibility of doxastic wronging because the morally grounded epistemic obligation doxastic wronging implies is incompatible with the presumption of liberty. But even though I will argue that the liberal challenge precludes the possibility of doxastic wronging, my objective in this paper is not purely negative. Those who embrace the possibility of doxastic wronging are onto something when they claim that entertaining (or failing to entertain) certain beliefs can be as such morally problematic. My second aim in this paper is to show how we can do justice to this intuition without falling prey to the liberal challenge.

I proceed in the following way. In Section 2, I present the idea of doxastic wronging and how its proponents argue for its possibility. Basu (on whose theory of doxastic wronging I will draw throughout this paper, as it is by far the most elaborate and convincing) does so by way of an inference to the best explanation. According to her, cases like "Conference" elicit a fundamental intuition that can only be accounted for if we assume the possibility of doxastic wronging. In this Section, I will also introduce the concept of doxastic harming as an alternative way to explain this intuition. In Section 3, I set out the liberal challenge and argue that it speaks against the possibility of doxastic wronging. Instead of relying on the idea of doxastic wronging to make sense of the fundamental intuition, we should explain it by pointing to doxastic harming, or so I will argue. In Section 4, I address a number of objections. The first two center on the liberal challenge; the third addresses the question whether my alternative concept of doxastic harming is too weak to capture everything we want to say. Here I argue that even though conceptualizing cases like "Conference" as instances of doxastic harming does indeed not allow us to draw all the conclusions we might have hoped for, it at least gives us a way to avoid the standard objections against doxastic wronging. Section 5 concludes.

2. The Fundamental Intuition, Doxastic Wronging and Doxastic Harming

In this section, I set the stage by introducing the intuition that drives the debate about doxastic wronging and showing how it (presumably) provides an argu-

ment for the possibility of this moral phenomenon. Then I elaborate on how Basu understands doxastic wronging and present doxastic harming as an alternative moral phenomenon that also allows us to make sense of the underlying intuition.

Let's start with the intuition in question. As I already mentioned in the introduction, the debate about doxastic wronging is full of examples like "Conference". This is so because they provide a crucial building block for the argument for the possibility of doxastic wronging. Generally speaking, this argument takes the form of an inference to the best (or rather: only) explanation: cases like "Conference" leave us with an intuition that can only be explained by assuming that a doxastic wrong has occurred. More specifically, Basu contends that cases like "Conference" elicit the widespread (Basu 2019a: 2514) and nagging (Basu 2019b: 921) intuition that *they depict something morally problematic*. Let's call this the *fundamental intuition*. At first glance, there are a number of strategies we could use to make sense of it.[2] First, we could try to explain it by pointing to some morally problematic consequence of Anna's sexist belief (a). For instance, the fact that Anna doubts women's philosophical capabilities might lead her to ask insulting questions during Q&A or to badmouth the keynote speaker at the reception, and these kinds of actions are clearly morally problematic. Alternatively, we could try to accommodate the fundamental intuition by identifying some morally problematic mistake in Anna's reasoning process (b). Anna could be guilty of active ignorance (similar, for instance, to white ignorance as described by Charles Mills [2007]), that is, she could culpably be ignoring evidence that suggests that women can be inspiring philosophers. Finally, we might suspect that Anna's belief is an expression of a morally problematic emotion, such as hatred or contempt of women (c). Proponents of doxastic wronging claim that, on closer inspection, none of these explanations holds true for cases like "Conference". Not only does Anna not act upon her conclusion that the woman behind the lectern cannot be the keynote speaker, she also takes care not to let on that she thought so the first place. Since Anna neither acts upon her belief nor communicates it, it cannot have any negative consequences for the speaker, which precludes strategy (a).[3] Strategy (b) is also not viable since, given the evidence available to her,

2. I do not mean to imply that philosophical theories *always* need to make sense of *all* of our intuitions. Others have argued persuasively that our philosophical theorizing is allowed to run counter to some of our moral or conceptual intuitions if we can thereby achieve a coherent, more fruitful (Rawls 1999: 42–43) or politically more attractive theory (Haslanger 2012: 385–87), and I agree with these interventions. Nevertheless, when there is nothing to be gained by jettisoning our intuitions, we might as well try to do them justice in order to make our theories more plausible. I assume that proponents of doxastic wronging would agree that this is the case when it comes to philosophical approaches to doxastic wronging.

