3 Responsibility and Others’ Beliefs

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In what sense, if any, am I responsible for my beliefs? What does responsibility for belief consist in? How far does it extend? Can I also be responsible for your beliefs? What does it mean to be a responsible agent with respect to one’s own and others’ beliefs? These questions, among many others, arise in thinking about the ways individual agents form beliefs, and receive or pass on information, and they regard the norms invoked when agents are held responsible in view of these processes. In touching upon the notion and the normativity of epistemic agency itself as well as upon the character of and the relations between epistemic agents, these issues connect directly with matters of debate in recent virtue and social epistemology.

The project of virtue epistemology comprises both a novel approach to the analysis of epistemic justification and knowledge and an approach to a variety of epistemological issues within the framework of a general virtue theory. Contributors to both of these strands of virtue epistemology have invoked specific notions of responsibility, albeit for the most part with a focus on the singular epistemic agent whose belief acquisition and epistemic character are in question. The project of social epistemology, on the other hand, consists in studying the routes to belief in which interactions among agents play a crucial role, the distribution of knowledge within social entities or in the social arena, and the status of certain social collectives as knowers. Here too, some authors refer to notions of responsibility, for instance in specifying the norms that are in play when beliefs or judgments are based on testimony or in characterizing good informants.

Both of these projects could, I submit, benefit from a systematically intertwined reflection on their respective references to notions of responsibility and on their shared concern with a normative conception of epistemic agency. Paying attention to the social dimension of familiar epistemic processes should help accounts of epistemic virtue increase in adequacy, given the importance of social relations to practices of knowledge acquisition and justification. Vice versa, an integration of reflections on epistemic virtue into accounts of the social dimension of epistemic processes should add breadth and precision to a normative account of socially mediated epistemic agency.
In this chapter, I shall pursue this general line by looking at a rather confined area within the intersection of virtue epistemology and social epistemology. My goal here is to outline a normative account of epistemic agency in application to cases in which information is either received or passed on. More specifically, I seek to determine what constitutes epistemically responsible agency. Echoing the title of this contribution, my topic is the characterization of responsibility and responsible agency with respect to others’ beliefs, where these others are other agents figuring either as receivers of information or as informants.

Applying the concept of responsibility to receivers of information, asking specifically under what conditions receivers of information act responsibly or prove themselves to be responsible epistemic agents, or when it is justified to predicate responsibility of an epistemic state, closely resembles the ways some virtue epistemologists invoke the notion of responsibility. John Greco, for instance, defines an agent S’s belief that p as epistemically responsible “if and only if S’s believing that p is properly motivated; if and only if S’s believing that p results from intellectual dispositions that S manifests when S is motivated to believe the truth” (Greco 2010, 43). And Angelo Corlett takes epistemic responsibility to be a feature of epistemic agents and analyzes it as follows: “S is an epistemically responsible agent at tn to the extent that S, as an intentional and voluntary agent at tn accepts (by higher-order cognition) open-mindedly and critically that p” (Corlett 2008, 190).

In both cases, epistemic responsibility is understood as picking out particular qualities exhibited by agents in forming or holding beliefs. This understanding can, I submit, be extended to cases in which the agent is not taken in isolation, but where she receives information from others. In such cases, acting responsibly presupposes reflection on the quality of the source of information, that is, on the reliability and trustworthiness of the informant. As we shall see, this makes for a more refined characterization of epistemic responsibility in which special attention is paid to beliefs grounded in information received from others as well as to epistemic agents as embedded in social exchanges about what to believe in a certain situation.

The other application of the concept of responsibility here envisaged concerns the responsibility of those who pass information on to others. Instead of asking, as before, what it takes to be a responsible believer or a responsible receiver of information, this application amounts to asking what it takes to be a responsible informant. In characterizing responsible informants, I shall seek to go beyond an account of what makes them, and justifies treating them as “reliable testifiers” (cf. Lackey 2008, 48) by considering in more detail situations in which informants are required to respect others’ epistemic dependence on them.1 Whereas it seems misguided to say that informants are epistemically responsible for the beliefs of those they inform in just the way they are epistemically responsible for their own beliefs, there may be a specific responsibility attached to the role of informant. In what follows, I shall present and discuss cases in which precisely this view gains plausibility, giving rise to another refinement of the concept of responsibility. This refinement highlights the other-regarding dimension of epistemic responsibility, in that it pertains not only to the features of epistemic agents that produce knowledge in and for individual agents alone but also to those that prove conducive to others’ or one’s epistemic community gaining knowledge.6

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows: Next up, I use a classic example by William K. Clifford to illustrate in more detail what is to be debated under the label of epistemic responsibility. On the basis of variations on Clifford’s case, I shall then turn to a characterization of responsible receivers of information, before I proceed to a characterization of responsible informants. In conclusion, I sketch how the results of the preceding two sections can be combined in an account of responsible epistemic agency.

