

More Scepticism about Epistemic Blame*

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Abstract

Scepticism about epistemic blame maintains that there is no distinctly epistemic form of blame. Cameron Boulton (2024a) challenges this view on the grounds that a particular theory of epistemic blame—the relationship modification account—can be defended against the sceptic. His defence includes two central claims. First, Boulton proposes a pluralism in our repertoire of epistemic accountability practices that makes space for both epistemic blame and epistemic evaluation. Second, he develops a more ‘sceptic-resistant’ way of articulating the phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame believe a theory of epistemic blame is needed to explain. In my view, neither of these arguments should convince us. I argue that the epistemic blame sceptic can meet both challenges. Although my arguments largely focus on Boulton’s defence of his preferred account of epistemic blame, I also set out two general problems that faces any theory of epistemic blame. The upshot is that there remain strong grounds for scepticism about epistemic blame.

Is there a distinctly epistemic form of blame? A number of writers have answered *yes*, developing accounts of what it is to blame someone for their beliefs. (e.g., Brown 2020, Piovarchy 2021, Boulton 2024b) It is common to think that an agent can be blameless or blameworthy for violating an epistemic norm. One motivation for developing a theory of epistemic blame is that it adds detail to this popular distinction, explaining how and why we blame others for

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their epistemic failings in a distinctly epistemic sense. The hope is that theories of epistemic blame are not merely *recherché*—niche tools for filling a lacuna that may only be of interest within the epistemology seminar room. They aim to capture an important aspect of how we hold one another accountable for what we believe.

Sceptics, on the other hand, answer *no*, arguing that we ought to set aside the very idea of epistemic blame. On their view, there is no distinctly epistemic form of blame. Arguments for this view include the claim that everything supposedly done by epistemic blame is already done by the more familiar notion of epistemic evaluation (Smartt 2023, 1818-1821), that accounts of epistemic blame provide inaccurate descriptions of our normative epistemological practices (Smartt 2023, 1821-1825), and that the notion of blame *simpliciter* resists being transplanted from the moral domain (Matheson and Milam 2022). A related argument can be found in Magalotti (2024), who argues that the absence of blaming emotions from the epistemic domain is a challenge for *all* proponents of epistemic blame, regardless of whether they make emotion central to their preferred theory. One lesson she suggests that we might take from this is scepticism about the very notion of epistemic blame (Magalotti 2024, 128).

Proponents of epistemic blame think these arguments can be overcome. Recently, Cameron Boulton (2024a) has responded to the case against epistemic blame that I set out in Smartt (2023). He argues that his preferred account of epistemic blame—the relationship modification account—vindicates the notion of epistemic blame against these challenges, and that it does so in a way that presents the relationship modification account as an attractive account of the nature of epistemic blame. On Boulton's view, epistemic blame consists in negatively modifying one's relationship with another in light of what one judges to be an epistemic failing on their part. Boulton takes it that there is a general epistemic relationship that we stand in with one another (2024b, 64-81). When others fail us—say, by violating an epistemic norm that we had a sensible expectation they would satisfy—we adjust our epistemic relationship with them. Paradigmatically, we reduce our trust in them. These interpersonal adjustments constitute epistemic blame.¹ Boulton (2024a) argues that this view

¹A general challenge Boulton faces is that his account of epistemic blame is built on Scanlon's (2008) controversial account of moral blame. For example, an anonymous reviewer worries that the relationship modification account of epistemic blame inherits the same challenges as the view it is modeled on, and so is of limited use in responding to scepticism about the very notion of epistemic blame. I leave it to others to determine which positive account of epistemic blame might be most plausible, although, of course, one can expect to meet disagreement on that issue, too.

can be defended against scepticism about epistemic blame.

