

Ethics and Epistemic Hopelessness

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Abstract This paper investigates the ethics of regarding others as epistemically hopeless. To regard a person as epistemically hopeless with respect to p is, roughly, to regard her as unable to see the truth of p through rational means. Regarding a person as epistemically hopeless is a stance that has surprising and nuanced moral implications. It can be a sign of respect, and it can also be a way of giving up on someone. Whether it is morally problematic to take up this stance, I argue, depends on a number of factors—perhaps most interestingly, it depends on the choices that one faces (or is likely to face). I close the paper by arguing against the view that there are standing moral reasons against regarding others as epistemically hopeless.

Suppose that we disagree with one another, and we know it. I'm aware that you believe that p , and you're aware that I believe that $\neg p$. Suppose, further, that we both remain *steadfast*—we retain our conflicting beliefs. What should you think about me?

Here are some options. You might think that I'm misinformed or underinformed, and that if I were given certain information or arguments bearing on p , I'd join you in believing that p . You might, on the other hand, think that I've made an error in my reasoning, and that if I were thinking more rationally, I'd join you in believing that p . Finally, you might think that our disagreement is not rationally tractable. You might think, in other words, that even if I were better-informed about p , and even if I were thinking rationally, I still wouldn't join you in believing that p .

This paper is about the final option. If you think that rational, informed inquiry wouldn't bring me to believe that p , and you also think that p is true, then you think that there's a true proposition that I'm doomed not to know. In short, you think that I'm *epistemically hopeless* with respect to p .

Epistemically hopeless inquirers are philosophically interesting characters. They raise important questions about truth and realism,¹ about the contents of our

¹ For instance: if thoughts about p aim to represent the truth, how could a perfectly functioning inquirer fail to represent p correctly? See Wright (2005); for a response, see McGrath (2010, sec. IV).

thoughts,² and about knowledge.³ But this paper addresses a distinct question about the epistemically hopeless: what are the *moral* reasons for and against regarding others as epistemically hopeless?

The ethics of regarding others as epistemically hopeless is underexplored territory, so a great deal of this paper's work is exploratory. But the exploration has substantive results. Though I aim to provide a survey of views, I also mean to cast doubt on some and to defend others. The upshot of the discussion, in brief, is this: there is no general, standing moral problem with regarding others as epistemically hopeless. Whether it's morally problematic to regard someone as epistemically hopeless depends, among other things, on the choices that one faces.

1. Epistemic Hopelessness

Though 'epistemic hopelessness' is a term of art, judgments of epistemic hopelessness are commonplace. Consider, for instance, the following case:

Libertarian Friend Your friend Wes staunchly believes that all taxation is morally impermissible. You've discussed this issue with him at length, in a series of conversations that have ranged over nearly all the arguments that you can imagine regarding the topic. You and Wes have both agreed not to discuss the issue any further, on the grounds that further discussion seems extremely unlikely to be productive. Over time, you've formed the settled view that further inquiry, at least of the sort spurred by armchair reflection and discussion, would not rationally bring Wes to believe that taxation is sometimes permissible.

Judgments of this sort are, I take it, familiar. In this section, I'll offer more detail about a family of related judgments that resemble this one: judgments that I'll call judgments of *epistemic hopelessness*.

1.1 What is Epistemic Hopelessness?

Let's start by getting a firmer grip on what it is to *be* epistemically hopeless. Roughly speaking, an epistemically hopeless person is a person who can't see the truth of some proposition through rational inquiry. Even if she were given arguments and information bearing on *p*, and even if she were thinking in a procedurally rational way, an epistemically hopeless person would not believe the truth about *p*. A judgment that a person is epistemically hopeless, then, is a counterfactual judgment:

² For instance: if you and I would disagree about the extension of a property even after undergoing ideal inquiry, how could we be thinking about the same property? See Jackson (1998), Schroeter and Schroeter (2009).

³ For instance: is my justification for believing that *p* defeated by the possibility that a fully rational, fully informed person could believe that $\neg p$? See Feldman (2007).

specifically, it's a judgment about the beliefs that a person would have if her inquiry were improved in certain ways.

Improved in what ways? Well, there are a range of idealizations under which it might be worth asking whether a person could rationally see the truth. In some situations, we might wonder whether a person could fail to believe some truth under a very intense idealization of her inquiry: say, if she were *maximally informed* and *perfectly procedurally rational*. But even if we were convinced of a particular answer to this question, we might still wonder *which particular* improvements to her inquiry would bring her to see the truth. We might wonder, for instance, whether she would come to believe the truth if she were given *the information available in a particular textbook* and she were *about as procedurally rational as she usually is*.

As these examples show, there are at least two axes along which an idealization of a person's inquiry can vary. We can imagine different bodies of *arguments and information* becoming available to an inquirer; some of these bodies of arguments and information are more complete, or less misleading, than others. We can also imagine a person reasoning with a greater or lesser degree of *procedural rationality*. Epistemic hopelessness is a matter of false beliefs' tendency to survive idealization along either or both of these axes.

It's worth clarifying each sort of idealization. First: what does it mean to be "given arguments and information"? I mean for this phrase to pick out a fairly thin relation. An example will help to illustrate that relation:

Flat Earther Prudence was raised in a religious cult. The cult is enormously deferential to a religious text, and it provides compelling debunking stories regarding any sources of information that contradict the religious text. The religious text claims that the Earth is flat, and Prudence believes, on that basis, that the Earth is flat.⁴

To say that Prudence is epistemically hopeless (with respect to the fact that the Earth is not flat) is to say that, even if her inquiry were improved, she would not come to disbelieve that the Earth is flat. When we're considering this counterfactual, we needn't imagine the scenario in which Prudence is given information about the Earth's shape *and regards it as information*. We needn't, for example, imagine the scenario in which Prudence is handed a textbook about astronomy and comes to regard it as largely accurate. (It's likely true, but uninteresting, to note that she'd correct her belief in *that* scenario.) We simply need to consider the scenario in which Prudence considers the textbook seriously and, having considered it, updates her views (either about the textbook's accuracy, about the Earth's shape, or both) in a procedurally rational way. When we make judgments about epistemic hopelessness, then, we are concerned with the question of what a person would believe if she were made aware of certain arguments and ideas, not the question of what she would

⁴ For extended discussion of the epistemic predicament of those in situations like Flat Earther, see Nguyen (forthcoming).

believe if she were made aware that the relevant arguments are sound or that the relevant ideas are true.