CLIFFORD’S CASE AND EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

To prepare for the discussion of responsible epistemic agency, let us consider the following scenario portrayed by William K. Clifford in an essay entitled “The Ethics of Belief” from 1877:

A ship owner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him at great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in midocean and told no tales. (Clifford 1877, 289)

The intellectual context of Clifford’s essay and his own discussion of this case are not my subject here.7 I shall rather use this scenario as a point of departure and develop a number of variations that help pinpoint different aspects of epistemic responsibility. Clifford himself provides a condensed discussion of the duties of inquiry and rationality that apply to epistemic
subjects generally. Although he does voice the view that the ship owner should be held responsible for having “knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind” (Clifford 1877, 290), that is, into believing upon insufficient evidence that the ship was seaworthy, Clifford does not systematically base his argument on a conception of epistemic responsibility. Nor is his discussion explicitly framed in virtue theoretic terms, although large parts of his reasoning about the proper conduct of epistemic agents could be read as a characterization of virtuous epistemic agency.

However, Clifford’s evaluation of the ship owner’s reasoning and behavior bears similarity to more recent discussions of epistemic responsibility. To see this, let us take a brief look at how, according to the original description of the scenario, the ship owner enters the “frame of mind” Clifford deems irresponsible. This process begins with the ship owner’s doubts about the seaworthiness of his ship that is due to put out to sea as an emigrant-ship; he had reason to believe that she was not seaworthy and even considered having her repaired, despite the costs he would have to incur. At the next stage, shortly before the departure of the ship, those earlier reflections are described as melancholic, and the ship owner is said (a) to have inferred from the number of safe voyages the past to the safety of the next, (b) to have put his trust in providence, which he took to be in favor of the emigrant families hoping for a better future at their destination, and (c) to have dismissed his suspicions about the honesty, and probably the reliability, of builders and contractors. These considerations are said to ground his conviction that the ship was seaworthy after all and his decision to let her depart. At the end of the portrayal of this scenario, it is reported that the ship sank and the ship owner was compensated by his insurance.

For the sake of discussion, we should obviously assume that the sinking of the ship was due precisely to the defects that were noticed but not remedied before her departure. However, as Clifford points out, his evaluation of the ship owner’s reasoning and behavior does not depend on the tragic conclusion of the story. And we can join him in this view for present purposes, as our attention is focused on the ship owner’s responsibility regarding the way he arrives at the decision to let the ship depart. Moreover, I set aside the issue as to whether the ship owner’s moral responsibility for the deaths of passengers and crew, which Clifford emphatically affirms, although we may assume that he was not held legally responsible, as otherwise he would not have received compensations. Finally, I will not here enter the discussion on whether the ship owner’s flawed reasoning is an instance of moral irresponsibility—a question Susan Haack (2001) takes up in her reconsideration of Clifford’s views—but I acknowledge it to be a valid and important question whether there is a genuine distinction to be made between epistemic and moral responsibility. For now, I shall continue to use the terms ‘epistemic responsibility’ and ‘epistemically responsible’ as denoting responsibility regarding epistemic processes such as reasoning, considering the significance of different factors of a situation, or forming a belief.

What is decisive about the scenario regarding the ship owner’s epistemic responsibility is what happened between his doubting the seaworthiness of the ship and the decision to let her depart. In my previous paraphrase, I emphasized three elements that led the ship owner to consider the earlier doubts to have been melancholic and to ultimately decide in favor of the ship’s departure. All three—the ship owner’s unwarranted inference from the safety of a number of past voyages to the safety of the next, his trust in providence, and his dismissal of suspicions concerning others’ honesty—could be challenged separately, but on Clifford’s account it is most important that the ship owner’s reasoning displays the flaw of being detached from evidence. Accordingly, Clifford formulates the following principle: “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1877, 309). An adaptation of this principle for the discussion of epistemic responsibility yields the view that it is epistemically irresponsible to believe on insufficient evidence and, correspondingly, that epistemically responsible agents pay specific attention to evidence.