3. A critic might interject here that this reply presupposes a specific understanding of what beliefs are, namely mental representations of propositions rather than dispositions to act (for

Anna is justified in concluding that the woman behind the lectern cannot be the keynote speaker. Anna's assumption is borne out by the fact that the woman sets up the laptop (at least if we also assume that at a prestigious conference the keynote speakers would not have to do this themselves) as well as by the fact that, unfortunately, philosophy is still a male-dominated field where keynotes are often given by (older white) men.[4] Finally, as Anna does not display any strong emotion, nothing in "Conference" suggests that her belief is the result of any sort of animus towards women. Thus, strategy (c) also fails. Since whatever is morally problematic about the situation cannot be located "downstream", in the consequences of Anna's belief (Basu 2019a: §2), nor "upstream", in how she comes to form it (Basu 2019a: §3), our only option, Basu surmises, is to assume that the problem lies in her holding such a belief. Cases like "Conference" thus show us that "[w]e must simply recognize that one of the ways in which people wrong people is by having beliefs about people, not simply what they do or say" (Basu 2019a: 2505) or, put differently, "that beliefs can wrong" (Basu 2019b: 915).

Having established how Basu argues for the possibility of doxastic wronging, let's now look a bit more closely at how she envisions this moral phenomenon. How is it that, according to Basu, we can wrong others by entertaining certain beliefs, especially when they are stashed away in our heads, so to speak, and undetectable to anybody else? For Basu, the answer to this question lies in the insight that "there are not only epistemic norms governing belief, but moral ones as well" (Basu 2019a: 2497) and that "there is something that we epistemically owe to each other" (Basu 2019b: 916). More specifically, Basu contends that "we must relate to each other as people, not as objects" (Basu 2019b: 928) and that this general obligation to adopt a moral standpoint vis-à-vis each other entails inter alia the obligation to try to see each other "as we see ourselves, not as we are expected to be on the basis of our race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc." (Basu 2019b: 928). Following Basu, we are bound by the following

classic representationalist approaches Fodor 1975; Millikan 1984; for a dispositional account Schwitzgebel 2002 and 2013). For the moment, proponents of doxastic morality have not said much about their conception of belief. But given that they are interested in cases whose protagonists entertain offensive beliefs but do not act upon them in any way, the critic's interjection seems correct. In what follows, I will not elaborate on whether this understanding of belief is plausible, but simply accept it for the sake of the argument.

4. A critic might insist that Anna is not justified in her conclusion in "Conference" and should have, for instance, suspended judgment on the keynote issue until she gathered further evidence. I suspect that this case could be made successfully. Nonetheless, I do not want to make it here because in doing so, we would run the risk of missing the main issue: the main point of the debate about doxastic wronging is figuring out whether we can wrong each other *merely* by having certain thoughts about each other. To that end, it is helpful to focus on cases in which the agents are epistemically blameless. Otherwise, we might get sidetracked in our evaluation by the fact that the agents reasoned poorly. Put differently, I urge the critic to accept the way Basu and others set up the issue and not to side-step it.

obligation which is grounded in moral reasons but which we discharge by (not) having certain epistemic states:

> *Obligation grounding doxastic wronging*: A has the moral obligation towards B not to think about B using stereotypes.

As with all obligations, when we violate this morally grounded epistemic obligation we wrong the person it is owed to, giving them the standing to blame us as well as to be compensated by us. But while we infringe upon other moral obligations by performing (or failing to perform) certain *actions*, we violate this particular moral obligation simply by having (or failing to have) certain *beliefs*. And this is precisely what, according to Basu, is going on in "Conference" when Anna comes to believe that, qua young woman, the person at the lectern cannot be the keynote speaker. To sum it all up: Basu accounts for the fundamental intuition by positing the morally grounded epistemic obligation to not think about other people using stereotypes. Our impression that cases like "Conference" depict something morally problematic thus stems from the fact that by entertaining their sexist, racist, ableist etc. beliefs, the protagonists violate this obligation.

Basu does not consider alternative ways to account for the fundamental intuition. Since I am skeptical about the possibility of a morally grounded epistemic obligation (for reasons I will set out presently), I have to. One alternative explanation[5] can be found in a paper by Simon Keller where he claims that "what you believe can make an intrinsic difference to my well-being" (Keller 2018: 22) or, to put it more bluntly, that we can make each other better or worse off in virtue of how we think about each other. To see the connection between well-being and people's doxastic states, we have to assume, firstly, a desire theory of well-being according to which we further another person's well-being by fulfilling their desires and harm them by frustrating them. Secondly, we have to posit (as Basu does, too) that "we care what people think of us" (Basu 2018: 1; also Basu & Schroeder 2019: 182) and, more specifically, that we do not want other people to think about us using stereotypes.[6] From these assumptions it follows

5. I do not mean to imply that the alternative explanation I adopt from Keller is the only one possible—there might well be other ways to make sense of the fundamental intuition. My aim in this paper is not to find out which explanation works best, but to show that we can account for the fundamental intuition even if we reject the possibility of doxastic wronging.

