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Three duties of epistemic diligence

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Introduction

A need for epistemic due diligence is standardly recognized by all kinds of investigator. For some professions and vocations – including academics, journalists, police, courts and intelligence officers – being clear about the basis of knowledge claimed is a stringent requirement of the occupation. But if it is incumbent on dedicated investigators to be critical, as well as honest and transparent, in their handling of evidence, their *duty* in the matter normally extends only to matters within their designated field of inquiry.¹ The question for this paper concerns duties that academics in general, and social philosophers more particularly,² may have to check claims of knowledge emanating from fields beyond their professional expertise or individual competence.

It might be supposed that the duty most applicable under such circumstances is to avoid pronouncing on matters that one is not competent to pronounce on. A self-denying ordinance would thus be appropriately observed.

The argument of this article, however, is that the presumptive justification of agnosticism cannot be sustained with regard to deliberations about matters of such significant public concern as those to be focused on, which relate to claims of a humanitarian case for coercive intervention. Implied in the making of these particular claims is a presumption of collective humanitarian responsibilities. A corollary that serves as a premise of this article is that, as a society, we collectively have a humanitarian responsibility to organize our intellectual capacities in such a way that preventable egregious harms like war have the best possible chance of being prevented. The central concern of this investigation is with erroneous beliefs that can prevail in an intellectual community, if only for a time, when during that time some serious harm might result from action in the world being taken on the

¹ Amelie Rorty has discussed the commonsense view ‘that we are obliged to fulfill the duty of due diligence only as far and as much as is necessary to act as responsibly as our situations and roles require’, pointing out, however, that it is circular: ‘the conditions for epistemic responsibility refer to those of moral responsibility; and those of moral responsibility presuppose epistemic responsibility.’ (Rorty 2010: 37) Developing this line of thought, and writing of ethical responsibilities of those engaged in advancing knowledge and understanding, Mitcham and Von Schomberg (2000) suggest a need to look beyond role responsibility to ideas of co-responsibility, as expanded upon a little in the text later on.

² The term ‘social philosopher’ is used here in a broad sense to encompass all who engage in ethical reflection on issues studied empirically in the social sciences. I take it the readership of this journal comprises a range of moral, political, social and legal philosophers and others with an interest in the application of normative principles to practical situations of current public interest.

basis of those beliefs. The mounting of a case for humanitarian intervention involving coercive, even military, means is an archetypal situation of this kind.

The article will argue for three distinct duties of epistemic diligence. The first follows from the rationale for the self-denying ordinance, namely, the need to avoid making uninformed, ill-informed or misinformed pronouncements. It adds a degree of vigilance regarding the judgment involved in deciding *whereof* one should remain silent insofar as this is to make a substantive decision. Such a decision, in practice, is unlikely to be entirely clear-cut. For our understanding of our cognitive competences and their limitations is likely to be less complete than we realize: there may be things we think we know, but don't, and things we think we don't know, but do. It is unrealistic to suppose one can rely on a clear distinction between what one knows and what one does not know.³ Being diligent to avoid speaking beyond one's competence is thus not only a matter of remaining silent on certain matters but also of checking that one's silence is not tacit acquiescence in a substantive view that is actually controversial and quite possibly false. A first duty, then, is to avoid allowing oneself to be deceived and thereby potentially to be in a position unintentionally to deceive others about the nature of the context in which a normative recommendation is likely to be applied. What this entails, at a minimum, is taking some care when devising thought experiments to characterize an ethical question. As Henry Shue showed with regard to arguments premised on the 'ticking bomb' scenario offered as justification for torture, even some general substantive characterizations of situations can be epistemologically unwarranted. The argument to be developed in Section 1 presses Shue's point further so as to problematize the assumption that intelligence obtained by methods other than torture is necessarily any more epistemologically sound. For both experience and reasonable general inferences about the nature of intelligence gathering caution us to withhold unreserved deference to official sources or authorized narratives.

A question then picked up in Section 2 is how skeptical it is rational to be. At the extreme, one might avoid being misled by just refusing to believe anything, but this would undercut the possibility of engaging meaningfully in social philosophy. In any case, one

³ In fact, any such assessment presupposes some means of managing a dilemma that has exercised philosophers at least since Plato's formulation of Meno's paradox. The dilemma, as Thomas Nickles summarises it, 'is that either we already know the solution to our problem (the answer to our question) or we do not. If we do already know, then we cannot genuinely inquire. And if we don't know, then we also cannot inquire, for then we would have no way to recognize the solution (answer) even should we stumble upon it accidentally.' (Nickles 2015: 63) What Nickles identifies as a flaw in the Meno argument 'is that it places us in an all-or-nothing position regarding knowledge, failing to allow that there can be (fallible) cues as to whether or not we are making progress toward a solution.' (Nickles 2015: 63-4) Heuristic appraisal can discern 'hints and clues that can provide direction to inquiry in the sometimes large gap between the extremes of complete knowledge and complete ignorance.' (Nickles 2015: 64)

needs to recognize just how much one always takes on trust even when striving to be rigorously independent in one's critical reasoning. For the development of knowledge is a highly socialized process, as Steve Clarke (2002, 2007) emphasizes, so extremes of skepticism are as much to be avoided as those of deference. They can be avoided by adopting rationally defensible methods of responding to anomalies in official stories and authoritative narratives – and there is a range of different kinds of response that can be appropriate depending on a variety of contextual factors. The defensibility of a response would ultimately be determined by reference to the kinds of factor that make for what Clarke, following Imre Lakatos (1970), calls a *progressive* research programme, as opposed to one that is *degenerating*. The general idea here is that research can be regarded as progressive as long as it yields novel predictions that in due course come to be verified.⁴

Given that this kind of diligence can be done, the argument can be made for regarding it as a *duty*. For the risk to be averted, on humanitarian grounds, is not only that one may be deceived in thinking one can remain agnostic about empirical questions when engaging in applied philosophy, but that others may be misled or deceived in ways that one could have helped them avoid. Harms can arise from the enactment of others' recommendations that one fails to oppose as well as from those one supports. It can thus be argued that, in certain kinds of circumstance, one has a duty to check that others are not misled. Instances of such a circumstance would be where the humanitarian stakes are high and those who are reproducing potentially dangerous misinformation are within reach of one's influence. A particular circumstance would be one where other academics are supporting a case for coercive intervention on grounds that one knows – from having discharged the first duty of due diligence – to be epistemologically questionable. Accordingly, the argument of Section 2 is that there is a duty to seek to protect others from being misled by problematic narratives. Its premise is that one can meaningfully engage in assessment of the epistemological basis of knowledge claims outside one's particular empirical expertise. For doing so need involve not producing positive knowledge of the substantive issues but assessing reports that bear the claims of knowledge into the public domain. These can be checked for contradictions or methodological inconsistencies internally, and the consistency of the report's knowledge claims can also be checked externally against relevant contextual and general knowledge.