On to a second question: what does it mean for a person to be *procedurally rational*? The norms of procedural rationality are norms on acceptable ways to form and revise beliefs. Importantly, these are norms that do not directly recommend or forbid any beliefs solely in virtue of their content. The norm that says not to affirm the consequent, for instance, is a norm of procedural rationality; a norm that rationally forbids believing that *occasionally killing at random is morally required*, by contrast, is a norm of substantive rationality.⁵

As I've mentioned already, both idealizations comes in degrees. Bodies of information can be *slightly* better or *massively* better; a person can become *a bit* more procedurally rational or *perfectly* procedural rational. Since epistemic hopelessness is a matter of false belief surviving idealization, and idealizations come in many shapes and sizes, properties of epistemic hopelessness also come in many different shapes and sizes. In other words: we always judge others to be epistemically hopeless against the backdrop of some idealization or other, and any of a range of idealizations can yield a version of epistemic hopelessness that is worth theoretical attention.

Some idealizations, however, can safely be set aside. In order for a judgment about someone to be recognizably a judgment that she is in some sense *hopeless*, the idealization in play should meet (at least) three conditions. First, the idealization should involve an *improvement* along at least one of the two axes I've noted: body of arguments and information, and degree of procedural rationality. Second, the idealization should not involve *worsening* the believer's inquiry along either axis. Third, there must be some sufficiently lengthy period of time in the future during which the believer's inquiry will not actually surpass the relevant idealization. (After all, if my offering you argument *A* would not help you see the truth, but my friend is currently offering you argument *B*, which certainly will change your mind, there's no interesting sense in which you are a lost cause.)⁶

With these restrictions in mind, I offer the following stipulative definition of epistemic hopelessness:

Epistemic Hopelessness A person is *epistemically hopeless*_(i, r) at time *t* with respect to true proposition *p* iff_{def}:

- (a) even if she were given a body of arguments and information, *i*, inquiry that is procedurally rational to degree *r* would not bring her to believe that *p*,

⁵ I borrow this example from Kelly and McGrath (2010, 347).

⁶ What length of time is "sufficient"? This is another respect in which the notion of epistemic hopelessness is flexible. In some contexts, we might be entirely uninterested in the question of whether a person can come to rationally believe the truth, say, *within the next thirty seconds*. But in other contexts, that very question might be extremely important. I see no reason to deny that there is an available notion of epistemic hopelessness with which we can respond to it.

- (b) during some significant period of time after t , her body of arguments and information will not be better than i , and her degree of procedural rationality will not surpass r , and
- (c) p is true.

This formulation foregrounds the point that I've been making in the last several paragraphs: with the term 'epistemic hopelessness,' I'm picking out a family of related, but distinct, properties. Which of these properties it's most worth thinking and talking about will vary from context to context. For instance, when I'm considering which form(s) of government people would endorse under wide reflective equilibrium, I'll attend to the question of whether any of those citizens are epistemically hopeless in a fairly *strong* sense—that is, the question of what they would believe under a very intense idealization. When I'm curious about how much time it would take to talk a student out of a confused reading of a text, on the other hand, I'd do better to ask whether he is epistemically hopeless in a fairly weak sense—I should ask what he would believe given a slightly improved body of information and roughly his current degree of procedural rationality.

Having noted the flexibility in the term 'epistemic hopelessness,' I'll leave that flexibility implicit for much of what follows, making it explicit again only when germane. The primary goal of the paper is to consider the moral reasons for and against regarding others as epistemically hopeless. And this dialectic can largely be carried out without pulling sorts of epistemic hopelessness apart. Though there are certainly interesting differences between stronger and weaker ways of regarding people as epistemically hopeless, there is also common thread that unites them. I'll close this section by characterizing that commonality.

1.2 Regarding Others as Epistemically Hopeless

So far, I've been discussing the question of what it is to *be* epistemically hopeless. In this section, I'll move to discussing the stance we take up when we *regard* other people as epistemically hopeless. (When we regard others as epistemically hopeless, they needn't actually be epistemically hopeless.) When I regard a person as epistemically hopeless, whether in a very strong sense or in a very weak sense, I thereby up a distinctive stance toward her: I give up on the prospect of her seeing the truth through rational means. When I view a person in this way, my engagement with her takes on a distinctive character.

An analogy with P.F. Strawson's "objective attitude" may help to illuminate this character. The "objective attitude" is the attitude that, Strawson says, we take up when we view a person's actions as determined by factors outside her control. Strawson writes that,

To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided... If your attitude towards someone is wholly objective, then though you may

light him, you cannot quarrel with him, and though you may talk to him, even negotiate with him, you cannot reason with him. You can at most pretend to quarrel, or to reason, with him. (1962/2008, 10)

There are striking similarities between adopting the “objective attitude” toward a person and regarding him as epistemically hopeless. As long as you continue to regard a person as epistemically hopeless with respect to p , you’ll regard him as an obstacle to the pursuit of the truth regarding p . Further, you won’t be able to sincerely reason with him or argue with him about p ; at most, you can “pretend to reason” with him or to argue with him about p . If you aim to change his mind as to whether p , you won’t do so by offering arguments or information—instead, you’ll attempt to bring about an irrational (or arational) change in his views, likely by “managing,” “curing,” or otherwise manipulating him.

In some respects, however, regarding a person as epistemically hopeless is *not* like taking up the “objective attitude.” When one adopts a wholly “objective attitude” toward another, Strawson claims, one does not see her as a fitting object for certain reactive attitudes, including “resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, anger, or the sort of love which two adults can sometimes be said to feel reciprocally” (1962/2008, 10). One sees her, instead, as an object, a cog in a machine. But one can certainly view a person as epistemically hopeless—even in a fairly strong sense—without giving up on the reactive attitudes, and without seeing her as a cog in a machine. In fact, in some cases, viewing a person as strongly epistemically hopeless can be a way of regarding her as a self-determined person worthy of credit and respect. In our next section, we’ll see why.