6. A critic could point out that this second assumption is controversial, especially in contexts of systematic social oppression. In such contexts, there is a substantial risk that the targets internalize the negative stereotypes their oppressors hold about them, perhaps even to such degree that they start despising themselves and do not wish to be thought of in a positive (or at least less negative) way. Adapting their desires in such a way might be their only way to reduce the psychological burden of seeing them frustrated constantly, even if this means colluding, to some degree, in their own oppression (I thank an anonymous referee for pointing this out). In reply to this, I

that we can indeed harm other people simply in virtue of the beliefs we entertain about them, namely if we think about them using stereotypes and thus frustrate their desire not to be thought of in such a way. On this alternative picture, what occurs in "Conference" is not a case of doxastic wronging in which Anna violates an obligation she has towards the speaker, but an instance of *doxastic harming* as Anna frustrates the speaker's desire not to be thought of in a bigoted way. Since harming another person is at least pro tanto morally problematic, the fundamental intuition can thus also be explained by pointing to the fact that by entertaining their sexist, racist, ableist etc. beliefs, the protagonists in cases like "Conference" harm their targets.

I want to conclude this section by briefly discussing the relation between doxastic wronging and doxastic harming. A critic could sustain that these two moral phenomena blur together and become indistinguishable. Given that we are under a general obligation to avoid causing each other harm, every instance of doxastic harming ipso facto amounts to an instance of doxastic wronging, or so the critic could claim. In reply to this, I contend that the critic overestimates the scope of our general obligation to avoid causing harm as there are some instances of harm we are under no obligation to steer clear of. In the next section, I will specifically address the case that is of interest here, that is, I will show that we are under no obligation to avoid harming other people by thinking about them using stereotypes. But for now, just think of the case of someone breaking up with their romantic partner. Often, this will result in significant heartbreak, nevertheless nobody is (ceteris paribus) morally forbidden to end a romantic relationship just because doing so would be harmful to their (soon to be ex-) partner. Cases like this suffice to show that, contrary to the critic's assertion, our obligation to avoid causing harm is not all-encompassing or, put differently, "not all harms are wrongs" (Begby 2018: 159; also Mikkola 2016: 11).

As distinct moral phenomena, wrongs and harms entail different conclusions. As violations of obligations, wrongs are directed, that is, they are done to somebody who thereby acquires the standing to blame their wrongdoer and to demand some form of compensation or, at minimum, an apology. Also, if A's action x constitutes a wrong towards B it follows at least prima facie that A

admit that this understanding of social oppression is apt and that the second assumption I make is therefore somewhat tenuous. Nevertheless, I want to stress that rejecting this assumption (and thereby the whole alternative picture of doxastic harming I am about to propose) is not feasible for those arguing for the possibility of doxastic wronging. Firstly, they repeatedly state themselves that we care about what other people think of us and that we are prone to experiencing strong negative emotions when we find out that people have thought about us in unfriendly ways (Basu 2018: 1; also Basu & Schroeder 2019: 182). But more importantly, as it will transpire in Section 3, only by making this assumption and positing that we do not want other people to think of us using stereotypes can we account for the fundamental intuition—which is, after all, what those arguing for the possibility of doxastic wronging set out to do in the first place.

should not perform x. Neither of these implications holds true for harms. Since we are under no general obligation to avoid causing harm, we cannot deduce that A should not perform x simply from the fact that x is harmful to B, nor that B has any particular standing to demand an apology or any other type of compensation from A. All that follows is that, since x is harmful to B, x contributes to a morally worse state of the world so that, at least in light of this, it would be better if A did not perform x.

Given the difference in what these two moral phenomena entail, it becomes clear what is so attractive about conceptualizing cases like "Conference" as instances of doxastic wronging in the way Basu proposes. We live in a world where bigotry of the worst kind is still rampant and where people's lives are destroyed (often in the most literal sense) by sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and the like. We therefore need all the resources available to fight these kinds of discrimination (both practically and intellectually). Conceptualizing cases like "Conference" as instances of doxastic wronging helps us to do so as it allows us to assert that people like Anna should not think about their targets in such bigoted ways. By comparison, the conclusion that follows from considering such cases instances of doxastic harming—namely that morally speaking it would be better if people like Anna did not entertain their bigoted beliefs—seems rather weak and unsatisfactory. Personally, I very much share this assessment. Nevertheless, I will now argue that it is impossible to conceive of cases like "Conference" as instances of doxastic wronging because we are under no moral obligation not to think about others using stereotypes.

3. The Liberal Challenge against the Possibility of Doxastic Wronging

After elaborating on doxastic wronging and doxastic harming as two different approaches to making sense of the fundamental intuition as well as on the difference between them, I will now discuss a challenge facing those who assume the possibility of doxastic wronging. As I mentioned in the introduction, this challenge arises from moral concerns, more specifically, from what I call the liberal principle. First, I will introduce the liberal principle and offer a brief defense of it. Then I will spell out the challenge the liberal principle poses for the possibility of doxastic wronging. Finally, I will argue that there is no way proponents of doxastic wronging can address this challenge.