⁴ I adopt Clarke's terminology, since he has introduced it into relevant debates in applied epistemology. But while the framing of the account that follows is broadly consistent with Lakatos' view of the development of science, the ideas here are more general and could be expressed as well in other terms. For instance, what Lakatos refers to as a "research programme" might in some contexts be referred to as a "working model". In this terminology, a model that has many adjustable parameters (auxiliary hypotheses) can adapt to fit the observations, but will usually have poor performance at predicting new observations because it is too tied to the data of a particular situation (an issue that in machine learning, for instance, is referred to as 'overfitting'). A good model will generate novel predictions that in due course come to be verified. I thank Paul McKeigue for his observations on these matters.

This approach may not directly generate new positive knowledge, but it can show certain positive claims to be false, which can be highly significant when acceptance of the claims would be taken as justification for harmful action that might otherwise have been avoided.

The problem addressed in Section 3 is that false claims are nonetheless sometimes accepted as a basis for deciding on action. In this circumstance, the duty is not only to protect against mistakenly accepting a false account but also to correct a false account that has gained acceptance. This can be a qualitatively more demanding task in at least two respects. One is that the correction may require the affirmation of a more satisfactory positive account, and while any competent report reader may be able to identify anomalies in one account, it may take considerable expertise and research to produce a better alternative: such a project would normally require collaboration of relevant experts and a considerable investment of effort. The other is that it involves a preparedness to be resiliently persistent – for in this circumstance, researchers may be confronted by protagonists who are actively promoting, and have a stake in maintaining, the claim. The third duty, accordingly, cannot adequately be conceptualised on an individualistic model of responsibility, and nor can it be specially assigned to social philosophers. The kind of work involved inherently involves interdisciplinary collaboration, and a duty to engage in it has to be thought of as a *collective* one. The argument to be developed, accordingly, is of a collective duty of co-responsibility that falls particularly on those entrusted collectively to underwrite knowledge claims – especially universities – and that devolves onto individuals via a principle of due responsiveness. This does not here involve stipulating any very particular interpretation of that principle or rules for applying it. Indeed, for reasons that become clearer as we go along, the matter is one that involves elements reasonably regarded – from the standpoint of any individual agent – as supererogatory. So the argument is not that every academic, for instance, should necessarily be held to be under such a duty. The point is, in Shue's words, the collective responsibility is to achieve 'full coverage',⁵ whatever more specific individual or group duties that might entail. An important part of the argument is that those agents who are appropriately responsive to the collective imperative should have the support of the rest of the intellectual community, including universities as institutions. If social philosophers have any special obligation it is to evaluate this argument and, to the extent accepted, support it.

In order to give as full a sense as possible, in the space available, of how the duties characterized in this paper might arise and be discharged in practice, reference is made to a case study. The research referred to is still in progress, but its development so far provides sufficient material to illustrate the points made in the discussion. For the aim, in referring to

⁵ The reference here is to Shue (1988); for more on my own general perspective on the concept of responsibility in relation to duties see e.g. Hayward (1995: 162-172)

it, is not to offer a detailed account of the research programme but to show how it has progressively developed as implicit response to the ethical imperatives that can be conceptualised as the three duties argued for here.

Section 1

Assuming an overarching precept of 'do no harm', a first duty of an applied philosopher is to recommend no course of action that causes unnecessary, unjustifiable and avoidable harm. Assuming also that this would never be done intentionally, then the relevant duty of due diligence is to be sure to avoid doing so unintentionally. In particular, one should avoid assuming over-optimistic prognoses regarding the outcome of an action or being misled about the nature of the problem to which an action is proposed as a response.

Now it should be acknowledged that philosophers are generally careful not to be misled about the facts of a matter, and, indeed, normally refrain from making any empirical assumptions at all. Ethical considerations are discussed on a hypothetical, *ceteris paribus*, basis. When particular scenarios feature in an argument, they serve as ideal typical models rather than putative descriptions of the actual world. For the applied philosopher – whose expertise typically lies somewhere within a nexus of fields including social, political, legal and moral philosophy – the evaluation of claims of empirical fact or social explanation may lie beyond their professional competence. This would seem to be a sufficient reason to reject the idea that they have duties to engage in such an evaluation. Indeed, they will recognize duties to not pronounce beyond their competence and to be careful to insert due caveats and qualifications in any argument that depends on assumptions about facts or explanatory interpretations of them.

The argument to be advanced here, however, is that a more nuanced view is possible (Nickles 2015) and that, in fact, it is ethically incumbent upon us to make efforts to develop one, as Amelie Rorty (2010) suggests. A key to doing so, as advocated by Carl Mitcham and Rene Von Schomberg (2000), is to recognize that a theory of occupational role responsibility is no longer in harmony with social reality of complex, multiple and fluid roles. So attaching responsibility to an individual's role is often not feasible. But in view of the risk of allowing social irresponsibility to become normalized, they propose an 'ethics of collective co-responsibility'. For an individual to be co-responsible means being personally *responsive*,⁶

⁶ To develop an adequate account of this would be beyond the scope of the present paper. What due personal responsiveness consists in will vary with the nature of the question and of the co-responsibility assumed to apply in relation to it. For instance, Mihaela Mihai (forthcoming) focuses on duties of responsiveness to the epistemic position of more vulnerable people borne by academics in virtue of their privilege of presumed epistemic authority, emphasizing the need to think beyond specialist constraints, while recognizing reasons for due

and this can sometimes mean doing epistemic diligence on knowledge claims that lie beyond the bounds of their field or role as normally delineated.

The general idea appealed to in developing this line of argument is that applied ethics should not be regarded as independent of applied epistemology. This idea has recently undergone a revival,⁷ particularly in response to the changing circumstances of social knowledge dissemination that have arisen with the new information technologies. David Coady, for instance, argues that ‘applied epistemology is logically prior to applied ethics. Our actions are normatively, as well as causally, dependent on our beliefs.’ (Coady 2017: 58) Furthermore, he maintains, our beliefs themselves are a kind of action: ‘in applied epistemology we are discussing one particular aspect of how we ought to live, namely how we ought to live our intellectual life: how we should pursue knowledge, what we should believe, and so forth.’ (Coady 2017: 58)

A basic element of epistemic due diligence incumbent on an ethicist is to be aware of how one’s beliefs may affect the way one argues, even – and perhaps especially – when these are not consciously present to one’s mind. Thus a good reason to be as diligent as possible with regard to one’s assumptions about the world, even when engaging in seemingly abstract theoretical considerations or intuitive thought experiments, is that these assumptions may be influencing one’s ethical argument more than one realizes, possibly shaping and steering it. Furthermore, it is not only philosophers who advance action-guiding arguments, and, in the world of practical decision making, actors may focus more on the positive case for a recommendation than on the caveats concerning its applicability. Thus a recommendation is liable to assume a ‘life of its own’ as it is taken up by others and, shorn of important caveats, comes to exercise influence in the world of action.