Now, tying belief in general to evidence or to evidential grounds is problematic (cf. Greco 2010, ch. 4), but what is of interest here is the cue Clifford gives for considering what is required of epistemic agents if their behavior and they themselves are to count as epistemically responsible. And in that sense paying specific attention to relevant evidence is an obvious candidate for such a requirement. Meeting this requirement again involves not only taking into account relevant evidence but also deciding in accordance with the respective evidence-based belief. For even if the ship owner at some point of his deliberation held the belief that the ship needed repairs, it was ultimately accorded less significance than other beliefs, for example, his trust in providence. In the context of Clifford’s dispute with William James, the opposition between evidence-based and faith-based beliefs takes center stage, resulting in Clifford’s decided position expressed in the principle previously. With respect to the other two elements of the ship owner’s reasoning, his inference concerning the safety of the ship, and his dismissal of suspicions, Clifford does not provide distinct arguments pertaining to the epistemic duties involved. On the one hand, he does not address the norms and requirements invoked when the ship owner’s inference is criticized. On the other hand, the description of the case is not specific enough to tell whether the beliefs concerning the honesty of builders and contractors, the suspicions, were justifiably dismissed or outweighed by other considerations. A comprehensive discussion would certainly have to be more detailed on both of these points.

Let us, then, sidestep the interpretation of Clifford’s essay for a moment and work with the proposition that the ship owner was epistemically irresponsible in his reasoning that grounds the decision to let the ship depart. What would an epistemically responsible agent have done in the case at hand? According to Greco’s definition, a belief is epistemically responsible iff it is “properly motivated” and results from “intellectual dispositions”
that the agent manifests when he is motivated to believe the truth (Greco 2010, 43). Given his own interest in the departure of the ship and his understandable hope for a safe journey, it seems reasonable to say that this prompts the ship owner ultimately to ignore counterevidence. Moreover, on the face of sufficiently clear indication that the ship needs repair, the ship owner is portrayed as talking himself into a frame of mind in which the evidence-based beliefs are overcome and deemed “melancholy reflections.” Here the reasoning is clearly not one in which intellectual dispositions to believe the truth are manifested, as the available evidence is not represented and treated as grounds for believing that the ship is not seaworthy. This should suffice to say that the ship owner’s belief that the ship is seaworthy is neither properly motivated nor a manifestation of truth-oriented intellectual dispositions. Thus, according to Greco’s account, the ship owner’s belief is epistemically irresponsible.

Following Corlett’s definition of epistemic responsibility, we arrive at the same assessment of the ship owner case. By contrast to Greco’s account, Corlett’s conception is focused on the character of the agent, where his status as an epistemically responsible agent is taken to depend on whether he intentionally and voluntarily accepts a certain belief “(by higher-order cognition) open-mindedly and critically” (Corlett 2008, 190). Regarding the conditions of the ship owner’s acceptance of the belief that the ship is seaworthy, we can affirm that the ship owner does so intentionally and voluntarily, since the description of the case gives no reason to doubt that the ship owner consciously guides his own reasoning in a noncoerced, nonmanipulated fashion. Let us assume for present purposes that there is, at least in this case, no gap to be closed between the ship owner’s formation and acceptance of the belief in question, and that whether the condition of voluntariness necessary for epistemic responsibility would require separate discussion.13 With respect to the ship owner’s reasoning, we should call into question whether it was open-minded and critical. And this is where what we already noted about the case leaves no alternative to saying that the reasoning was neither open-minded, as it reveals wishful thinking and ignorance of evidence, nor critical, as no reasonable reflection concerning the weight of different considerations and motives is reported. In other words, the ship owner appears to lack the epistemic conscientiousness that could have guided an open-minded and critical reasoning process (cf. Montmarquet 1992).

However, what seems to be missing in the discussion so far is an explicit inclusion of the particular circumstances of the ship owner’s reasoning and decision. This is not to diminish the value of asking whether he assigns proper weight to the available evidence and engages in critical reflection about his motives for believing as he does, or whether his reasoning is open-minded and critical, but the fact that others’ lives are at stake seems to be of additional and considerable significance.14 And this significance does not lie only in the fact that the ship owner may be held morally responsible for his employees and costumers—it also regards his epistemic responsibility. To see this, consider the case in which forming a belief concerning the ship’s seaworthiness can be postponed, since it is not to depart for some time to come. In this case, nothing much depends on whether the belief that the ship is seaworthy is true if we assume further that all possibly necessary repairs could also be postponed and the ship’s seaworthiness is not affected in the meantime. So if the ship owner goes through roughly the same reasoning process as in the original case, excluding the reference to the emigrant families, and comes to believe in this modified case that the ship is seaworthy, we could still say that this belief is not epistemically responsible. But in that case there is no immediate pressure to inquire further, and that is what is different in the original case. In Clifford’s description of the case, the stakes are significantly higher due to the imminent departure with employees and customers aboard, so further inquiry and critical examination of the reasoning is called for.