Let's start with the liberal principle. In its most general form, this principle runs as follows:

> *Liberal Principle:* A is under a moral obligation to φ towards B if and only if being thus obliged is justifiable to A.

The liberal principle expresses one aspect of what has been called *the presumption in favor of liberty*, that is, the presumption that we should be as free as possible to lead our own lives (Benn 1988: 87; Gaus 2003: 208). For that, we need to be as unencumbered as possible not only by factual interventions (that is, by other people interfering with our actions and projects) but also by normative constraints (that is, by prescriptions about what to do and what projects to engage in). The liberal principle implements (part of) this presumption by stating that we are only obliged to follow the prescriptions we can reflexively endorse. As it establishes that we are only bound by prescriptions we could have adopted ourselves, the liberal principle ensures that morality's demands are compatible with our personal autonomy as well as with our desire to be guided by the reasons available to us, such that we do not have to blindly follow someone else's rules. At first glance it might seem that the liberal principle severely limits the number and scope of morality's demands on us. Yet although it expresses a spirit of normative parsimony, it is in fact compatible with the existence of all kinds of moral obligations, even onerous ones (such as, say, the obligation to help people in need or to provide for future generations), as long as these obligations turn out to be justifiable to their addressees.[7]

With its emphasis on justifiability, the liberal principle can appear almost trivial. However, I assume that not everybody will endorse it. In particular, people with perfectionist leanings—who care more about our doing the right thing than about our understanding that it is the right thing to do—might be skeptical about it. A full-fledged defense of the liberal principle is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to point out that the liberal principle comes up, under various guises, in other philosophical debates. For instance, Samuel Scheffler implicitly endorses it in the debate about special duties and obligations, when he accepts the so-called voluntaristic objection according to which "[i]t would be unfair . . . if people could be saddled with such burdens (that is, with additional moral obligations) against their wills" (Scheffler 1997: 192). Moreover, the liberal principle is implicit in all Kant-inspired moral theorizing. If a principle has to be justifiable to everybody to be morally binding (as Kant's categorical impera-

7. Which obligations live up to this standard depends to a large extent on how we spell out the notion of justifiability the liberal principle employs. I will assume a wide understanding here, according to which an obligation to φ is justifiable to some person A if and only if being thus obliged follows from the reasons A would recognize as binding if she was fully informed and reflected carefully and open-mindedly (as opposed to: from the reasons she consciously embraces at the moment). For a similarly permissible reading, see Gaus (2010: ch. 5).

tive demands), then a fortiori it must be justifiable to the person it aspires to apply to. I contend that these considerations make a strong enough case for us to accept the liberal principle, especially if we also take into consideration that the liberal principle ensures that in obeying morality's demands we are nevertheless guided by the reasons available to us and thus act autonomously.

If we accept the liberal principle, proponents of doxastic wronging are faced with the following *liberal challenge*: As I spelled out in Section 2, their approach relies on A's morally grounded epistemic obligation not to think about B using stereotypes. Following the liberal principle, this obligation needs to be justifiable to everybody it addresses. Otherwise it fails to be binding, in which case we would be allowed to entertain bigoted thoughts about other people. The liberal principle thus puts the burden of proof on those who embrace doxastic wronging: either they come up with a convincing justification for the morally grounded epistemic obligation at the heart of their approach or they have to accept that, with regard to stereotypes, we have freedom of thought. As far as I can see, there are three types of considerations proponents of doxastic wronging could advance to answer this challenge.[8] Either they could argue that limiting A's doxastic discretion is justified because thinking about other people using stereotypes is extrinsically bad, that is, because it can lead to disastrous consequences (i). Or they could claim that entertaining such thoughts is intrinsically bad because it amounts to harming its targets (ii) or because it is morally despicable in another way yet to be specified (iii). As I will show now, none of these considerations is convincing.

Let's start with (i). Following this line of thought, A should not have discretion to think about B using stereotypes because this could have all kinds of bad effects. It is easy to imagine what these effects might be since people who entertain sexist, racist or otherwise bigoted thoughts will often also articulate or act upon them. Just as bigotry is not "in the heart" (as Tommie Shelby [2002] puts it), it will with all likelihood not remain confined "to the head". Put differently, A should not be granted discretion to entertain such beliefs because it increases the risk that A will eventually act in a discriminatory way against members of the target group.[9]

8. I do not present any independent argument here for my assumption that (i)–(iii) constitute an exhaustive list of the strategies proponents of doxastic wronging can employ to justify the obligation at the heart of their account. There might be yet another way in which having bigoted thoughts is intrinsically bad to such a degree as to warrant prohibiting doing so. But even though I cannot exclude this possibility, I find it hard to substantiate. Also, if we accept the presumption in favor of liberty, coming up with such an additional strategy is on the proponents of doxastic wronging rather than on me.