In this paper, I argue that epistemic blame sceptics can meet Boulton's (2024a) recent challenges. In [Section 1](#), I argue that one of his lines of response—namely, his claim that both epistemic evaluation and epistemic blame have a role to play in our repertoire of epistemic accountability practices—can be overcome. In [Section 2](#), I discuss Boulton's (2024a) description of the basic phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think a theory of epistemic blame is needed to explain. Boulton claims that this description of the core problem that leads proponents of epistemic blame to develop their views makes it much more difficult to motivate scepticism about epistemic blame. I argue that it makes it easier. I introduce two general challenges that face any theory of epistemic blame, which are suggested by Boulton's presentation of the motivating phenomenon. The upshot is that there remain strong grounds for scepticism about epistemic blame.

1 Pluralism and accountability

One argument for scepticism about epistemic blame holds that the very notion of epistemic blame introduces an idle mechanism; much of the work purportedly done by epistemic blame is already done by epistemic evaluation (Smartt 2023, 1818-1821). Proponents of epistemic blame—and especially advocates of the relationship modification account—describe a system of interpersonal reactions whereby we regulate how much trust we place in other members of our epistemic community and incentivize norm compliance. On a prominent account of the social dynamics of epistemic evaluation due to Dogramaci (2012, 2015), ordinary epistemic evaluations—such as attributions of knowledge or epistemic rationality—already play both these roles. That is, they identify who we ought to trust (call this role **Deference**) and encourage unperforming members of our community to improve their epistemic performance (call this role **Compliance Pressure**). My original challenge holds that the relationship modification account of epistemic blame duplicates these roles. Not only does this violate parsimony, but it fails to deliver one of the central features of any account of blame, namely, describing a type of reaction that goes beyond mere evaluation.

For Boulton's own defence of his view against this worry, including details about the adjustments he makes to Scanlon's relationship-based framework, see Boulton (2024b, 67-74).

In response to this argument, Boulton states that he is sympathetic to a pluralism about epistemic accountability practices. This pluralism can accommodate both epistemic blame—understood according to the relationship modification account—and accounts of the social role of epistemic evaluation like those proposed by Dogramaci. He writes:

Even if negative epistemic evaluation can play the roles Smartt and Dogramaci say it does, a further question is whether it can play that role equally *effectively* as epistemic blame. It may be the case that epistemic blame is *better* at playing the Deference and Compliance roles, in which case it may be an important notion to have in our theoretical toolbox. (Boulton 2024a, 389 fn. 4. Emphasis his)

This move is intended to deflate the tension arising from the purported functional equivalence between epistemic blame and epistemic evaluation that I emphasise (Smartt 2023, 1818-1821). It provides a way for one to accept Dogramaci's claim that ordinary epistemic evaluations play **Deference** and **Compliance Pressure** roles, while holding onto the idea that epistemic blame plays these roles, too.² This point has a concessive element and an assertive element. The concessive element is that Boulton is happy to grant to the sceptic, at least for the sake of argument, that epistemic blame may not be the only way that we modify our epistemic relationships.³ The more assertive element is that epistemic blame might be able to do the job more effectively than epistemic evaluation. Although Boulton does not emphasise this, I think an additional reason that counts in favour of this response is that Dogramaci, and others in this tradition, do not claim that epistemic evaluation is the only way to encourage norm uptake.⁴

²Others have pressed me on this point. For instance, Piovarchy (2025, 8) writes: 'It is one thing to show that epistemic evaluation provides pressure, it is another to show that it provides pressure to the degree...of epistemic blame.'

³Precisely how concessive Boulton is being here may require a little more clarification from him. His argument for pluralism about accountability practices proceeds by claiming that even those who agree with my claims about the social function of evaluation ought to appreciate the work epistemic blame can also do. But at some points, he seems to grant even more to the sceptic by agreeing that the Dogramaci-style picture of evaluation is largely correct. For instance, he says, '[Smartt's account] may be sufficient to underpin a difference between the significance that certain evaluations can have for the *community*—namely, a tendency to promote coordination versus a tendency to be functionless.' (Boulton 2024a, 390. Italics his). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this point.