Before moving on, it’s worth pausing to consider an objection. Can’t I regard a person as epistemically hopeless regarding some topic while nevertheless engaging with her in entirely sincere, collaborative, open, and respectful shared inquiry about that very topic? You might think, for instance, that this happens a great deal in academia; we have long, fruitful, non-manipulative discussions with those who disagree with us, all the while assuming that neither of us will change our views. When we do this, we don’t seem to be *pretending* to reason or argue with one another; we seem to be authentically reasoning with one another. So we needn’t, the objection goes, take up a dismissive stance toward a person when we regard her as epistemically hopeless. Perhaps regarding a person as epistemically hopeless needn’t involve taking up any particular stance toward her at all.⁷

There’s a kernel of truth in this objection: regarding a person as epistemically hopeless is indeed compatible with sincere and open shared reasoning. But regarding a person as epistemically hopeless with respect to p does involve giving up on at least one sort of engagement: sincere, open reasoning that is narrowly concerned with the question of whether p . To see this, note that most discussions touch on an enormously wide range of propositions. This means that when I enter into discussion with you, I am very unlikely to think that you are epistemically hopeless about *all* the propositions at hand. Even if I think you are epistemically hopeless as to whether

⁷ Thanks to John Bengson and Tristram McPherson for helpful discussion here.

unrestricted composition is true, for example, I might nevertheless think that you are in a position to rationally believe a number of important truths *related* to unrestricted composition. I might think, for instance, that you are in a position to rationally believe truths about the meanings of terms in, about what unrestricted composition entails, about the validity of certain arguments, about what it's like to inhabit a certain perspective, about the comparative merits of argumentative strategies, and so on. I can have a fruitful, non-manipulative exchange with you by discussing unrestricted composition precisely because I think you are appropriately related to a number of truths like these. If we stipulate that I consider you epistemically hopeless about *anything* related to unrestricted composition, it's much less clear that I can have a sincere, mutually respectful discussion on the topic with you.

Regarding a person as epistemically hopeless, then, doesn't foreclose the possibility of fruitful, sincere reasoning with her. But it does constrain the form that engagement with her can take. If you regard me as epistemically hopeless regarding *p*, you may think that there are many good-making features of engaging in rational inquiry with me, but its possibly showing me the truth of *p* will not be one of them. This is true across the wide range of properties that can be picked out by the term 'epistemic hopelessness'; any way of regarding a person as epistemic hopeless is an instance of giving up on her inquiry for a significant amount of time.⁸ So there is indeed a characteristic stance involved in regarding a person as epistemically hopeless. The remainder of this paper investigates the moral reasons for and against taking up that stance.

2. In Favor of Regarding Others as Epistemically Hopeless?

In this section, I'll consider two arguments for the conclusion that we frequently have moral reasons to view people as epistemically hopeless.⁹ I'll argue that both of these arguments fail.

2.1 Appeals to Reasonable Disagreement

The first line of argument I'll consider is inspired by liberal political theory. It starts from the acknowledgment that there are a wide variety of actual systems of belief—some of them contradicting one another—within diverse societies. One way to explain this is to suggest that anyone who does not share one's system of belief is irrational. But, at least at first glance, there's something troublingly chauvinistic about this explanation. Perhaps it'd be more respectful to allow for the possibility that some of the people who disagree with one might be impressively epistemically rational.

⁸ It's in keeping with the view that I go on to offer that the threshold for "a significant amount of time" here is flexible; see footnote 6 for further discussion.

⁹ On some views, there are an enormous host of genuine normative reasons that are so weak that it would be absurd to note them in most conversational contexts. Schroeder (2007, 96), for instance, argues that you have a genuine normative reason to eat your car. I set reasons of this sort aside; references to "moral reasons" should be interpreted as references to moral reasons that are strong enough to be worth noting in ordinary contexts.

Several political liberals emphatically defend this possibility. Rawls writes, for instance, that “Many of our most important judgments are made under conditions where it is not to be expected that conscientious persons with full powers of reason, even after free discussion, will all arrive at the same conclusion” (58). Here, Rawls takes pains to acknowledge that, even under a heavy idealization of inquiry, disagreement would remain in a pluralistic society. A liberal commitment to reasonable disagreement, then, might seem to favor the belief that some of our political opponents are epistemically hopeless—even, perhaps, epistemically hopeless in an extremely strong sense—with respect to disputed political matters.

In fact, however, the liberal commitment to reasonable disagreement has remarkably limited implications for the question of how we should regard any particular disputant. I can staunchly believe that *there are some* epistemically hopeless people who disagree with me while suspending judgment as to *which ones* are epistemically hopeless. (Compare: I can staunchly believe that there is an error somewhere in my manuscript while suspending judgment, when it comes to any particular page, as to whether the error is on that page.) My commitment to the truth that some of the people who disagree with me are impressively epistemically virtuous, in other words, need not be accompanied by views about which of my opponents is in fact impressively epistemically virtuous. The liberal commitment to reasonable disagreement does not, on its own, give us moral reasons in favor of viewing any particular person as epistemically hopeless.¹⁰

2.2 Giving Due Credit

Some people deserve to be regarded as paragons of procedural rationality, simply because there is strong evidence that they are impressively procedurally rational. To fail to regard a person as impressively procedurally rational is to fail to give credit where credit is due. In some contexts, this can be morally problematic. To adapt a phrase from Miranda Fricker (2007, 20), it is the sort of failure that wrongs the person *in her capacity as an inquirer*.¹¹ So there is sometimes moral pressure in favor of regarding a person as having met impressive standards of inquiry.

You might think that, sometimes, this pressure sometimes simply amounts to pressure in favor of regarding a person as epistemically hopeless. If we’re under moral pressure to acknowledge that a person has surpassed an impressive standard for information-gathering and procedural rationality in her thinking about *p*, and we

¹⁰ It’s worth noting that a liberal commitment to reasonable disagreement might motivate a weaker stance: *keeping open* the possibility that one’s interlocutors are epistemically hopeless. Perhaps, for instance, we should not leap too quickly to the conclusion that an interlocutor’s false belief is rooted solely in ignorance or irrationality. Note where this leaves us: we have found no moral reasons that count against suspense of judgment regarding any given person’s epistemic hopelessness.

¹¹ Fricker’s phrase is “wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower” (2007, 20). The difference in locution flags an important difference between Fricker’s focus and mine. While Fricker is interested in the question of when we have a duty to regard others as *knowers*, I am interested in the question of when we have a duty to regard others as *excellent inquirers who, through no fault of their own, believe falsely*.

also acknowledge that she does not believe the truth regarding whether p , aren't we under moral pressure to see her as epistemically hopeless about p ?

In short, no. To see why, recall that judgments of epistemically hopeless are always made against the background of an idealization that constitutes an *improvement* to a person's inquiry. Judging a person to be epistemically hopeless, then, requires more than simply judging that she wildly surpasses any everyday standard for inquiry—it requires making a judgment about what would happen if her inquiry were even more impressive than it is. Even if we are under moral pressure to make judgments of the former sort, we might well be under no pressure at all to make judgments of the latter sort.