A dilemma in practice, then, where decisions must be taken and action guided, is that the need to attain some rational guidance for decision-making can come into tension with the need for epistemological scrupulousness. So an appropriate balance in practice needs to be struck. Engaging in applied philosophy is fundamentally a matter of exercising *judgment*.

intellectual humility about the possibility of doing so. The question of how personal responsiveness links to collective co-responsibility, particularly in relation to humanitarian need, is explored by Christina Dineen (2018). Mitcham and Von Schomberg, meanwhile, in thinking more beyond ‘role responsibility’, focus on the challenges of attaining any epistemic authority in relation to complex structures of collective knowledge, where lack of empathy may not be the biggest obstacle. From the point of a conscientious individual working out their own moral duties, there is a place for all kinds of responsiveness. The focus in the present paper is on those of us who do have a degree of identifiable role responsibility – as ‘academics’ or ‘intellectuals’ – but with the recognition that our personal or civic responsibility is not exclusively related to such specialist expertise as our professional role calls for.

⁷ Coady (2017) records how it was clearly present in works of many figures in the history of moral and political philosophy.

Judgment is involved in both the ethical and epistemological domains, but it also has an irreducible domain of its own. An ethical theory offers general reasons to favour a certain course of action in a given set of circumstances; an empirical theory explains the nature of a specific set of circumstances; but there remains a further question of whether and to what extent the specific circumstances resemble the kind assumed as the generic model. The answer to this question cannot be determined by simply consulting the two kinds of input, for whether the situation is one where the ethical theory applies is a distinct question requiring exercise of judgment.

This irreducible role for judgment in arriving at ethical decisions has been particularly emphasized by Henry Shue. He has highlighted it in the context of just the kind of ethical issue that is of central substantive interest here. This is where the question is whether to countenance an exception to a strong moral proscription on a certain course of action in order to prevent a still more egregious human rights violation.

Shue has made the issue vivid in his discussion of torture. While he holds the view that torture can never be justified, he recognizes that, given a sufficiently imaginative scenario, a case for exceptions might be constructed. He refers to influential arguments that explore justifications for torture on the basis of the ‘ticking bomb’ thought experiment. He argues that the scenario it presupposes – whereby vital information that will save many lives can be extracted by torturing a captured conspirator – fundamentally misrepresents the circumstances under which torture is actually practiced in the world. For it is encountered as an institutionalized practice that involves ‘a culture, expert teachers, innovative students, equipment testing, technique improvement, international communication, plus corrupt medical doctors who collaborate and corrupt lawyers (like those around Bush and Cheney) who cover-up and deny’ (Shue 2009: 314). In abstracting from those institutionalized realities, the ticking bomb scenario involves ‘a sociological fantasy’. To suppose the complex specificity of the facts can be set aside, Shue argues, ‘is to think that one can make wise moral assessments of practices without knowing how the practices work—indeed, without really knowing what the practices are. This is intellectually and morally irresponsible’ (Shue 2009: 314).

A similar point can be made in relation to coercive intervention. The crucial question regarding the possible justification for any kind of intervention – preventive or humanitarian – is whether intelligence ‘can be sufficiently reliable that it is not irresponsible to take human lives on the basis of it’ (Shue 2009: 316). Shue challenges the assumption that the epistemic value of information secured through torture could ever reliably be so great. He does believe, however, that intelligence obtained by other means can have sufficient epistemic value potentially to justify intervention on consequentialist grounds. Although he is not under any

illusion about the reality of how intelligence agencies can fail to live up to their public service mission, Shue sees this as a contingent problem that could in principle be resolved, rather than a contradictory tension at the very heart of the idea as in the case of torture. Thus he draws a contrast between the idea of the ‘ideal torturer’ and that of the ‘ideal spy’. The former is inherently self-contradictory:

‘Successful torturers must avoid sympathy and empathy, or they will go too easy. But they must also avoid anger and cruelty, or they will go too hard and merely knock the victim senseless, or drive him into a dissociative state, and learn nothing useful for the prevention of catastrophe. Torture is not for amateurs-successful torturers need to be real "pros", and no one becomes a "pro" overnight. At a minimum, one must practice-perhaps do research, be mentored by the still more experienced. In short, torture needs a bureaucracy, with apprentices and experts, of the kind that torture in fact always has. ... Torture is an institution.’ (Shue 2006: 236)

Intelligence agencies, by contrast, although ‘notoriously unsuccessful’ in practice, could in principle be so organized and regulated as to deliver well-verified and solid intelligence (Shue 2007). The organization of such intelligence operations would involve a great deal of coordination and resource, but not self-contradictory objectives or particular moral dilemmas. Thus, Shue’s view is that ‘the ideal torturer sounds like fantasy, but the ideal spy mainly sounds fabulously expensive’ (Shue 2009: 316).

However, if we think about the nature of the ideal intelligence institution we find it is replete with as many, if not more, paradoxical requirements than those associated with torture. For one thing, intelligence agencies being established, as they supposedly are, to serve interests in national security, and no matter how benign and pacific those interests might be, their operations necessarily require some secrecy. For a state that aspires to be democratic there is thus an inherent tension: in the public interest some kinds of knowledge cannot be made public. So there need to be various checks and procedures to prevent secrecy and privilege being abused. But while mechanisms of democratic oversight are in principle possible, their effectiveness can be limited in practice (Otto 2017; Bakir 2018). Indeed, the idea of an ‘ideal intelligence agency’ is paradoxical inasmuch as the ‘ideal spy’ would be someone capable of deceiving you. The problem is not that spies can sometimes be double agents but that the whole organizational infrastructure of intelligence operations has to be capable of maintaining convincing deceptions. Even if intelligence personnel are selected for their probity and integrity, the problem remains that public deceptions need not originate with the intelligence officers. They may be scrupulously truthful in the confidential reports they convey to politically motivated decision-makers, but who can check that the latter are also as scrupulous? Members of the legislature may be able to ask certain questions of them, but this

cannot guarantee complete protection against any who might be determined to instrumentalise the system's necessary features of opacity. Unfortunately, when it comes to information relevant to decisions about war and intervention, we have learned to be extremely cautious on that score.

A problem for a society, then, is that intelligence reports are not open to peer review, so the knowledge they embody, and what is reported of it publicly, are matters over which neither members of the citizen body nor even their representatives in the legislature can exercise due diligence. And if that is so, what can be expected of academics? A duty to avoid being misled or making recommendations that could cause harm appears to imply keeping to a minimum any comment at all on actual cases of potential intervention. Yet the problem remains that other people will engage in ethical debate of such matters. Is there any duty to prevent them being misled in order to protect the wider public against decisions being taken that lead to serious avoidable harms? The answer to this question, assuming that 'ought implies can', depends on what it is possible to do.

Section 2

Intervention is a matter with respect to which there is a particular need not only for ethical diligence, as philosophers well recognize, but also for epistemic diligence. This latter need may be under-appreciated in the philosophical literature, but in some more empirically orientated fields it is well understood. If both the need for it and the possibility of it are accepted, then the case for this second duty follows from the same basis as the first. A need for it is in fact not hard to seek. Studies have identified a clearly discernible presumption in favour of intervention by the Western-led 'international community' (Desch 2008; Parmar 2009; Dixon 2019), and this is built into the very framing of purportedly factual reports that reach the public via the news media (Milojevich and Beattie 2018). Given the potential for harm of acting on reports favouring intervention, there is a clear ethical imperative to engage in critical assessment of them rather than simply accept them. The argument of this section begins by showing how the prejudicial framing of prospective interventions can be described in terms that amount to a *playbook*. In order then to demonstrate how a non-expert can deploy generic skills of critical reading, there follows some discussion of a case study.