⁴For instance, Dogramaci writes: 'I don't claim that epistemic evaluation is the only way that coordination is fostered; evaluation is just one way. Plausibly, we have an evolved, innate disposition to accept a certain coordinated stock of epistemic rules. Epistemic evaluation is a supplementary

I have mixed thoughts about this reply. Partly, I think that an epistemic blame sceptic ought to remain sceptical. But, partly, I can see a new line of inquiry that might vindicate the pluralism that Boulton favours. My sceptical point is familiar from my (Smartt 2023, 1820) previous arguments: this reply still violates parsimony. Parsimony holds that we should not multiply entities beyond necessity, and adding a tool to one's toolbox that functions just like the other tools runs afoul of this. To get around parsimony, epistemic blame and epistemic evaluation need to have different functional profiles, and this line of response fails to deliver this.

Someone sympathetic to the relationship modification account might reply that we should relax parsimony. This seems to be implied by Boulton's remark that epistemic blame can play the **Deference** and **Compliance Pressure** roles *better* than mere evaluation. Perhaps what is needed to push all the quirky buttons of human psychology that would improve norm uptake within a community is a complicated *system* of rewards and punishments; a system which includes epistemic blame, epistemic evaluation, and a range of other mechanisms. What mechanisms actually drive successful norm uptake is an empirical question. This, then, pushes the debate onto new, and quite different, terrain. No doubt we are conditioned to respond to criticism in accommodating ways, and one way for epistemic blame to earn its keep as one mechanism among many—or to demonstrate its ability to play this role better, as Boulton suggests it might—would be to draw on some empirical results that demonstrate the effectiveness of severe forms of criticism as a mechanism for **Compliance Pressure** in the epistemic domain. Although advocates of the relationship modification account—and epistemic blame, more generally—have not yet developed these arguments, it seems to me like there is an interesting case to be explored here. If these types of results could be found, the case for adding extra tools to the toolbox would be strengthened. Whether the new tool ought to be thought of as a novel species of blame might still remain to be seen. But a start would have been made: at the least, we might uncover grounds for thinking there is work that can be done by a more severe kind of reaction to epistemic failings; work that cannot be done by mere epistemic evaluation. So, I think that epistemic blame sceptics ought to be open to considering this line of response if Boulton intends it as an empirical point, rather than a conceptual

tool for policing others, for keeping them on the straight and narrow path of following exactly the coordinated rules. It's an especially useful tool for a species, like ours, in which individuals are much better at catching others' mistakes than at catching their own.' (Dogramaci 2015, 781).

one.

At this point, one might wonder where the burden of proof lies. Is it the job of the sceptic or the proponent of epistemic blame to provide these empirical arguments? Perhaps someone sympathetic to Boulton's view might press the sceptic to point to some grounds for thinking that epistemic evaluation is sufficiently effective such that we do not need other mechanisms to assist with the work of **Deference** and **Compliance Pressure**. I believe the burden of proof lies with the proponent of epistemic blame. My original argument presses a conceptual point; namely, that the relationship modification account of epistemic blame describes the same kind of reaction as described by a prominent account of epistemic evaluation. Part of Boulton's reply is to introduce the claim that, despite the conceptual similarity, epistemic blame might sometimes be the more *effective* reaction; it may be the better way of bringing about **Deference** and **Compliance Pressure** in actual epistemic communities. It is this empirical claim about the comparative frequencies of success that stands in need of further support.