In fact, I want to suggest that we can always give credit where credit is due without settling on the view that a person is epistemically hopeless. To see how, consider the sort of case in which this suspension of judgment initially looks most morally suspicious: a case in which there is excellent evidence that a person is a truly exemplary inquirer, and the question at hand is what she would believe if made only *slightly* more ideal—say, if she heard a single novel argument that she happens never to have considered. In cases like this, I admit that giving due credit may require being highly *confident* that the inquirer in question is epistemically hopeless (in the weak sense at hand). But merely being highly confident in a proposition isn't the same as regarding it as true. If I buy a ticket to a lottery, for instance, I might be very confident that my ticket will lose without regarding it as true that my ticket will lose. In the same way, it's possible to be very confident that a person is epistemically hopeless while nevertheless keeping open the possibility that the next argument she hears will bring her to rationally see the truth. In short, we can be highly confident that a person is epistemically hopeless while also suspending judgment on the matter. On the face of it, this stance toward a person is doubly respectful of her *qua* epistemic agent. It gives epistemic credit where credit is due, but it also leaves open the possibility that there is a procedurally rational path from her current condition to the truth.

In this section, we considered two arguments to the effect that there are noteworthy patterns of moral reasons in favor of viewing others as epistemically hopeless. These arguments had very limited implications. Given a commitment to reasonable disagreement, morality may favor forming the general belief that *some people or other are epistemically hopeless* on some topics. And morality may sometimes favor a high level of confidence that a person is epistemically hopeless. But morality does not favor, in any general way, viewing particular people as epistemically hopeless.

3. When Epistemic Hopelessness is Important for Decision-Making

Though there is no noteworthy pattern of moral pressure in *favor* of regarding particular people as epistemically hopeless, there is a noteworthy family of cases in which moral reasons *count against* regarding a person as epistemically hopeless. In this section, I'll make this point by example: I'll show that there are moral reasons against regarding a person as epistemically hopeless when the question of whether

she is epistemically hopeless is, in a sense to be clarified, *important for one's decision-making*.

I'll begin by setting aside cases in which a person regards another as epistemically hopeless out of ill will. Say, for instance, that I regard a person as epistemically hopeless on the grounds of misogynist suspiciousness about the inquiry of women. In this case, my regarding a person as epistemically hopeless is (or, at least, is a symptom of) a moral problem. But this is an unsurprising result. In what follows, I'll argue for a more interesting result. I'll argue that, even when I regard a person as epistemically hopeless simply because my evidence makes it quite likely that she is, there are sometimes moral reasons that speak against the stance that I've taken up.

To give away the punchline: there tend to be moral reasons against my regarding a person as epistemically hopeless about p when the proposition that she is epistemically hopeless about p is *important for my decision-making*. What does this mean? Well, on my usage, a proposition p is important for A 's decision-making when there is a gap between the way that it's *actually* morally preferable for A to act and the way that it's morally preferable for A to act conditional on p . In other words, p is important for one's decision-making whenever the "gap between one's actual epistemic position and perfect epistemic position with regard to p makes a practical difference to" the question of how, morally, to act (Anderson and Hawthorne 2019, sec. 1).¹²

To see how the proposition that someone is epistemically hopeless could be important for decision-making, consider a case:

Cousin Gary Your cousin Gary recently wronged your uncle Matias. Gary falsely believes that he has not wronged Matias, and therefore that he owes Matias no apology. Gary is stubborn, and will not apologise unless he comes to believe that he has wronged Matias.

You've just observed your aunt Sofia engage Gary in an extended conversation. Sofia, an insightful and persuasive person, made a careful and thorough case for the conclusion that Gary has wronged Matias. But although Gary weighed Sofia's arguments carefully, he seemed to have an answer for every point that she brought up, and he remains unpersuaded. Given this evidence, it's very likely from your perspective that Gary will be impossible to persuade. But it's *just* possible that, by sharing arguments or helping him to grasp Matias's

¹² The notion of being important for decision-making is as gradable. To see why, imagine a case in which it'd be morally preferable for me to give all my money to charity C rather than charity D only if fact F obtains, but I can (and will) meet all my moral obligations without giving money to either charity. Is fact F important for my decision-making in such a case? Well, only an extremely morally virtuous agent would be responsive to fact F in her decision-making. So this fact is only very slightly important for decision-making, and I therefore only face the tiniest bit of moral pressure to keep my mind open as to whether fact F obtains. As we move further away from cases like this and further toward cases like Cousin Gary, it becomes less of an exotic exercise of virtue to keep one's mind open, and we therefore face increasing moral pressure not to treat the facts in question as settled in our practical reasoning.

experiences more fully, you could persuade him that he has wronged Matias. Further, you're willing to attempt to persuade him, and he's happy to engage with your attempt.

In this case, the proposition that Gary is epistemically hopeless is *important for decision-making*; the question of how it's morally preferable for you to act hangs (at least in part) on the question of whether Gary is epistemically hopeless. If it were certain for you that Gary could not rationally come to see the truth, then an attempt to persuade him would not be morally preferable. But, given the slim possibility that his mind *can* be changed rationally, it is morally preferable that you attempt to persuade him.¹³ In other words, it's best to engage with Cousin Gary *precisely because* of the possibility that he is not strongly epistemically hopeless.

It's worth noting a complication. In at least some cases, we can be called on to offer arguments and information even when there's no sense in pursuing rational persuasion. Sometimes, for instance, it's important to persuade, or to express solidarity with, third parties. When reasons of this sort are adequately strong, they can swamp the reasons that would otherwise have made someone's epistemic hopelessness important for decision-making. I grant all this. I simply argue that, in at least some cases (including, on some precisifications, the case of Cousin Gary), none of these special grounds for engagement is operative, and the only moral reason for engaging is the genuine possibility of successful rational persuasion. When this rationale for persuasion is adequately strong, we face moral pressure not to regard certain other people as epistemically hopeless.

Propositions about epistemic hopelessness are, perhaps, most likely to be important for decision-making in cases like Cousin Gary: cases where there are strong moral reasons to attempt to persuade someone. But the decision in question need not be a decision to persuade, and the person whose hopelessness is under consideration need not even be someone else. The following example illustrates both possibilities:

Broken Machine As you leave your engineering job for the day, you pass a group of other engineers from another team working to repair a machine. They will lose funding for a major project unless the machine is fixed in the next hour. But they're all very competent, and they've been unable to discover the problem with the machine all day. This makes you very confident (but not certain) that you would also be unable to determine what's keeping it from working. You now face a choice: you could go home to spend time with your family, who have been missing you, or you could stay and attempt to determine what is keeping the machine from working.