9. Note that (i), even though it relies on considerations about negative effects, is still compatible with Basu's claim that what is ultimately morally problematic about bigoted beliefs is not located downstream from them. For if their negative effects ground a moral obligation not to have bigoted beliefs in the first place, those who entertain them wrong their targets in virtue of violating this obligation.

In reply to this, I contend that *the negative effects of A's bigoted beliefs do not warrant restricting A's freedom of thought as causing these effects is already prohibited by other obligations*. Given the harms associated with discrimination, restricting A's liberty to exclude discriminatory actions is certainly justifiable in the relevant sense and will therefore be prohibited under the liberal principle. Put differently, irrespective of the possibility of doxastic wronging, we are already morally obliged not to engage in the sort of discriminatory action that might result from holding bigoted beliefs. So if the reason for limiting A's freedom of thought is to decrease the risk of bigoted actions, then placing A under this new obligation is superfluous since A already owes it to B to refrain from such actions. Admittedly, A's obligation not to think about B using stereotypes would not conflict with her obligation not to discriminate against B, and positing this new obligation would thus not result in any inconsistencies. But increasing the number of A's moral obligations when there is nothing to be gained by it runs counter to the spirit of the liberal principle, which advocates for normative parsimony. If we accept the liberal principle, then, we have to reject this first line of argument.

Let's move on to (ii). This second strategy starts from the insight spelled out in Section 2 that being the object of bigoted thoughts is harmful to those who are targeted in such a way. As I argued in Section 2, we are under no general obligation to avoid causing harm to others as this would preclude many actions we should be allowed to perform (for instance, to return to the example I used above, to break up with our romantic partners if we do not want to be with them anymore). This notwithstanding, we might be under the *specific* obligation to avoid causing harm to each other by thinking about each other using stereotypes. Put differently, the obligation Basu stipulates might be grounded in the fact that being the object of bigoted beliefs diminishes the well-being of the targets and thus harms them.

As we saw in Section 2, bigoted thoughts are indeed harmful to their targets insofar as they frustrate their desires not to be thought of in such a way. However, we should still reject (ii) as it stands because *the harm the liberal principle prohibits must be of a different, more robust kind than the harm bigoted thoughts amount to*. To see this, we must first realize how prevalent the kind of harm constituted by bigoted thoughts really is. Because, unfortunately, *we frustrate each other's desires all the time*. To illustrate the point, let's return to "Conference". Imagine that Anna very much wanted to be invited to give the keynote address at the prestigious philosophy conference. When the conference organizers failed to do so, they frustrated her life's ambition and thereby harmed her in the sense at issue here. Still, it would be a stretch to suggest that the conference organizers violated an obligation they had toward Anna to spare her feelings or that Anna had a claim on them to be considered for the keynote. A critic might object at

this point that Anna's desire to be chosen as keynote speaker was unreasonable to begin with, but we can easily imagine similar cases in which the desires in question are less ill-founded. Think, for instance, of a young adult choosing a risky career of which their parents do not approve or (again) of a lover who breaks off a relationship. In these cases, the protagonists' decisions cause some harm to the people around them by frustrating their (at least to some extent) understandable and legitimate desires, and still it would be odd to claim that in doing so they violated an obligation they had. In more general terms, if the liberal principle allowed for an obligation not to frustrate other people's desires, it would considerably narrow down the number of permissible actions, given that we have all kinds of desires concerning what other people do and how they lead their lives. To stay true to the presumption of liberty and its aim to enable us to live autonomously, the liberal principle therefore must be limited to prohibiting harm of a more robust kind such as physical harm or the frustration of particularly important desires. It is thus not enough for proponents of (ii) to show that bigoted thoughts harm their targets insofar as they frustrate their desire to not to be thought of in terms of stereotypes. Beyond this, they also must explain why the desire to be seen in this way is particularly important. One straight-forward approach to doing so would be to point to the negative consequences that being the object of bigoted beliefs can have—but this way of arguing is blocked since it leads straight back to (i). A more promising route to take is (iii), that is, the argument that, regardless of their consequences, bigoted beliefs are morally despicable in another way yet to be specified. So, it seems that (ii) cannot be advanced independently of (iii). Therefore, let's turn to this last consideration.