A significant general concern motivating the checking of factual reports cited as grounds for intervention is that 'political leaders can promote a one-sided foreign policy as a response to foreign conflicts if the media continue to push a humanitarian (military) interventionist agenda, effectively leaving all other policy options off the table without any resistance from a public unaware of or less exposed to other proposed options.' (Milojevich

and Beattie 2018: 849) This interventionist frame may be characterized by reference to the four main elements of a news frame as conceptualized by Robert M. Entman:

‘(1) “Group A is being oppressed and suffering human rights abuses”; (2) “Dictator A and his hardline, ultra-nationalist government is using the military to violate human rights and suppress democracy in Country A”; (3) “Dictator A can only be stopped by the threat or use of military force”; and (4) “We cannot afford to do nothing while military aggression, democracy suppression, and human rights abuses continue” (Entman 2004: 24).’

The dynamic applied to those elements then involves a process of demonization, as David Willcox (2005) has described:

‘First, the war or crisis is specifically personalized with the enemy leader so that the introduction of their name becomes synonymous with the conflict. Second, the individual, once directly associated with the conflict, is demonized, provoking negative connotations through the invoking of their name.’ (Willcox 2005: 92)

The question then is how one can know whether any claims so framed are not in fact true, for we should not assume that reports of atrocities are always prejudicially framed. So although the onus of proof lies with the would-be intervener, this is not a reason to dismiss *a priori* any purported proof offered. The reference to the framing is given as a guideline for critical questions that might be asked. What this section now focuses on is the nature of competences required in order to answer those questions.

The claim to be developed is that these competences are of a kind commanded by anyone capable of intelligent critical report reading. For it is possible to evaluate critically the reports that are presented to support a case for action without oneself having direct or expert knowledge of the matters reported. While it is normally rational to defer to the authors of a report with respect to matters in which one has not done one’s own research, it is nonetheless appropriate to pay some critical attention to the soundness of a report when one in some way relies on it or has some stake in its potential consequences. A difference between this kind of due diligence and actual research is that it can focus on seeking out anomalies. It is not necessary that a reader be an expert in a matter to identify some kinds of anomalies in reports on it. Moreover, for a question like whether there is a case for humanitarian intervention, no single field of expert knowledge can offer a complete answer, and thus there is no single field in which to find a uniquely qualified expert. Non-experts may sometimes even have certain cognitive advantages over experts: they might discern unnoticed phenomena appearing between or across specialisms, or they may notice how findings from different fields might be synthesized in ways unnoticed by the several experts who generated them. Non-experts could thus notice anomalies that bear on the framing and assumptions of the authoritative

collaboration.⁸ In the critical reading of a report there are two general kinds of anomaly that might be identified by a non-expert: those internal to a report that show up as inconsistencies within it and external ones that can be brought to light through comparing the report with related reports or other available information sources. Specialist expertise does not necessarily stop a critical reader from identifying anomalies in a report, then. This is a matter of some *potential* significance when a report is presented as evidence in support of a possibly harmful course of action.

However, when a given course of action is understood to have a presumptive justificatory basis in a ‘mountain of evidence’, so to speak, then the mere identification of an anomaly is in itself likely to be of limited *actual* significance. For in the development of expert knowledge, anomalies are encountered routinely, and a point about expertise is that it equips its possessor to deal appropriately with them. Anomalies can be dealt with by means of adjustments to peripheral elements of the research programme, by means of introducing or modifying auxiliary hypotheses, while leaving its core proposition untouched. The rationality of this approach is bound up with the reasonable presumption that, when a given scientist encounters an anomaly, this could be due to some failing on their part rather than a fundamental flaw in their model or research programme. Thus it would be a naïve understanding of scientific method and rationality to suppose that simply identifying an anomaly for a core proposition would falsify or suffice to refute it.

Indeed, it is worth noting that critics who make a broad based challenge to the kind of core proposition advanced by advocates of a specific intervention are often accused of being conspiracy theorists, in a derogatory sense,⁹ because even if they do not engage in wild alternative conjectures, they can nonetheless be said to mistake an anomaly for a refutation. This criticism is conceptually useful in bringing focus to what is at stake in the present case because precisely the charge often levelled at objectors to intervention is that they are rejecting authoritative intelligence on the basis of nothing more than a speculative alternative. Since the blanket rejection of any and every ‘conspiracy theory’ would also not be rational – if only because we know that some of them have been vindicated – then such a theory can be

⁸ This is something that can routinely be observed in review panels, and something similar is assumed as the condition of possibility of trial juries delivering sound verdicts.

⁹ Since this is often taken to be the only sense, it is worth being aware that ‘the conspiracy-theory label was popularized as a pejorative term by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in a propaganda program initiated in 1967’ (deHaven Smith 2013: 21). It is now generally accepted that ‘some of the labelling of particular views as “conspiracy theories” is a technique of governmentality’ (Knight, 2014: 348). In response, a number of philosophers have recently embarked on evaluating conspiracy theorizing as a rational form of intellectual inquiry (e.g. Basham 2018; Coady 2018; Dentith 2016; Hagen 2018; Pigden 2016).

rationally assessed in terms of its epistemic merits. Thus Steve Clarke (2002, 2007) has advocated the methodological proposal that, following Lakatos (1970), the way to decide whether to adhere to a conspiracy theory, or to abandon it, is by considering whether it is at the core of a *progressive* or a *degenerating* research programme. Certainly, this kind of general distinction is helpful to keep in mind when trying to decide, in any given context, between an ‘official narrative’ and a ‘conspiracy theory’, since it cuts through the prejudicial loadings of those descriptors to the issues that can potentially settle the contest:

‘In a progressive research programme the proponents of a theory are able to anticipate new evidence and make predictions (and retrodictions) that are generally successful. By contrast, a degenerating research programme is characterised by a lack of successful predictions (and retrodictions) and by the subsequent modification of initial conditions and auxiliary hypotheses after new evidence has come in.’ (Clarke 2007: 167)

At a certain point, it becomes irrational to continue with a degenerating research programme, although Lakatos did not attempt to say exactly when this would be, and Clarke considers it ‘doubtful whether we could stipulate an exact point at which it becomes rational to abandon any particular theory.’ (Clarke 2007: 167) For, as philosophers of science more generally recognize, the mere fact of anomalous data ‘can never logically compel a scientist to abandon a particular hypothesis because the hypothesis is embedded in a network of beliefs, any one of which might be wrong’ (Chinn and Brewer 1993: 10). It is only with the development of a comprehensively better theory that one can speak of the old one being *refuted*. So it is possible meanwhile to adhere to a degenerating research programme even as the rationality of doing so diminishes.