In this case, the question of whether you are epistemically hopeless about the problem with the machine is important for your decision-making. If it were certain that you could not rationally reach a true belief in the next hour about what's keeping

¹³ This is not to say that you are morally obligated to attempt to persuade Gary; perhaps your doing so is supererogatory.

the machine from working, it would be morally preferable for you to go home to spend time with your family.¹⁴ But, given the sliver of possibility that you will be able to determine what is keeping the machine from working, and given how important it is to help the engineers to retain their funding, it's actually morally preferable for you to stay at work and continue trying to solve the problem. (If you're not convinced, feel free to imagine that something of even greater moral importance hangs on whether the machine is fixed.)

Both Cousin and Gary and Broken Machine are cases that involve moral reasons to choose an action on the basis of the possibility that a person is *not* epistemically hopeless. But if you are guided by these reasons—if, that is, you act *precisely on the basis* of the possibility that a person is not epistemically hopeless—you are not regarding the person as epistemically hopeless. At most, you are regarding him as *very likely* to be epistemically hopeless. In the same way, if you buy a ticket to a lottery *precisely because* the possible payoff makes the long odds worth it, you are not regarding your ticket as a loser. You are, at most, regarding your ticket as *very likely* to be a loser.

This claim may seem to commit me to a specific or idiosyncratic view of what it is to regard a proposition as true. But, in fact, the opposite is true; for the purposes of this paper, I can be neutral between a variety of views about which mental states are involved in regarding-as-true. There is, surely, *some* attitude toward *p* that you forego when you choose your action precisely because of the possibility that $\neg p$. Maybe it's *acceptance*; maybe it's *taking for granted*; maybe it's *believing*.¹⁵ In this paper, I use talk of *regarding* as a theory-neutral placeholder for this mental state, and invite readers to fill it in by appealing to the philosophy of mind that they find most plausible. The key point of this section, then, has simply been that we sometimes face moral pressure against adopting this mental state concerning others' epistemic hopelessness.

One further objection is worth considering. You might think that the moral reasons that bear on how to *act* do not come along with moral reasons that bear on how to *regard others*.¹⁶ Perhaps, for instance, it's entirely morally acceptable to simultaneously attempt to rationally persuade Gary and view him as beyond the reach of rational persuasion. The problem with this view is that actions are temporally extended, and regarding one's action as doomed to failure tends to

¹⁴ To make this even clearer, suppose that everyone working to repair the machine has to work in isolation, and that the machine is so complex that the possibility of determining the problem with it arationally, or of fixing it without discovering the problem, is vanishingly small.

¹⁵ For discussion of different mental states that might be thought relevant to guiding practical reasoning under uncertainty, see Ross and Schroeder (2014) and Bolinger (forthcoming).

¹⁶ Some will think that any apparent moral reasons against regarding *p* as true are, actually, merely moral reasons to *desire* or to *bring it about* that one does not regard *p* as true. (For a view in this vein, see Kelly 2002.) This view is entirely compatible with the arguments I offer; readers tempted by it should feel free to interpret my claims about reasons to regard-as-true as, e.g., reasons to desire that one regards-as-true.

undermine one's commitment to carrying it out. Regarding cousin Gary as beyond the reach of rational persuasion, for instance, will tend to undermine one's commitment to engaging with him. After all, we're imagining a case in which the primary reason to engage with cousin Gary *just is* that there's a possibility that he really will be rationally persuaded. If you view that possibility as foreclosed, but you keep engaging with Gary, your action is likely to seem pointless from your own perspective. And when our actions seem pointless from our own perspective, we tend (perhaps not immediately, and perhaps not exceptionlessly) to give those actions up.

When morality favors taking an action on the grounds that there is a genuine chance that someone is not epistemically hopeless, morality also often speaks against regarding that person as epistemically hopeless. Since there are cases in which a person's epistemic hopelessness is important for decision-making, then, there are also cases in which morality speaks against regarding others as epistemically hopeless.

4. Against the Never Give Up Hope View

In the previous section, I showed that there are at least some contexts—ones involving decision-making—in which morality speaks against regarding people as epistemically hopeless. Some, however, will be tempted by an even stronger conclusion: that judging a person epistemically hopeless in certain ways (that is, regarding certain subject matters or with a certain idealization in the background) is always objectionable, no matter what decisions we face. I'll call this the Never Give Up Hope View.

A spiritual cousin for the Never Give Up Hope View can be found in Ryan Preston-Roedder's work on faith in humanity. On Preston-Roedder's view, having faith that other people are morally decent is a "centrally important moral virtue" (2013, 665). Further, having faith that other people are morally decent involves certain cognitive dispositions. In some cases, Preston-Roedder writes, a person with faith in humanity will "hold on to the belief that right action is attainable" for other people, even as "reasons to doubt [their] decency mount" (2013, 666). On Preston-Roedder's view, in short, morality speaks forcefully in favor of our having certain beliefs about people, and against our having other beliefs about them.

Now, the question of whether a person *is morally decent* is importantly different from the question of whether a person *can rationally come to see the truth*. But it's not difficult to imagine a Preston-Roedder-inspired view on which, just as we face moral pressure to believe that *right action* is attainable for others, we also face moral pressure to believe that certain *rational true beliefs* are attainable for others. On this view, morality speaks in favor of our holding out hope that others can come to rationally see the truth (about, at least, certain topics of importance), and against our taking it for granted that they cannot. There is some initial attractiveness to this view. Hopefulness about others' inquiry seems to be, in Preston-Roedder's words, a morally virtuous "way of standing by them" (2013, 683).

In what follows, I'll argue that the Never Give Up Hope View goes too far. Regarding a person as epistemically hopeless—even in quite a strong sense, and even on topics of serious importance—is not, in itself, morally problematic. The view that I develop, however, leaves room for the kernel of truth in the Preston-Roedder-inspired position: morality does sometimes counsel us to stand by others by holding out hope that they are not epistemically hopeless. But whether it does so, I'll show, depends in part on the choices that the believer faces.

4.1 Open-Mindedness

Some may be tempted to think that regarding a person as epistemically hopeless—at least, against the background of fairly strong idealizations—involves a worrisome dogmatism. If I believe that a person could be wrong about p even if she were an extremely impressive inquirer, the thought goes, then I should acknowledge the possibility that *I* am wrong about p —and, thereby, the possibility that those who disagree with me are not epistemically hopeless.