2 The basic phenomenon

The second line of response that I wish to reply to on behalf of the epistemic blame sceptic is Boulton's description of the basic phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think a theory of epistemic blame is needed to explain. In my original argument, I emphasise that the very notion of epistemic blame supports a common strategy for defending highly demanding epistemic norms (Smartt 2023, 1813-1814). Boulton rightly points out that the project of developing an account of epistemic blame has other goals, independent of debates about demandingness in epistemology. He hopes to provide a more 'sceptic-resistant' way of articulating the basic phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame are interested in (Boulton 2024a, 388). He describes the explanandum in terms of a distinction between (1) and (2):

1. Judging that someone has fallen short of an epistemic norm or standard.
2. Being *exercised* or *engaged* by one's judgment that someone has fallen short of an epistemic norm or standard.

Proponents of epistemic blame think that this distinction can be explained by epistemic blame: sometimes, our more severe reactions to others' purely

epistemic failings rise to the level of a novel species of blame. (Boult 2024a, 389)

I agree that our reactions to others' epistemic failings come on a spectrum. Sometimes others' irrationality irritates us, sometimes it does not. But I do not think that we need a theory of epistemic blame to account for this. This is due to considerations that I (Smartt 2023, 1822-1824) initially presented as challenges to emotion-based accounts (e.g., Rettler 2018) and belief-desire accounts (e.g., Brown 2020) of epistemic blame, but I think that they apply equally well to Boult's new description of the motivating problem. In a nutshell, I am not convinced that we are systematically exercised or engaged by others' purely epistemic failings. And when we are, I suspect that there are other factors at play that explain our heightened reaction.

There are two points here worth teasing out. First, epistemic blame targets epistemic failings, rather than moral (or prudential) failings that might be associated with our attitudes. I think this rules out a class of cases that purportedly show that we are often engaged by others' epistemic failings. I do not think that our reactions to conspiracy theorists, racial profilers, cable news broadcasters, or irrational autocrats latch onto their purely epistemic failings. Partly, we are responding to the moral and social harm (and unnecessary risk of harm) that their attitudes carry. Second, sometimes we are engaged by others' epistemic failings for idiosyncratic reasons. Some beliefs matter enormously to us, and some of our interpersonal relationships are complicated and fraught. Often, our heightened reaction to someone's epistemic failing can be explained by these kinds of factors. For instance, it can explain why we are upset by a policymaker who believes (against the evidence) that philosophy courses do not benefit undergraduates, or why we are frustrated with a climate-denier relative over a family dinner. To my lights, these kinds of explanations go a long way towards accounting for the difference between (1) and (2).

To make these points a little more precise, I want to present two challenges to Boult. The challenges are fairly general, so I think other advocates of epistemic blame ought to attend to them as well.

2.1 Doxastic wrongdoing and epistemic blame

The first challenge can be appreciated by considering the notion of doxastic wrongdoing. Doxastic wrongdoing is the view that our attitudes can wrong others, even if they are never expressed (Basu 2018, 2019; Basu & Schroeder 2019).

Doxastic wrongdoing is a thesis about the moral badness of one's attitudes. Are doxastic wrongdoing and epistemic blame compatible? Consider Boulton's 'basic phenomenon.' I suspect that an advocate of doxastic wrongdoing would hold that their preferred theory can explain why we are sometimes bothered by someone falling short of an epistemic norm—it's because the failing is morally wrong! On this view, many objectionable beliefs are classified as moral wrongs. This includes objectionable beliefs that are typical ways of motivating the very idea of epistemic blame. Doxastic wrongdoing can explain our heightened reactions to conspiracy theorists, racial profilers, and other purported doxastic wrongdoers. If that is right, fans of epistemic blame lose a powerful way of motivating epistemic blame. Of course, doxastic wrongdoing is a controversial thesis. So the upshot of this argument is merely conditional: if doxastic wrongdoing is correct, then we have further reason for scepticism about epistemic blame.