This means elements of judgment are integral to the process of scientific discovery, and the response of investigators to anomalies can itself stand to be judged in terms of its all-things-considered rationality. Clark A. Chinn and William F. Brewer (1993) offer a conceptual framework that will be referred to in discussing the case study that follows. This distinguishes seven kinds of possible response to an anomaly: ignore it; reject it; exclude it from the domain of the accepted theory; hold it in abeyance; reinterpret the data to fit the accepted theory; reinterpret the data and make peripheral changes to the theory; accept the data and change the theory. Each kind of response will be more rational in certain situations than in others. Determining the rationality of a particular response in a given situation is in large measure a matter of judgment. It should be defensible in terms that non-experts ought to be able to understand so that in situations where evidence to justify intervention is at stake, and such a justification has to be publicly defensible, its basis needs to be publicly comprehensible.

The case study relates to international disagreement about how the United Nations' commitment to a 'responsibility to protect' should be implemented with regard to the people in Syria. The doctrine stipulates three pillars of responsibility: every state should protect its people from mass atrocity crimes; the international community should encourage and assist individual states in meeting that responsibility; if a state is manifestly failing, the international community should intervene, with force if necessary (Bellamy 2015). The fact that since 2011 mass atrocities have been occurring in Syria signals a need for action under the second pillar, but the controversy is whether the third has been triggered. For if the Syrian state is shown to have manifestly failed, despite having received encouragement and assistance from outside, then the international community would have to act against the holders of power in that state.

To be clear, the purpose here is not to purport to settle controversy about such an immensely difficult and complex question. There are strong arguments and strong feelings on different sides of the terrible conflict. The question is whether, under such circumstances, the burden of proof that should satisfy nations of a responsibility to intervene decisively in favour of ousting a state's leadership had, as far as could be determined on the basis of information made public in Western nations, been met. The case study, accordingly, focuses on claims made in public discussions that, for the sake of the humanitarian interests of the people of Syria, the country's leadership should be ousted. The central proposition as publicly disseminated was that president Bashar al Assad ought to be removed from office. As justification, it assumes the intransigence and recalcitrance of the governing power has precluded meaningful action to achieve humanitarian objectives under the rubric of the second pillar, such as encouraging accelerated political reforms while supporting the state in protecting citizens against violent extremists. Insofar as the proposition also includes the possibility of imposing economic sanctions on Syria as a means to its end, it also implies a belief that the harms these inflict on the Syrian people are outweighed by the value of that end.¹⁰ So the Assad government has been determined to be the overriding problem and not a possible part of a feasible solution. The study will draw attention to certain anomalies for the core proposition – namely, that *for the good of the Syrian people, "Assad must go"* – and it shall assess the rationality of responses to those anomalies by reference to the framework of Chinn and Brewer (1993).

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this core proposition has been regarded as axiomatic by a great many who comment publicly in the West, including in academia. There, consensus was reached early in the conflict, the message being reinforced from many

¹⁰ The tension between economic sanctions and ostensibly humanitarian concern has been less reflected on than one might expect by Western commentators, although see Held (2008) and Averre and Davies (2015), as well as the response of Hayward (2018b) to Monbiot (2011).

quarters, and with virtually no dissenting opinion reaching Western ears. How accurate and objective was the information supporting it, however, is another matter; and such of it as came to public attention was certainly incomplete. With hindsight and the benefit of access to initially neglected sources, one can find in reports from the time a number of pieces of evidence that would have presented anomalies for the theory. However, since few of these were publicized in the Western media, and allowing reasonable assumptions about the likelihood of conflicting reports in such situations, it might be argued that, particularly under conditions of humanitarian emergency, it was rational to *ignore* the anomaly presented by those few that did appear.¹¹ In conflict situations it is especially easy for reports simply to be mistaken. When anomalous reports came from organs of the Syrian state, however, one could not simply assume them to be mistaken, but they could plausibly be regarded as lacking impartiality or independent corroboration. So it was generally regarded as rationally defensible to *reject* them on the grounds of vested interest and partiality.

An example of evidence that could not simply be ignored or straightforwardly rejected, however, was the result of the 2014 presidential election. The outcome – with Assad attaining 10,319,723 votes (88.7% of the vote) with a turnout put at 73.42%¹² – would appear to present an anomaly for the proposition that “for the sake of the Syrian people Assad must go”. For even if a significant number took that view, they were not in the majority. Commentators who adhered to the proposition typically responded, however, by *excluding the anomalous evidence from the domain of their theory*. The result could not truly be accounted evidence against the proposition, they maintained, because the conditions of a genuinely free, fair and democratic election were absent: so although it superficially appears to rebut the proposition, a suitably sophisticated understanding of the situation would show that it is not genuinely admissible evidence.¹³

As the war went on, with the Syrian Arab Army – a religiously pluralistic force – remaining resolutely loyal to the government (Alam 2014, 2016; Watt 2015), anomalies became harder to avoid. For instance, it came to be widely understood that arms and other supplies provided by foreign countries for ‘moderate rebels’ were falling into the hands of violent anti-democratic forces. Knowledge of this implied worrying questions about what

¹¹ The number is small only relative to the orthodox view. Contemporary writings critical of the authorised account were in fact rather numerous. For syntheses of some of these see, for example: Abrahms (2017), Anderson (2016), Cockburn (2017), Dejevsky (2018), Gowans (2017), Hammond et al (2019), Hayward (2017; 2019b), Lynch et al (2014), Sen et al (2016), Kinzer (2016), Zollmann (2017).

¹² Reported in *The Guardian* 4 June 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/04/bashar-al-assad-winds-reelection-in-landslide-victory>.

¹³ This is to note a claim often heard asserted. The basis for it remains uncertain, as far as I have so far been able to discover, although see Fares (2014) for some relevant considerations.

would happen were Assad to go – questions that will have influenced the 2014 election result (Al Yafai 2014). However, this knowledge was largely *set in abeyance* by commentators in the West who continued to maintain their principled support for the ‘moderate opposition’, even as it became increasingly doubtful whether any of the groups fighting on the ground could reasonably be described as ‘moderate’, either in the socio-political ends they aimed at or in the coercive means they used to achieve them.