On one approach to this charge, the call for open-mindedness is rooted in a particular view of disagreement's epistemic significance: the view that, if I learn that a procedurally rational inquirer with a strong enough body of information and arguments disbelieves p , I cannot rationally believe p .¹⁷ Discussing the problems for this view would take us too far afield; for the purposes of this paper, I'll work on the assumption that it's false.¹⁸

On a second way of developing the open-mindedness charge, we run afoul of a *moral* injunction toward open-mindedness whenever we regard another person as epistemically hopeless. Even if epistemic rationality permits me to remain steadfast, wouldn't there be something more respectful about acknowledging the possibility that I could be wrong about my contested belief, and that my interlocutor could be the one on the right track?

On closer inspection, however, it's not clear how regarding others as epistemically hopeless could amount to a problematic failure of open-mindedness. Granted, when I regard someone as epistemically hopeless, I take him to have a false belief. But this is not morally problematic in itself; surely, morality does not call on us to suspend judgment about p any time that we encounter disagreement about p . Regarding a

¹⁷ For a view in this spirit, see Feldman (2007).

¹⁸ Note that, by setting this view aside, we needn't rule out epistemic uniqueness, as it's usually understood. I can think that there is only a single doxastic state that is rationally supported by a body of evidence while also thinking that perfectly meeting *procedural* standards of rationality would not bring you to have that rationally supported doxastic state. Note, also, that I haven't assumed the falsehood of *conciliationism*, a popular and more general view of disagreement's epistemic significance. Very briefly: conciliationism is a view about how we should respond to others when they have a particular sort of epistemic credential. But if that epistemic credential has to do with the *accuracy* of your belief (see Elga 2010, Christensen 2016), then I can take you to be maximally procedurally rational and maximally well-informed while also taking you to lack the relevant credential.

person as epistemically hopeless also involves taking on certain views about the conditions under which he could come to see the truth. But this also does not seem to preclude open-mindedness. A person's being open-minded about p has more to do with the conditions under which she will reconsider *her own* views than her thinking about when *others* would reconsider their views.¹⁹ So even if I become entirely convinced that a person could not see the truth about p under an enormously heavy idealization, I might *myself* take up a stance toward p that is entirely open-minded. Perhaps I can do so by acknowledging that p might be false;²⁰ perhaps I can do so by being willing to abandon my view about p under certain conditions.²¹ Whatever morally virtuous open-mindedness requires, then, it does not rule out regarding others as epistemically hopeless.

4.2 Why Bother?

On a second strategy, regarding a person as epistemically hopeless constitutes a morally objectionable use of cognitive resources. We all have limited representational capacities, and we must adopt some policies regarding where to direct those capacities.²² Perhaps some matters are such that only a perverse or a vicious thinker would bother to settle them in her thinking.

To see the force of this idea, imagine a case: suppose that you come to learn that Bob has a settled, sometimes-occurrent set of beliefs ranking each married couple that he knows in terms of their likelihood of divorce. Bob, you might think, has gone morally wrong in the way that he manages his cognitive life. Perhaps, just as Bob has moral reasons not to devote his cognitive resources to the prospects for others' marriages, we have moral reasons not to devote our cognitive resources to the prospects for others' inquiry.

We should resist this analogy; there needn't be anything morally worrisome about bothering to evaluate the prospects for others' inquiry. This is especially clear in cases, like the case of Cousin Gary, where the prospects for their inquiry are important for decision-making. In those cases, thinking seriously about the chances for success in rational engagement with others is a morally *virtuous* way of managing cognitive resources.

Even in other cases, when a person's epistemic hopelessness is of no practical importance, there's nothing obviously worrisome about considering it. Suppose, for instance, I idly wonder as to whether my colleague, who's spent an impressive

¹⁹ Thanks to Kate Nolfi for helpful discussion here.

²⁰ Adler (2004, 133) and Riggs (2010, 181) argue that open-mindedness in one's steadfast belief that p is possible precisely because one can believe that p while acknowledging that p might be false.

²¹ See Fantl (2018, 23-4). Note also that Fantl rejects the claim that open-mindedness is, in any general way, a moral virtue.

²² Kruglanski (2014), for instance, notes a wide variety of "epistemic motivations," only some of which drive an agent toward "closure" regarding the truth of a given matter.

amount of time thinking about the issue, would continue to hold her false view about unrestricted composition even if perfectly procedurally rational. Suppose further that, reflecting on her impressively coherent package of beliefs, I conclude that she would. Especially if I think that epistemic hopelessness about unrestricted composition does not reflect badly on her, this seems like an entirely acceptable use of my cognitive resources. It's no more morally worrisome for me to use my time to think about this question than it would be for me to think about whether she has another entirely unimportant trait: take, for instance, the trait of never having visited Kentucky.

This is not to say, of course, that one *couldn't possibly* regard a person as epistemically hopeless in a way that manifests a morally problematic use of cognitive resources. But the mere fact that I devote cognitive resources to the prospects for a person's inquiry needn't reflect poorly on me.

4.3 Shared Reasoning

Recall Strawson's point that, when we take up the "objective attitude" toward a person, we cannot authentically argue with her or reason with her. In other words, we sever the possibility of a certain sort of relationship with her. This insight, I think, points the way toward the most promising defenses of the Never Give Up Hope View. On the final three strategies that I'll consider, we have standing moral reasons against regarding others as epistemically hopeless because, when we do so, we sever the possibility of a certain kind of relationship with them. Each of these strategies, I'll argue, fails to justify the Never Give Up Hope View.

The core question for these final three strategies is: *what kind* of relationship do I foreclose when I view a person as epistemically hopeless? I'll start by considering the view that, when I regard a person as epistemically hopeless about *p*, I give up on *shared reasoning* with her. Marušić and White (2018, 110) suggest that, at least some of the time, others have a "legitimate expectation" to be treated as a participant in shared reasoning.²³ When another person legitimately expects that I treat her as a participant in shared reasoning, one way for me to fall short of her legitimate expectation is for me to view her as epistemically hopeless.

But just how often can others legitimately expect that we share inquiry with them? On Marušić and White's view, giving up on shared reasoning with a person is not "always objectionable" (2018, 108); instead, openness to shared reasoning simply ought to be a *default* stance (2018, 112). Which circumstances suffice to justify giving up the default stance?