I think this reveals an interesting choice point that theorists of epistemic blame ought to consider. Many cases that seem like promising ways of motivating epistemic blame can be explained by doxastic wrongdoing. Epistemic blame and doxastic wrongdoing are two recent innovations at the intersection of ethics and epistemology, but they have largely been explored independently of one another. Do fans of epistemic blame need to reject doxastic wrongdoing in order to safeguard the motivation that these kinds of cases provide for epistemic blame? It seems to me that if one accepts both epistemic blame and doxastic wrongdoing, one's explanation of the difference between (1) and (2) will often be over-described. Accepting both commitments would lead one to say that our heightened reactions to, say, a conspiracy theorist, is due to the fact that the attitude in question constitutes a moral wrongdoing *and* that it bothers us for falling short of an epistemic standard. If one accepts doxastic wrongdoing, it is not clear to me why we might need a theory of epistemic blame to explain the difference between (1) and (2). In any case, if proponents of epistemic blame have a view about how the two explanations might be teased apart in these types of cases, it may be fruitful to set it out.

One way to resolve this tension would be to reclassify the type of failing at issue. For instance, perhaps doxastic wrongs are a kind of *epistemic* failing, and so apt targets of epistemic blame. Or perhaps epistemic failings that purportedly warrant epistemic blame are a kind of *moral* failing, and thus cases of doxastic wrongdoing. However, I'm not sure how attractive this strategy would be to either camp. A unified theory along these lines risks making one of the notions—epistemic blame or doxastic wrongdoing—the more significant concept,

subsuming the lessons of the other underneath it. I'm not sure who would want to budge. And in any case, it seems to be quite revisionary, redescribing core features of each theory.

2.2 The Goldilocks challenge for epistemic blame

I will call my second challenge *the Goldilocks challenge*. Various cases have been called upon to motivate the very idea of epistemic blame. The cases map onto the structure of Boulton's 'basic phenomenon.' Some fall into (1) and some fall into (2). Those that fall into (1) are banal. These are cases of epistemic norm violation that do not seem to motivate epistemic blame. For instance, many find it implausible that one would blame a student who makes a mistake on an exam, or an agent who fails to believe an exotic proposition entailed by their beliefs, even though both constitute an epistemic failing. Cases that fall into (2) are much better suited to the task of motivating epistemic blame; these are the violations that really do *bother* us in some way. My claim is that all of the second kind of cases involve some other factor such that we are not responding to a purely epistemic norm violation. In these cases, we are moved by other factors—by some social considerations, or by some moral or prudential factors. The Goldilocks challenge asks whether proponents of epistemic blame can motivate the 'basic phenomenon' with a case that is just right: not too cold (banal) and not too hot (crucially involving moral/social elements).

Matheson and Milam (2022, 206-207) press a similar challenge. On their view, most instances of purported non-moral blame (e.g., epistemic, athletic, aesthetic) are misidentified instances of moral blame. To see this, they suggest comparing two cases that vary only along a moral dimension; both cases describe a non-moral failing, but the cases have different moral stakes. One of their examples is a pair of cases that feature two astrophysicists. One astrophysicist makes a calculating error in an exam, the other makes the same error in the NASA mission control centre during a live exercise. It seems much more plausible that we might blame the second astrophysicist—who courted disaster—than the first.⁵

Here is an illustration of the Goldilocks challenge in action. Consider the below passage from Piovarchy:

Examples of epistemic blame and blameworthiness seem common

⁵I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on this point.

enough in everyday life. A student affirms the consequent, even though *we just spent hours explaining* how this is a fallacy, stirring an impulse to raise our voice. A teammate makes a foolish move against an opponent in a game of cards, *losing the game* and garnering a swift rebuke. *Relatives* quote pseudoscience despite having previously been told about fake news and misleading sources, which escalates into angry yelling across *the dinner table*. (Piovarchy 2021, 792. Emphasis mine)

This passage is typical of the epistemic blame literature. It provides a few examples of norm violations that I would put in the second category of Boulton's 'basic phenomenon.' However, they all suggest alternative explanations of what may be driving one's blame-like reaction in each case. In the language of my challenge, these cases are not too cold, but they are too hot. That is, it seems to me like, in each case, we are bothered by factors apart from the epistemic failing. I have italicised the remarks where we can see this. The reason that we are engaged by the failing is that the student wasted our time, our teammate lost the game, and we are trying to negotiate a difficult family dinner. In each case, the epistemic violation brings with it practical factors—such as moral and prudential failings, or fraught interpersonal dynamics—which are doing a lot of the bothering.