But if the proposition could be defended in the face of particular anomalies, the fact that it had failed to receive practical confirmation of its implicit prediction, in the form of overwhelming endorsement of it by the people of Syria themselves, was something of a challenge for its defenders. Since no general upswell of a popular movement had put the case beyond practical dispute,¹⁴ the focus of the West's commentators – in government, the media, think tanks, and even academia – fastened instead on specific *reasons* why, nonetheless, Assad must go. Arguments of this kind may, in effect, *reinterpret the data to fit the accepted theory*. A datum that had to be accepted but could be reinterpreted was that the Syrian army and the people remaining in government-held areas appeared committed to supporting the Assad government against the insurgent forces. Thus while a straightforward argument from unpopularity could not be relied on, his apparent popularity could be interpreted as a symptom of other factors such as cronyism and patronage in some quarters, the incarceration or exile of critics, and widespread fear of dissent among the rest. Thus attention came to be focused on claims serving to explain why Assad would be widely feared and, accordingly, justifiably ousted. Three in particular have featured as recurring allegations directed against the person and ‘regime’ of Assad: the deliberate bombing of children and hospitals; widespread and systematic torture and mass murder in prisons; and the use of chemical weapons against both enemies and civilians. To be clear, there is no dispute that bombing has caused massive destruction and loss of life, but allegations of the systematic targeting of non-combatants have consistently been disputed; nor is there dispute that the Syrian security apparatus and its detention centres were known for brutality even before the war, but evidence collected by prospective prosecutors so far shows that when senior commands have referred to torture they have in principle condemned it (Larson 2018a, 2018b). Regarding both allegations, the kinds of evidence human rights organisations have presented would not stand up in a court of law¹⁵ and do not establish the scale as extrapolated numbers from a

¹⁴ Even at the time of the original protests, and from a strongly anti-Assad perspective, it was noted that ‘few want revolution and many fear disorder and chaos. ... Everyone wants change, but they want orderly change.’ Yassin-Kassab (2011) The reality, according to Raymond Hinnebusch, was that any alternative government in Damascus would ‘be confronted with the same policy dilemmas and limited options that faced Assad’s, and will struggle to find better or even different answers to Syria’s intractable problems.’ (Hinnebusch 2012: 113)

¹⁵ An example would be the collection of photographs, attributed to a defecting Syrian police photographer codenamed Caesar, that depict thousands of badly treated corpses. Certain human rights organisations have

certain number of confirmed cases. As for the chemical weapons allegations, these are highly controversial, and they will be commented upon in Section 3.

So while it is right to regard as criminals under international law those who – on whichever side – are responsible for causing the horrendous suffering the people of Syria have endured since 2011, what is less clear is the evidence that could be appealed to in identifying the criminals. Yet notwithstanding the uncertainty of the evidence as verified as a basis for them, each of these classes of allegations leveled against one side has come to be accepted as well established by the preponderance of commentators in the West. To call any of them into question is to become liable to moral opprobrium and accusations of apologism for a brutal dictator and war criminal. It has thus been quite unusual to encounter more epistemically cautious views in the Western media.

Knowing this, one would expect academic commentators to strive for the requisite detachment and methodological scrupulousness about the facts they are ready to accept as established. In fact, however, uncritical acceptance of the narrative that prevails in Western media has also permeated some of the academic discussion. Thus we find some scholars holding Assad or the ‘Assad regime’ to be uniquely or primarily in the wrong, rather than the situation being one of inevitable horrors of war on both sides, but without doing due diligence on the evidence their assurance rests on. For instance, Adrian Gallagher (2014) has categorically declared that ‘not only is the Syrian regime overwhelming responsibility (sic) for the violence carried out but at present it is the only actor to have committed war crimes *and* crimes against humanity’ (Gallagher 2014: 7). Yet, as evidence, he cites a UK government gloss (FCO 2013) of a UN report (UN 2013) that in fact records that crimes were being committed on all sides and that it was impossible accurately to determine responsibility for most of them. Even recently, and despite the increased opportunities meanwhile arising to learn reasons for skepticism, we find Constance Duncombe and Tim Dunne criticizing resistance to proposals of intervention on the grounds that ‘evidence of mass atrocities being committed in Syria is virtually uncontested’ (Duncombe and Dunne 2018: 36). The authors do not cite the sources of that evidence, however, so simply asserting that it is ‘virtually uncontested’, in a context where China, Russia and member states of the Non-Aligned

presented the Caesar photographs as evidence to demonstrate the scale and nature of alleged brutality in Syrian prisons, but their claims have been contextualized by the head of an organization gathering evidence of war crimes, Bill Wiley of the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA). The collection of images ‘has tremendous emotional and human value’, he says, yet ‘would it make a case against Assad? No, not at all, not at all.’ (Wiley interviewed in Al Jazeera 2017) He is clear that for advocacy groups like Amnesty and HRW ‘the burden of proof for the sort of evidence they need for their reports, it is very, very low. ... Oftentimes they do allege crimes, in my opinion, incorrectly, but they are just drawing attention to the suffering.’ (Wiley 2016) Observers who are not part of any prosecution team have much stronger criticisms to make, as noted in Hayward (2019c).

Movement contest it, leaves uncertain the standard of proof that might settle the contest. Thus we find Western academics following the politicians, journalists and other opinion formers in dismissing non-Western views as deriving from strategies of political expediency rather than from genuine concerns about reason and evidence. Contrary presumptions are meanwhile allowed to apply in the assessment of communications from the West.

Yet it is open to question whether the generally accepted position has the robust verification assumed by those adopting it. Reliable information about events in Syria has not been easy to come by. Journalists have had little access, and the problem of Syrian state influence on reports from government held areas is matched by the problem that reports from opposition held areas are under the influence of opposition activists. Reports with claims to impartiality have been provided by influential NGOs like *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) and *Amnesty International* (AI) – to name two that are widely respected in the West. Yet although their reporting has to a great extent been taken on trust (Boyd-Barrett 2019), and even cited in academic works debating the case for intervention in Syria, just a modest effort of due diligence reveals concerns about the bona fides of their sources and the reliability of their reports. My own interest in the present study was sparked by the simple observation that MSF was presenting as independent reports information based on secondhand testimony (Hayward 2016) – a problem that was subsequently acknowledged (MSF 2017).¹⁶ Controversy has also surrounded Amnesty International’s reporting in Syria and other politically-charged conflicts (Boyle 2012; Human Rights Investigations 2012). These and other organisations have at times given expression to a moral sense that ‘something ought to be done’ to try and end the terrible suffering but without having a demonstrably adequate evidence base for the particular recommendations they have supported, even when these implicitly or explicitly appeal for Western intervention. Indeed, a tendency to try and shame Western governments into intervening has been given some encouragement by influential sections of the media, as Hammond et al (2019) document. Not only was the lack of an international decision to intervene militarily deemed a moral failure,¹⁷ but anyone who suggested that the moral question might be regarded differently – for instance, in terms of more assiduously engaging in responsible action as required by the first pillar of the R2P doctrine – were liable to be held up for public condemnation.¹⁸

¹⁶ However, there are evidently internal tensions at MSF about the issue. MSF invited me to their annual research meeting in Brussels that year to discuss the dilemmas associated with ‘secondhand testimony’. That experience further enhanced my respect for MSF’s volunteer medics while reinforcing my sense that the MSF press office is part of a rather distinct operation.

¹⁷ Duncombe and Dunne (2018: 36) speak of ‘the dire consequences of non-intervention in the case of Syria’.