Paradigmatic examples of shared reasoning (like those that interest Marušić and White) involve relying on others' testimony. These are not, generally, cases in which one party is rationally entitled to steadfastly believe that the other party is getting the

²³ Marušić and White draw on work from Craig (1990, 35) and Langton (1992, 482) to clarify their notion of genuine, shared reasoning from within a "participant stance" (2018, 111).

subject matter of their shared reasoning wrong. What does shared reasoning look like in circumstances that support steadfast disagreement? Plausibly, it involves an active attempt to persuade, by offering reasons, criticizing beliefs, and questioning. If I'm not disposed to take these steps in the context of our disagreement, it's plausible that I *have* given up on shared reasoning with you.

Next, note that we have a great deal of moral leeway regarding whom to engage with in this involved way. Especially when the chance that I have to rationally persuade you of the truth is not a valuable one, I'm generally justified in leaving behind rational engagement on that topic on a whim. But, if we're very often entirely justified in leaving behind the *actions that constitute* shared reasoning in the context of a disagreement, then we're also often entirely justified in leaving behind *shared reasoning itself* in the context of a disagreement.

The bare fact that I have an opportunity to engage in shared reasoning with someone, then, provides at most a highly defeasible moral reason against viewing her as epistemically hopeless. This is not to say that we never face moral pressure to engage with others in shared reasoning; perhaps we do. But, to vindicate the idea that we do, we'll need a further story explaining the source of that pressure. Let's move on to consider some stories that might provide that story.

4.4 Close Personal Relationships

You might think that regarding a person as epistemically hopeless about certain important questions rules out the possibility of a genuine, mutually respectful personal relationship with that person.²⁴ If I consider a person incorrigibly misled about the things that matter most, could I really treat her as a confidante or a friend?

There are two things to say about this worry. First, there can certainly be authentic, close friendships between people who regard one another as epistemically hopeless on particular topics—even topics of central moral concern. Recall the Libertarian Friend case from section 1, in which you give up on the prospects for your friend Wes's inquiry about the permissibility of taxation. We can fill out the details of this case to make it clear that you might have an authentic, close friendship with Wes, despite your regarding him as hopeless. Suppose that you and Wes agree on most other moral issues, and you enjoy one another's company greatly. Suppose that you spend a lot of time together, make plans, keep promises, and generally treat one another as responsible adults. Suppose that, when a third party asks you about Wes's views on taxation, you tend to smile and affectionately say, "oh, yeah, I don't know why, but he's hopeless about that stuff. He's a good guy, though." Once details like this are filled in, it's clear that there needn't be anything defective or worrisome about a friendship of this sort.²⁵

²⁴ There has been a great deal of work lately on the question of which ways of representing a person interfere with friendship. See especially Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006).

²⁵ Thanks to Tristram McPherson for helpful discussion here.

Of course, not all moral disagreements are as contained as your disagreement with Wes. Some people are so far gone that there is practically no common ground on which you could base a friendship with them. This brings me to my second point; it's not always morally bad to rule out the possibility of an authentic, close personal relationship with someone. In fact, compelling evidence that a person might be epistemically hopeless about enough issues of central concern may be just the sort of thing that justifies giving up on the possibility of a close personal relationship with that person.

4.5 Membership in a Moral Community

On a final approach, which I'll call the "moral-community" approach, membership in a moral or political community with others requires seeing them as able to rationally respond to certain demands. When we settle on the view that someone is unable to rationally respond to those demands, however, we view him as beyond the scope of our moral or political community.²⁶ On this final view, we have strong moral reasons not to give up this sort of community, and therefore not to view others as epistemically hopeless—at least, with respect to certain propositions, and against the backdrop of certain strong idealizations.

The moral-community approach is the strongest strategy for establishing that, when it comes to certain morally or politically important propositions, we have standing reasons against regarding others as epistemically hopeless. But I doubt that it can be made to work.

To see why, first note that regarding a person as epistemically hopeless regarding the legitimacy of some particular demand does not mean regarding her as epistemically hopeless regarding morality *altogether*. So there's a sense in which we can regard a person as a competent moral agent—a member of the moral community—while also acknowledging that she has a moral blind spot. To take up this stance is to consider a person able to participate in our moral community, albeit in a potentially limited way. Recall, for instance, the Libertarian Friend case. In that case, you treat Wes as a competent, responsible member of your moral community—you simply acknowledge that there's an important moral issue about which he has a rational but incorrect view.

The defender of the moral-community approach might respond by conceding that there are no moral reasons against regarding Wes as epistemically hopeless, but insisting that in nearby, related cases—cases in which it's morally important for you to explicitly demand that Wes pay his taxes, perhaps—there are moral reasons against regarding him as unable to rationally respond to your demand. What should we say about these cases?

²⁶ For a view on which holding to one another demands is a crucial component of moral practice, see Darwall (2006). See also views in the public reason tradition (e.g. Gaus 2010), on which the legitimacy of a political demand presupposes that reasonable citizens can see that demand as legitimate.

Well, it depends. Suppose that you're faced with a decision about how (or whether) to go about making a demand of a person, and it's *important for your decision-making* whether she is epistemically hopeless. In other words, suppose that questions about just how to go about making the demand of the person hang on whether she really is epistemically hopeless. In that case, I agree that there is moral pressure against your viewing the person as epistemically hopeless—but we don't need to appeal to the moral-community view to explain it. We've already established that, when a person's epistemic hopelessness is important for your decision-making, there is moral pressure against regarding her as epistemically hopeless.

Suppose, on the other hand, that you stand ready to make a moral demand of a person, but the question of whether she is epistemically hopeless is *not* important for your decision-making. In other words, the way it's best to treat her given your actual position is just the same as the way it'd be best to treat her if you were certain that she was epistemically hopeless. Perhaps, for instance, it's very morally important to go through the motions of demanding an apology from her in order to express your solidarity with a party that she has harmed, and it would be morally preferable to do so even if you were certain that she could not rationally see the legitimacy of your demand. In cases of this sort, I doubt that morality calls on us to keep our minds open. After all, we've just stipulated that morality would favor outwardly blaming and demanding apology *even if it were certain* that the person in question was epistemically hopeless. So outwardly blaming while inwardly regarding a person as beyond the reach of your demand is, by stipulation, a combination of attitudes that morality permits in a very nearby case. And, given that you really have strong epistemic support for the proposition that the person you're outwardly blaming is epistemically hopeless, it seems entirely possible that you can currently adopt that combination of attitudes in a morally unproblematic way.