The third consideration states that thinking about other people using stereotypes is morally despicable as such, which is why people should not have discretion to entertain such beliefs in the first place. I assume that it is this line of argument that Basu herself has in mind with her "case-driven" approach (Basu 2019b: 917), since she derives the conclusion that beliefs can wrong straight from the examples she discusses. To Basu, cases like "Conference" apparently wear the fact that they constitute a moral wrong on their sleeves. But since the reprehensible feature of these cases is precisely what is at issue, Basu and other proponents of doxastic wronging must specify what about the beliefs in question makes them morally problematic to such a degree as to warrant a moral prohibition. The best way to substantiate this claim is to sustain that entertaining bigoted beliefs amounts to displaying some character flaw or vice. Which character flaws might this be? The vices that come to mind most readily are *epistemic* vices, since what is going on in cases of doxastic wronging is, first and foremost, that the protagonists have false beliefs about their targets. It seems plausible to assume that a person who only thinks about others using stereotypes thereby

displays epistemic laziness or closed-mindedness (Medina 2012: ch. 1.1).[10] For instance, it might be argued (contra Basu) that in "Conference", a more conscientious cognizer would have inquired about the keynote speaker or just suspended judgment rather than jumped to conclusions like Anna did. I am sympathetic to this line of reasoning, but proponents of doxastic wronging cannot use it to bolster their argument, at least not if they want to make good on Basu's claim that there can be instances of doxastic wronging which are epistemically faultless, that is, in which the perpetrators are justified in their hurtful beliefs (Basu 2019a: 2498). Therefore, proponents of doxastic wronging must instead turn to character flaws that do not concern the agent's epistemic behavior but their demeanor in general. Several potential candidates suggest themselves here. Regularly failing to perceive other people as they really are could, for example, be construed as part of arrogance, since arrogant people often consider it beneath themselves to take the trouble to really get to know those they interact with (Tiberius & Walker 1998). Alternatively, it could be seen as an aspect of willful negligence, of a general unwillingness to properly engage with the world. But even if they find a vice under which entertaining bigoted thoughts can be subsumed, I doubt that this strategy will ultimately help those arguing for doxastic wronging. For even though a person's virtues and vices are important for our overall moral assessment of them, *we generally do not have a moral claim on other people to be virtuous.* It is regrettable when people turn out to have a bad character, and it certainly makes for a morally less valuable state of affairs—yet we do not owe it to each other to be virtuous. But if we do not have a claim on each other to be virtuous, it is impossible to ground a duty not to entertain bigoted thoughts in the fact that doing so amounts to displaying a vice. Thus, (iii) fails as well.

Where does all this leave us? At the beginning of this section, I presented the liberal challenge according to which the obligation at the heart of doxastic wronging is only binding if it is universally justifiable. Proponents of doxastic wronging thus face the challenge of justifying the obligation not to think of other people using stereotypes. Then I sketched three different considerations they might use. They could either point to the negative effects bigoted thoughts have, or stress that such thoughts are harmful to their targets, or, finally, posit that these thoughts are as such morally despicable in some other way. None of these considerations suffices. First, there are already obligations in place to prohibit the negative effects bigoted thoughts can bring about so that there is no need to add another obligation to avoid these effects. Second, even though bigoted thoughts

10. I do not want to imply that relying on stereotypes is by necessity epistemically detrimental. Much has been written about how using stereotypes can sometimes help us, for instance, to come to quick assessments (Antony 2016). Nevertheless, using stereotypes often comes at an epistemic cost, such as ignoring other available evidence or failing to gather sufficient evidence in the first place.

are indeed harmful to their targets, the harm they constitute is not robust enough to warrant a moral prohibition. Otherwise all kinds of actions we consider morally permissible would be prohibited as well. And finally, even though entertaining bigoted thoughts can be construed as a sign of a flawed character, people are under no obligation to have flawless characters. Thus, adherents of doxastic wronging cannot meet the challenge raised by the liberal principle. Barring further argument, we have to conclude that we are allowed to draw on stereotypes when thinking about other people or, put differently, that when it comes to using stereotypes in our beliefs about other people, we have freedom of thought.

Proponents of doxastic wronging could try to reject this conclusion by insisting that the fundamental intuition still stands in need of explanation. And indeed, we still have to explain why the protagonists in cases like "Conference" seem to be doing something morally problematic. But we can do so by falling back on the concept of doxastic harming because, as I argued in Section 2, cases like "Conference" depict situations in which the protagonists harm their targets by frustrating their desire to not be the objects of bigoted beliefs. In doing so, they contribute to a morally worse state of affairs, which in turn can account for the fundamental intuition. In contrast to the doxastic wronging approach, this explanation does not commit us to stipulating an additional obligation that cannot meet the liberal challenge—all we have to assume is the desire theory of well-being and that people do not want to be the objects of stereotypes. Conceptualizing cases like "Conference" as instances of doxastic harming thus can make sense of the fundamental intuition without accruing any of the additional theoretical costs of the doxastic wronging approach. Therefore, I conclude that we should re-interpret cases like "Conference" in the following way: In cases like these, the protagonists harm their targets by thinking about them using stereotypes, thus contributing to a morally worse state of affairs. But even though they make the world morally worse in virtue of their beliefs, the protagonists do not violate any obligation by having these thoughts and are thus allowed to entertain them—just as people have discretion to turn the world into a morally worse place in virtue of, say, badmouthing other people in private or letting their talents go to waste. When we reproach people like Anna for their hurtful thoughts, we are thus not accusing them of having done *something they were not allowed to do or should not have done* but of having done *something it would have been better not to do, even though they were allowed to do it.*