In the present context, I cannot go into the details of the general argument for pragmatic encroachment (cf. Fantl and McGrath 2007) but instead limit myself to two remarks that are pertinent here. First, it seems promising to explicitly include the consideration of the stakes implied in a given situation in the characterization of epistemic responsibility. In doing so, we need to make explicit that it is part of critical reflection and epistemic conscientiousness—to take up just two of the features of epistemic responsibility mentioned previously—to take into account what is at stake in a given situation. On the picture thus envisaged, the epistemically responsible agent is disposed to adjust the accuracy of his inquiries to the demands of the situation in which he forms a belief. So where the defenders of pragmatic encroachment coin their discussion to pragmatic conditions for knowledge, that is, the condition whether it is rational for an agent to act as if a given belief were true, I propose a reformulation of this view in terms of the agent’s responsibility to the consideration of what is at stake in his epistemic processes. Second, it may be held that the requirement that the ship owner take into account what is at stake for his employees and customers simply derives from the moral obligations he has to them in virtue of his role as business- and employer. I do not oppose this view, but the point of incorporating the demand to consider stakes into the conception of epistemic responsibility is precisely to say that the ship owner’s responsibility has an epistemic dimension. Whoever is ready to grant that he is required to inquire further and make sure that his belief that the ship is seaworthy is properly justified should acknowledge that this regards the quality of his epistemic processes and not just his character as a moral agent. I shall return to this reflection on the relationship between moral and epistemic responsibility in the conclusion of this contribution.

Before we leave the discussion of Clifford’s exposition of the ship owner case behind and move on to variations in which the social dimension of epistemic responsibility is highlighted, we will do well to note that Clifford did comment on the importance of what is at stake to the assessment of the ship owner’s reasoning. Alluding to the principle quoted earlier he writes that
“it has been judged wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation. The reason of this judgment is not far to seek: It is that in both these cases the belief held by one man was of great importance to other men” (Clifford 1877, 292). Here Clifford distinguishes between two kinds of failure (believing on insufficient evidence on the one hand and nourishing belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation on the other) that share the feature that the importance of the decision to those affected by it is ignored. In the framework just introduced, we can capture this idea by saying that the significance of what is at stake affects both the way of dealing with evidence and the reflective consideration of propositions. On the proposal put forth in this contribution, paying attention to what is at stake in a given situation is required if an agent is to prove himself to be epistemically responsible.

RESPONSIBLE RECEIVERS OF INFORMATION

The discussion of agents’ epistemic responsibility so far turned exclusively on the ways they deal with evidence and conflicting beliefs, and more generally on the appropriateness of their epistemic processes. In this section, I consider cases that raise questions concerning how epistemic agents are to behave in situations in which they receive information from others. The goal here is to arrive at a characterization of responsible receivers of information. I take it to be uncontroversial that a considerable part of the information agents use in their reasoning is received from others, typically through communication. So once we consider agents’ responsibility with respect to their epistemic processes, it seems reasonable to ask whether there are specific requirements agents are to meet with regard to such social situations.

For this purpose, variations of the ship owner case can provide some data. Let us first assume a scenario in which the circumstances are precisely those of the original case up to the point in which the ship owner doubts whether the ship will be sufficiently seaworthy. Assume further that the ship owner, instead of seeking to overcome these doubts in private reflection, consults a naval architect and asks her for her expert opinion regarding the ship’s seaworthiness. To facilitate our discussion, let us imagine the expert to be independent and epistemically responsible in the sense specified previously, and that the ship owner has no reason to doubt the truthfulness of her view on the matter. The naval architect is, qua expert, in a better position to judge whether the ship is seaworthy and that her judgment is thus better justified than the ship owner’s own previous judgment. There seems to be a rather obvious parallel between receiving an expert judgment and becoming aware of new evidence, so that the failure to acknowledge that the expert judgment overrides the ship owner’s own judgment parallels ignoring new evidence.

A second failure could consist in the ship owner’s not trusting the expert. Recall that we characterized the naval architect as reliable and trustworthy, where this refers to the epistemic quality of her reasoning and judgment as well as to her neutrality concerning the question at issue. Distrust can refer to one or both of these aspects, whereas the former connects directly with the misrecognition of the naval architect’s expertise and only the latter, that is, distrust regarding neutrality, brings up a new point to consider. According to one view of (expert) testimony, the default stance toward judgments received from others is acceptance. And nothing in the construction at hand speaks against understanding the expert’s speech act in informing the
ship owner as inviting trust in the reliability of the judgment thereby communicated. So the burden to contest the expert's motives and reliability is on the ship owner. Were he to assume, say, that the expert has reason to influence his judgment contrary to evidence, the ship owner would have to support this assumption, for instance by exposing the expert as biased. Under the specification given, there is no cue to demonstrate that the ship owner successfully challenges the neutrality of the expert so that his outright disregard for the expert judgment stands to be evaluated as epistemically irresponsible.