At this point, a proponent of epistemic blame might reply with a point about multidimensionality. Perhaps there are multiple normative dimensions that one might be bothered by. In this case, the larger project of epistemic blame is to account for the epistemic dimension of some types of failings, even if those failings also involve moral failings or practical failings. This is a view that Boulton (2024b, 96-97) has recently expressed sympathy towards. However, even if epistemic blame is just intended to pick out one facet of our complex ways of responding to others' failings, my challenge still stands. The Goldilocks challenge asks whether epistemic blame can show up in isolation. And if it cannot, that is an important result, one that a sceptic would take as grounds for resisting the notion of epistemic blame.

Or perhaps proponents of epistemic blame might try to explain away this challenge. For instance, Schmidt (2025, 778) discusses cases where we are bothered by others' irrationality, but only because it led to moral harm. On my view, it's the moral harm that's doing the bothering in cases like this. But Schmidt suggests a different lesson: we're bothered by the irrationality, but the moral

harm supplies other conditions that trigger our reaction to this epistemic failing. If this is the case, proponents of epistemic blame needn't worry that their most convincing cases appear to be too hot by my lights; this pattern can be explained by other conditions that are necessary for epistemic blame to be apt. Perhaps this line of response suggests one way that the Goldilocks challenge might lose some of its force.

A paradigmatic case has not yet been provided that motivates the very idea of epistemic blame in a way that avoids the Goldilocks challenge.⁶ I think it would be difficult to devise one. Without such a case—or without an explanation of why such a case is not required—sceptics will be unmoved by the basic phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think stands in need of explanation.

3 Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out additional grounds for scepticism about epistemic blame. Partly, these arguments reply to Boulton's (2024a) recent claim that his preferred account of epistemic blame—the relationship modification account—vindicates the notion of epistemic blame against my original case for scepticism (Smartt 2023). And partly, these arguments set out two additional challenges that I think any advocate of epistemic blame ought to attend to. The first challenge focuses on the compatibility of epistemic blame with *other* innovations at the intersection of ethics and epistemology, such as doxastic wrongdoing (Section 2.1). The second challenge focuses on the basic phenomenon that proponents of epistemic blame think that a theory of epistemic blame is needed

⁶This is not to claim that the issue has been entirely neglected by advocates of epistemic blame. For example, Schmidt (2024, 20) claims that, on his preferred view, epistemic blame is apt even in some cases of trivial epistemic failings. Perhaps this sets out a partial answer to the Goldilocks challenge, supplying advocates of epistemic blame with an account of how our reactions to violations that typically seem 'too cold' can purportedly be cases of epistemic blame. Although work like this might enrich a particular theory of epistemic blame—demonstrating how it can be extended to a wider range of cases than one might initially suppose—it does not directly meet the Goldilocks challenge. That challenge is to provide a case of epistemic norm violation that presents a typical kind of reaction to an epistemic failing that might fit the bill of blame, without crucially folding in moral/social factors. It is one thing to show that, equipped with a theory of epistemic blame, reactions to violations that typically seem too banal to rise to the level of blame can be classified as blame after all. But the Goldilocks challenge asks for more: it challenges proponents of epistemic blame to motivate the suggestion that there is a basic phenomenon that needs to be explained, without reaching for practical or moral factors to amplify the purported phenomenon. I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on possible ways that a proponent of epistemic blame might attempt to meet the Goldilocks challenge.

to explain (Section 2.2). The upshot is that there remain strong grounds for scepticism about epistemic blame.

Conflict-of-Interest Statement

The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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