¹⁸ Hammond et al (2019) identify as a common theme the denouncing as ‘denialists’ those who questioned official claims about the war, with accusations that those who ‘willingly consumed such propaganda’ were guilty by association with the ‘Assadist-Putinist war machine’. The concern of those aiming to protect the core proposition,

This response to anomalies in the theories supporting the core proposition is of a kind not normally encountered in the development of a scientific research programme. The attempt to defend problematic auxiliary hypotheses by fiat amounts to any activity less like research than propaganda. The response shows that attempts to discharge the second epistemic duty – to protect against acceptance of unsound information – may sometimes not simply fail but even be actively obstructed. At this point, even diligent attempts to correct misinformation or to develop a rationally defensible response to anomalies have failed. In this situation the case for a third duty of epistemic diligence becomes evident.

Section 3

The third kind of duty comes into play when not only has anomalous information been insufficiently heeded but due consideration of it has been actively resisted. This situation, in which attempts to correct the record encounter ‘pushback’, is of a kind that lies outside the bounds of normal academic activity. For it does not correspond to practices of research that depend on constant error checking and correction; it is closer to activities of a kind associated with the production of propaganda. Nonetheless, even if a critic feels justified in identifying propaganda, this need not mean the promoted information is false. It is possible to grant that a piece of anomalous information has the potential to undermine an accepted view of current affairs while nonetheless judging deference to the accepted view to be rational on the grounds that the weight of evidence presented in the anomaly is not great enough to outweigh it.

A question arising in this situation, then, is whether not only are there anomalies in the given narrative account but whether it is also possible to formulate positive hypotheses that are more plausible – having an overall greater weight of evidence in their favour – than those problematised. Producing such an account is likely to be far more onerous than fulfilling either of the first two duties, and so one may wonder how this can be regarded as someone’s duty and whose it would be. These, then, are the guiding questions for this section: the first thing to establish, since ought implies can, is how the discharge of such a duty would even be practically possible; once that can be shown, the question is who it falls to and why. It is clearly not within the professional competence of a social philosopher to engage directly in the potentially complex empirically informed research required to construct alternative accounts. This kind of activity involves interdisciplinary collaboration. In order to make vivid

according to Hammond et al, was that they were increasingly coming up against sources of information and public opinion formation that were ‘questioning the simplistic moral narrative about Syria’ (Hammond et al 2019: 39) See also Allday (2016), Hayward (2018c), Mason (2018), Ritter (2017).

what this could realistically involve, and to show how there is nevertheless a potential role in it for the social philosopher, I shall return to the case study.

In terms of the stages of response to anomalies as set out by Chinn and Brewer, we reached the point of considering whether there is a case for thinking the theory should be modified in more than a peripheral way. A context in which this arises is when a decisive reason to affirm “Assad must go” is that he is responsible for using chemical weapons, which would be to have crossed the ‘Red Line’ signaled by President Obama (Hersh 2014). Given that this allegation has been accorded critical weight in the case, and given that it is also a particularly difficult kind of allegation for a non-expert to assess, it presents a meaningful test of the approach that is now to be commended as an illustration of how the third duty could be discharged.

Early critical assessments of published reports of alleged chemical weapon attacks appeared as certain individual citizens and independent journalists noted anomalies in them; and this led to some clustering of informal research collectives that pooled observations and hypotheses, collaborating online using blogs and wikis. Participants came from a variety of professional and educational backgrounds in several countries.¹⁹ Following these discussions was Edinburgh University epidemiologist Professor Paul McKeigue. Finding that the informal collectives were developing hypotheses that seemed more credible than the officially approved ones, he set out a methodological basis upon which to compare the likelihoods of competing hypotheses (McKeigue 2017a). He thereupon demonstrated how alternative explanations for certain chemical weapons events were more likely than the official ones (McKeigue 2017b).

McKeigue was to become, along with Piers Robinson and myself, a founding member of an informal research collective called the Working Group on Syria, Propaganda and Media (WGSPM). This group has gone on to publish a number of Briefing Notes on specific alleged cases.

Even before WGSPM had published any briefing, however, a succession of articles by former Guardian journalist Brian Whitaker would warn the public of ‘propaganda professors’ who were ‘promoting conspiracy theories’.²⁰ There followed shortly afterwards an attack on the group’s founder members by *The Times* of London, its front page headline denouncing ‘Apologists for Assad in our Universities’. This attack – like others that have

¹⁹ Citations of examples are to be found in the various works lead-authored by McKeigue. Although the question cannot be explored here, it could be interesting to consider whether these critical and collaborative online investigators have the makings of a movement of ‘organic intellectuals’ in a Gramscian sense.

²⁰ For links to these and other attacks see <https://timhayward.wordpress.com/syria/working-group-in-the-press/wgspm-timeline-of-hostile-media-coverage/>

continued to be directed against the group²¹ – did not identify any error in its published briefings. Thus the response to the highlighted anomalies took a form that would be predicted, not by a model of the development of scientific knowledge, but by the model proposed by Herman and Chomsky (1988) of how corporate news media constrain and direct communications. According to their propaganda model of information filters, when subtle discouragement about off-limits topics fails, then a more overt form will be deployed. This is called 'flak', a term that refers to efforts to discredit those who challenge the limits of debate set by the other filters. Since flak operates *ad hominem*, one would not expect it to work in an environment where such logically fallacious forms of argument are diligently avoided – e.g. *within* academia – but it can fulfill strategic communicative purposes when used by news media. These can also reverberate into academia (Robinson 2018).

Nevertheless, while *ad hominem* slurs manifest a fallacious mode of argument, their deployment does not in and of itself show that no genuine counter argument might be advanced by more intellectually adroit defenders of the official narrative. So there remains to consider the substance of the matter, as, for instance, concerning the alleged chemical attack in Douma, on 7 April 2018. This allegation served as justification for the forces of US, UK and France to fire 103 missiles into Syria in retaliation. The evidence appealed to was problematic on its face, and yet when even senior military figures Lord West and General Shaw voiced skepticism on television news channels they were cut short by their interviewers.²² The one prominent media figure to depart from orthodoxy and argue against a rush to judgment was Tucker Carlson on the Fox News Channel.²³

Meanwhile, the international public awaited the report from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to settle the matter. The wait, however, became inexplicably protracted, and the final report that had been expected by summer 2018 was only eventually published in March 2019. WGSPM identified significant failings in it (McKeigue, Miller and Robinson 2019a). For instance, it left unclear why the OPCW's Fact-Finding Mission (FFM) had not released toxicology reports or why it had apparently made no engineering assessments during its April visit to the site but instead waited six months to commission some from unidentified third parties who had to rely on images and measurements obtained by others.

²¹ See <https://timhayward.wordpress.com/syria/working-group-in-the-press/wgspm-timeline-of-hostile-media-coverage/>

²² A list of links to media coverage of relevant questions is included in Hayward (2018a).