4. Objections

In this last section, I want to address three possible objections against the liberal challenge I raised. Doing so will also allow me to point out how doxastic harm-

ing, the alternative I proposed to doxastic wronging, fares with regard to the standard arguments against its competitor I touched upon in the introduction.

The first objection alleges that *the liberal challenge shows too little*. As I noted in Section 3, it relies on the presumption (implicit in the liberal principle) that people should be as unencumbered by moral obligations as possible. A critic could point to this and contend that it comes as no surprise that doxastic wronging is incompatible with this presumption—after all, those arguing for doxastic wronging want to expand our moral inventory by adding a morally grounded epistemic obligation. Put differently, a critic might accuse me of begging the question: If we assume that we have all-encompassing freedom, as I seem to have done by adopting the liberal principle, then a fortiori we are under no obligation to avoid having bigoted beliefs.

It is, admittedly, not surprising for a liberal challenge to conclude that people have some degree of freedom of thought. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown more than what the critic grants me. Contrary to what the critic implies, I did not simply *stipulate* that we have freedom of thought with regard to bigoted beliefs. Instead, I only assumed that all moral obligations need to be justifiable to those they address (that is, I assumed the liberal principle), to then argue at length that, although it is morally problematic in a number of ways to have bigoted thoughts (as it increases the risk of bigoted actions, harms the targets, and is a sign of an arrogant or willfully negligent character), none of these problems suffices to establish an obligation to avoid such thoughts. So while the critic is right in pointing out that my liberal challenge articulates skepticism about doxastic wronging's main assumption, they are wrong in suggesting that I did not present reasons for this skeptical stance.

The second objection points in the opposite direction, so to speak, and contends that *the liberal challenge shows too much*. If we accept that people have some freedom of thought, does that not also entail that they are unbound by epistemically grounded norms of beliefs such as "hold no contradictory beliefs" or "believe in accordance with the evidence available to you"? In this case, a critic could sustain that the liberal challenge overshoots its mark because, presumably, even liberal-minded people want to hold on to the idea that we should avoid inconsistencies in our beliefs systems or stick to the evidence we have.

Even if we assume that, morally speaking, we have unrestricted discretion to believe whatever we want to, this is less of a problem than the critic makes it out to be. The liberal challenge only shows that *we do not owe it to each other*, that is to say, that we have no categorical moral duty (not) to believe certain propositions. It does not preclude that we are *bound in our reasoning by hypothetical duties*, that is, by duties that arise from being committed to certain goals. Epistemic norms like those mentioned can be interpreted this way, that is, as rules we should abide by if we aspire to epistemic goals such as truth, justified belief, or rationality. This

way of interpreting epistemic norms fits well with our everyday assessment of people who violate them, because when a person holds contradictory beliefs or beliefs she has no justification for, we usually consider her bad *knower* rather than a bad *person*. That we are not morally bound to observe epistemic norms, as the liberal challenge sustains, therefore does not undermine their normative force, assuming their normative force comes from their instrumental value with regard to truth or justification. What appeared to be a reductio ad absurdum of the liberal challenge thus turns out to be compatible with an intuitively plausible interpretation of epistemic norms.

Finally, the third objection sustains that I have *shown the wrong thing*. As I stated in the introduction, my aim in this paper was not only to argue against the possibility of doxastic wronging, but also to propose an alternative explanation of the fundamental intuition at the heart of the debate. I did so by pointing out that while entertaining bigoted beliefs does not violate any moral obligation, doing so nevertheless harms its targets. Entertaining such beliefs is therefore morally problematic as it contributes to a morally worse state of affairs. A critic could contend that this alternative explanation does not capture the fundamental intuition cases like "Conference" evoke to its full extent. For in cases like these we do not only have the intuition that something morally problematic is going on, but more specifically that an obligation has been violated and a person has been wronged.