The moral-community approach, then, only justifies a limited moral worry about viewing others as epistemically hopeless. When another person's epistemic hopelessness is important for decision-making, we can morally err by viewing her as epistemically hopeless; most notably, we can give up too quickly on the project of making moral demands of her. But, when a person's epistemic hopelessness has no implications about whether or how to *go about* participating in a moral or political community, viewing her as epistemically hopeless does not cut her out of the that community in any objectionable way.

I'll now consider a final attempt to motivate the moral-community approach. One might argue that we need much stronger evidence to justify regarding a person as epistemically hopeless than we need to take up less morally-fraught stances. Perhaps, for instance, I need to be in an awfully strong epistemic position before I'm morally justified in regarding you as epistemically hopeless (or, perhaps, as epistemically hopeless in any strong sense), but I need only a bit of epistemic support before I'm morally justified in regarding you as having been to Kentucky. And perhaps the best way to explain this difference is by appeal to the moral importance of taking up a default stance that keeps the boundaries of our moral community open, at least until a very high evidential standard is met. (Note that, depending on where the evidential

standard is set, this line of thought may not vindicate something quite as strong as the Never Give Up Hope View.)

On a closer look, however, it's not at all clear that we really do need stronger epistemic support to regard a person as epistemically hopeless than to regard her as having been to Kentucky. That's because, loosely speaking, it's much easier to come by very strong epistemic support for the latter proposition than the former. The mere fact that someone tells me that she's been to Kentucky makes it enormously probable that she's been to Kentucky. (Why would she lie?) But the mere fact that a person seems fairly reasonable and defends a falsehood against some objections *doesn't* make it enormously probable that she would believe that falsehood under any given idealization—especially when the idealization is a particularly intense one. So perhaps one needs no more epistemic support to justifiably regard others as epistemically hopeless than one needs to regard them as having any other banal trait. Perhaps the difficulty of *getting* that support, instead, explains why we're generally, and rightly, quite cautious about regarding others as epistemically hopeless.²⁷ This attractive position also explains why, generally, we're *more* cautious about regarding others as epistemically hopeless as the relevant idealization intensifies: the more intense the idealization, the harder it is to get the needed epistemic support.

In this section, we saw that the Never Give Up Hope View goes too far. There is no noteworthy pattern of moral reasons that count against regarding others as epistemically hopeless, even about matters of serious importance. Now, it's true that there can be a certain pessimism involved in settling on the view that a person cannot see the truth, especially when it would be good for her to do so. But this, I think, is no grounds for moral concern. Consider an analogy: my evidence leaves open the possibility that all apparent injustices are really part of a grand design that builds toward perfect justice. It would be optimistic for me to regard that possibility as a live one. But I don't; I, pessimistically, regard the world as lacking perfect justice. There's nothing morally worrisome about this bit of pessimism. In the same way, there needn't be anything morally worrisome about pessimistically giving up hope on the prospects for a person's inquiry.

5. Conclusion: Directions for Further Exploration

This paper offered an investigation into the moral considerations that bear on whether to regard a person as epistemically hopeless. We found no general pattern of cases in which there is significant moral pressure to take up that stance. Further, we found that some cases do involve moral pressure *against* taking up that stance. But the moral reasons that count against regarding others as epistemically hopeless

²⁷ If testimony that a person has never been to Kentucky suffices to justify belief, why couldn't testimony that a person would not believe the truth that *p* under a very intense idealization suffice to justify belief? In principle, I admit that it could. But, as with all cases of testimony about difficult-to-evaluate counterfactuals, testifiers who are clearly in a position to know the truth will be harder and harder to come by as the variety of epistemic hopelessness in question becomes more and more intense. Thanks to Gene Mills for this objection.

turn out to be fairly limited; even when it comes to propositions of central moral concern, there is no standing moral reason to keep our minds open about the prospects for others' inquiry.

The investigation that I've offered in this paper raises a number of exciting questions, ones that point the way toward brand-new projects in both ethics and epistemology. I'll close the paper by noting three ways in which the inquiry of this paper could be taken forward into new territory.

First: the property that I've called 'epistemic hopelessness' is the property of being unable to obtain rational true belief under certain conditions. But sometimes, we ask questions about a person's inquiry that primarily concern epistemic goods other than rational true belief. Even if I grant that a person could gain rational true belief through inquiry, I might wonder whether she can thereby gain *knowledge*, or *understanding*. So there are a cluster of interesting properties in the vicinity of epistemic hopelessness. Each of these properties raises ethical questions much like the ones I've discussed in this paper: for instance, when (if ever) are there moral reasons against regarding a person as unable to *understand* some subject matter?

Second: this paper's discussion has been restricted to ethical questions about the ways that individual agents regard other agents. But what should we say about cases in which an individual regards a group as epistemically hopeless, or in which a group regards an individual as epistemically hopeless? On the face of it, these cases can be uniquely ethically troubling; being regarded as hopeless by a dominant social group, for instance, might be ethically problematic in a way that does not simply reduce to the problems with being regarded as hopeless by its members. Perhaps, in order to confront ethical questions like these, the tools I've offered in this paper will have to be combined with tools provided by work on group agency or collective responsibility.

Finally: though the moral considerations that I've noted here are not hostage to any particular view in epistemology, they may play an interesting role in answering certain epistemological questions. In other work, I've defended the view that certain moral facts, including ones that do not bear on whether *p*, can make a difference to how much epistemic support one needs to rationally believe that *p*. On this view, moral facts play a surprising difference-making role in epistemology; in other words, there is *moral encroachment* in epistemology.²⁸

Moral encroachment opens up room for the following interesting possibility: at least some of the considerations that provide moral pressure against regarding a person as epistemically hopeless can also help to explain why it would be irrational to *believe* that she is hopeless. Perhaps, for instance, the moral importance of attempting to persuade Cousin Gary is the sort of moral fact that explains both why it would be morally problematic to regard him as hopeless, and why it would be epistemically

²⁸ For defenses of moral encroachment, see Pace (2011), Fritz (2017, forthcoming), Moss (2018), Schroeder (2018), Basu and Schroeder (2019), and Bolinger (forthcoming).

irrational to believe that he is hopeless.²⁹ If there is moral encroachment in epistemology, then, this paper's inquiry into the *ethics* of regarding others as epistemically hopeless provides the groundwork for related inquiry into the *epistemic rationality* of regarding others as epistemically hopeless.

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²⁹ It's worth noting that defenders of moral encroachment generally do not, and should not claim that epistemic standards are sensitive to any moral reasons that bear on belief. For further discussion, see my (forthcoming).

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