²³ Tucker covered the issue in three Fox News reports: 9 April 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSGf2ZpDENU&feature=youtu.be>; 11 April 2018: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPO9uA_M1Eg; 18 April 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7R2QhK0-Pe8>

The latter question would be answered in startling fashion when, in May 2019, the WGSPM received a leaked document revealing that an engineering assessment – signed by OPCW FFM sub-team leader Ian Henderson – had indeed been carried out onsite during the original OPCW inspection. The findings of this suppressed assessment substantially contradicted the conclusion delivered in the official published report by implicitly exculpating the Syrian government (McKeigue, Miller and Robinson 2019b). The revelation happened to be timely, given the specific threat of US war against Iran at that time. Tucker Carlson picked up on Henderson’s document as vindication of his earlier caution,²⁴ and being now a close adviser of the president, he was to be credited with having stayed the president’s hand in response to calls from more hawkish advisers for forceful action against Iran (Wright 2019).

This example suffices to indicate that the WGSPM research programme is a progressive one – for the revelation of the engineers’ assessment verifies an implicit novel prediction. Another novel prediction that still stands to be verified is the existence of toxicology reports that would present further anomalies in relation to the official story.²⁵

Meanwhile, several points may be taken away from this brief case study regarding the third duty of epistemic diligence. One is that the *ought-implies-can* condition is satisfied. For the WGSPM has shown that official narratives can be credibly questioned and alternatives suggested that satisfy the methodological requirements of academic work. The question then is whether there is a *duty* on anyone to do it. While the WGSPM example provides one model of how it can be done, the group’s members responded to a sense of responsibility directly, in what might be regarded as an ad hoc way. Such a response might be regarded as supererogatory. No individual WGSPM member has been under any special duty in the matter. Nor has anybody else. The idea of identifiable individuated duties following directly from the humanitarian imperative does not seem appropriate or feasible to argue for. Instead, the matter might be approached from the perspective provided by the premise of a collective humanitarian responsibility. Relevant to the case at hand is that the OPCW was mandated by the United Nations on behalf of humanity to ensure chemical weapons are not used. If certain actors undermine the proper workings of the OPCW (McKeigue et al 2019d), then the rest of humanity has a collective responsibility to protect, and where necessary restore, the OPCW’s

²⁴ “If he’s right, the United States went to the brink of war on the basis of fraudulent information.” (Tucker Carlson, *Fox News* 23 May 2019) Discussing the revelation with Tulsi Gabbard on his Fox News show, their conversation linked the questionable pretext for bombing Syria with concerns about the then-current dangerous confrontation with Iran: <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6040492421001/>.

²⁵ *Since this article was accepted for publication, that further prediction has been verified. A panel of international experts convened by the Courage Foundation – and endorsed by OPCW founding General Director José Bustani – had an opportunity to see and hear first hand whistleblower evidence that included revelations of suppressed toxicology findings contradicting the official report: <https://couragefound.org/2019/10/analytical-points-opcw-panel/>.*

work and reputation. Appropriate steps would include supporting honest investigators at the OPCW who strive to present the world with information that has been produced by following the organisation's prescribed protocols. For this is likely to reduce the chance of avoidable warfare.

More generally, if international institutions can fail, and if an aspect of the failure is such as involves knowledge claims that could be corrected by means of appropriate investigation, then humanity ought to be able to look to universities as institutions well suited to doing the necessary epistemic diligence. The foreseeable objection that universities are fundamentally unsuited to the kind of work more traditionally undertaken by journalists and intelligence agencies rests on a rigid distinction between different kinds of intellectual labour that is breaking down in contemporary digital information environments. Universities are in fact already getting drawn into this kind of activity, and so there is arguably a duty on their part to do it according to proper academic standards (Hayward 2019a).

At present, universities are not fulfilling the responsibility as argued for here, but the need for them to do so has a further aspect to mention. The work of critically engaging with the strategic communications of powerful actors can encounter active resistance. Engaging in it thus requires – as has long been recognized by thinkers alert to the social responsibility of intellectuals – a certain firmness of resolve. Bertrand Russell has spoken of the risks run by those who take a stand against ‘the powerful organizations which control most of human activity’ (Russell 1960). Russell’s answer is that the risks will diminish, the more people are willing to accept them.²⁶ Thus a point to highlight is that what is both a pre-requisite and a benefit of collaboration and commitment in the face of hostility is the solidarity of people standing together in fulfillment of ‘their moral responsibility as decent human beings in a position to use their privilege and status to advance the cause of freedom, justice, mercy, and peace’ (Chomsky 2011). For this is not simply a matter of beliefs about fundamental ethical values but one that concerns the very epistemological conditions of intellectual inquiry as such. Accordingly, it is arguable that taking such a stand is an inescapable part of the intellectual integrity that binds the community of scholars and gives worth to their vocation. Thus, anticipating the argument that universities ought to be neutral with respect to normative controversies and promote ‘pure’ science, it can be pointed out that as long as they are allowed

²⁶ He reasons: ‘for everybody knows that the modern world depends upon scientists, and, if they are insistent, they must be listened to. We have it in our power to make a good world; and, therefore, with whatever labor and risk, we must make it’ (Russell 1960). In similar vein, Noam Chomsky considers it a responsibility of intellectuals ‘to speak out not simply about the abuses of our enemies, but, far more significantly, about the crimes in which we are implicated and can ameliorate or terminate if we choose’. In support of this view, he believes, there is not much that needs to be said ‘beyond some simple truths. Intellectuals are typically privileged—merely an observation about usage of the term. Privilege yields opportunity, and opportunity confers responsibilities. An individual then has choices.’

to be complicit in maintaining propagandized falsehoods, even passively, let alone actively, they are precisely failing to maintain relevantly meaningful neutrality. Universities accordingly ought to be actively hospitable to supporting what is, effectively, a necessary condition of their existence as the kind of institution they publicly aspire to be. This means not simply providing space for such research and protecting the academic freedom of those engaging in it, but also actively encouraging and incentivising the substantive investigations, teaching and outreach required to ensure the intellectual community is fully exercising the responsibility it has to ensure humanity is well informed about the most serious issues it faces.

The kind of investigation illustrated here is clearly not something that every academic will have an interest in or aptitude for, and it would be unrealistic and unreasonable to argue anyone has duties to do exactly as WGSPM members, for instance, have done – particularly as the merits of their research model and outputs have anyway still to be fully evaluated by peers. Moreover, to play a part in combatting errors with potentially grave consequences can involve effort and a need for some resilience. Yet the argument here is that anyone genuinely interested in applying ethics to matters of the kind illustrated should be prepared to accept this practical responsibility.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that we can and should do epistemic due diligence regarding the assumptions we allow about the world when engaging in applied philosophy. This includes taking appropriately proactive measures to ensure that the sources we rely on are not deceptive due to the influence of heteronomous determinations originating from outside the sphere of disinterested inquiry.

Given particularly a collective responsibility of humanity to guard against crimes against humanity, the presumption of which is the normative premise granted in this argument to those who may argue for coercive intervention to that end, there is an important part to be played by universities and intellectuals in general. For they are the social institutions and classes of individuals functionally entrusted by the wider society to enhance, protect and disseminate dependable knowledge and understanding about the world. The argument of this paper is not that social philosophers have a duty in this respect that is not shared by the academic collectivity. A distinct responsibility we do have is to ensure that the community is alert to the shared responsibility. This means being alert to it ourselves.

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