In reply to this, I first have to admit that, on the harm-based explanation I propose, we can indeed only conclude that it would be better if people like Anna reconsidered their offensive ideas and not that they are morally obliged to do so. This might not be what we *want* to say, but it is all we *can* say if we take the liberal challenge seriously. However, I want to push back against the objection's underlying implication that this conclusion is too weak. Our normative landscape is nuanced and multilayered, and we would lose much of it if we insisted on evaluating people and their actions only in terms of obligations. Saying that an action does not violate any obligation the agent was under is not yet saying much about it—it can still turn out to be morally problematic in a great number of ways. Pointing out that people like Anna harm their targets (as the concept of doxastic harming allows us to do) is therefore far from irrelevant. To see this, it is helpful to think of other cases in which someone's actions are morally permissible (in the sense of not violating some obligation) but nevertheless hurtful to their targets. For instance, think back to the case of the lover I mentioned in Section 2. Imagine that, out of the blue, Mark leaves his longtime partner Pavel for a younger man he just met because he has grown bored with their relationship. Mark tries to defend his behavior by insisting that he does not owe it to Pavel to stay together since no one is morally obliged to remain in a relationship they are no longer interested in. To this, Pavel replies: "Sure, you're *not obliged* to stay with me. But still, the way you ended things, without any warning at all and for someone

you've only known for a couple of days, has left me devastated." I for one do not have the impression, given such feelings on Pavel's part, that Mark is morally off the hook. Although his action was morally permissible, it still matters greatly for our moral assessment of Mark that what he did was very painful for Pavel. I contend that the same holds for perpetrators of doxastic harm. In addition, there will likely still be plenty of opportunities to accuse bigots of violating some moral obligation they had toward their targets because, as I pointed out in Section 3, it is to be expected that they do not only entertain bigoted beliefs but act upon them as well. And whenever their bigotry escapes the confines of their heads, so to speak, and their actions discriminate against members of marginalized social groups, we can reprimand them for infringing upon their targets' justified claims to safety, equal social status, fair treatment, and so on.

I want to close by pointing out that, on the plus side, my harm-based explanation of the fundamental intuition allows us to avoid the standard objections that have been raised against its obligation-based competitor. To show this, let me first reiterate these objections: The so-called problem of control states that an obligation-based explanation commits us to accepting doxastic voluntarism, that is the idea that we can control what we believe. If people must not think about each other using stereotypes, it must be up to them not to do so, otherwise this obligation would run afoul of the maxim that ought implies can. This implication is problematic since, on the one hand, it is psychologically difficult to exert voluntary control over one's beliefs and, on the other, our beliefs should conform to the evidence available to us rather than to what we want (Basu & Schroeder 2019: §2.1.). In contrast, the so-called problem of coordination draws attention to the fact that if we accept morally grounded epistemic duties like the one Basu proposes, we also have to accept the possibility that these obligations come into conflict with our more conventional epistemic duties. Positing morally grounded epistemic duties thus raises the specter of an inconsistent system of obligations. As this short restatement makes clear, both problems only arise if we posit a morally grounded epistemic obligation—which is precisely what my harm-based explanation helps us avoid. So even if my harm-based explanation only allows us to conclude that it would be morally better (instead of morally required) if people stopped thinking about other people using stereotypes, it at least helps us to steer clear of the problems of control and coordination associated with the obligation-based explanation.

5. Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to raise a new challenge against the possibility of doxastic wronging as well as to show that there is another, less problematic way to

make sense of the fundamental intuition that drives the philosophical debate about this (purported) moral phenomenon. I argued that we should not conceptualize cases like "Conference" as examples in which the protagonists violate a duty they have vis-à-vis their targets by thinking about them using stereotypes since such a duty would run afoul of the liberal principle. Instead, we should conceive of them as situations in which the targets are harmed in virtue of being the objects of bigoted beliefs.

The reason I propose this revision is not to make light of the morally problematic nature of bigoted beliefs. On the contrary, I want to make sure that the criticism we level against people who entertain such beliefs hits its mark properly. For this, we have to avoid moralistic overreach and making morally grounded demands on what other people believe would be just that. People who think of their fellow human beings in terms of stereotypes have a catastrophically distorted grasp of the world, but as long as they keep their bigoted opinions to themselves, they are morally allowed to stick to them. By accusing them of violating a morally grounded epistemic duty, we would encroach upon their freedom of thought, thereby running the risk of compromising our own standing as critics. This (potential) squandering of standing would be even more regrettable given that there is not much to be gained by such criticism in the first place. Because as many theorists involved in emancipatory struggles teach us, what we ultimately should care about is not the intentions (or, for that matter, beliefs) of bigots, but what they do in the world.[11] By doing away with the possibility of doxastic wronging, we are therefore not robbing ourselves of an important emancipatory concept, but rather clearing the way for other more productive ways of moral and social critique.

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11. A recent example of this ultimately consequentialist stance is Ibram X. Kendi's "How to be an Antiracist"; another is the feministic critique of a mens rea- (and thus intention-) centered understanding of rape (MacKinnon 1989: 180 or more recently Hänel 2018).

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