A third failure could consist in disregarding what the naval architect says about the seaworthiness of the ship on grounds of disagreement alone. In this case, the ship owner would ignore the expert's opinion precisely because he does not go along with it. This behavior would amount to neglecting the expert's superior position with respect to the question at issue, which is precisely what expertise regarding a domain involves. The failure here would consist in not giving the expert judgment the appropriate weight in the ship owner's considerations. An epistemically responsible agent would in contrast take the expert judgment into account and thus remain open to revising a judgment if a neutral expert contradicted it.

We gain a different, seemingly complementary perspective on the ship owner's failure to pay appropriate attention to the expert's judgment if we interpret the latter as providing a defeater for the ship owner's reasoning. On the assumption that the naval architect is indeed a neutral expert, her negative judgment about the seaworthiness of the ship defeats the ship owner's positive judgment. In order to be justified in holding on to that positive judgment, the ship owner would in turn have to defeat the expert judgment, by pointing to evidence the expert ignores, to fallacious reasoning on the part of the expert or to a bias in her judgment. As seen previously, as long as the ship owner does not establish such a defeater-defeater, his ignorance of the expert judgment is epistemically irresponsible or blameworthy. But it seems useful to highlight a distinction between there being a defeater on the one hand, and the ship owner's (omitted) acknowledgment of the defeater on the other. Suppose we told him that the expert judgment defeats his own and thereby suggested that he is to amend his position accordingly; he might refer to his trust in providence or his hopes for a safe journey of the vessel and let this guide his decision. Then his stance would be that these considerations defeat the expert judgment. Now, this is not the place to go into a discussion of how these reasons for judgment are to be weighed up against each other—although I should note that I incline towards the evidentialist line and respect for expertise—so we can leave it at this: In practice, there can be an important difference between there being a defeater and one's having, that is, acknowledging and accepting, the force of a defeater. It is in this sense that we can specify that an epistemically responsible reasoner has and acknowledges precisely the epistemic reasons, including defeaters, which apply to them in a given situation.

To capture an importantly different case of testimony, we can alter the previous variation by replacing the expert with another ship owner to whom, as we can imagine, the ship owner refers and asks for an opinion. In such a case of peer testimony the reasonable requirements on epistemically responsible reception would be quite similar to the ones noted in view of expert testimony. To treat the testifying ship owner as an epistemic peer of the other ship owner we need to assume that he is equally qualified and experienced. And to align this case with the previous, we should assume that the testimonial judgment amounts to the recommendation against the ship's departure and in favor of having her reconditioned. The first point, which regarded distrust in the testifier's neutrality, would imply the important question whether the testifying ship owner could reasonably be assumed to be unbiased in his judgment about ship's seaworthiness. The ship owner receiving the testimony would be justified in rejecting the testimony as biased if he can establish that the negative judgment goes back to the testifier's own interest in the result of the decision. If the testifier judges as he does because this would imply considerable costs for a competitor on the market, this would justify the rejection of the recommendation. But absent such bias, whether revealed or reasonably assumed, the situation would amount to a standoff between equally informed opinions, where this takes up the third consideration rehearsed earlier. Whereas this seems to be a plain case of peer disagreement, which could be viewed as commending suspension of judgment, the circumstances of the scenario suggest caution. As was pointed out previously, the stakes in the situation are particularly high—human lives depend on the quality of the decision—so it could be argued that the testifier's negative judgment does count against letting the ship depart. The question here is whether a peer's conflicting judgment can simply be ignored or whether it should reenter the reasoning process. Given the potentially precarious consequences of a wrong decision and the pressure to decide, the line on which the ship owner should pay attention to and acknowledge the testimonial judgment commends itself. At any rate, it seems plausible to regard outright neglect for a recommendation that conflicts with one's own judgment, when it is made in such a high-stakes situation and even if it comes from an epistemic peer, as epistemically irresponsible.

The demand placed on responsible recipients of information that unites the cases of expert and peer testimony is that they are to find a reasonable stance between skeptical neglect and blind acceptance of what they are told. The acknowledgment of an informant's status as expert can be required along with the critical open-mindedness to differing opinions and the avoidance of unquestioned adoption of others' views. Epistemic responsibility with regard to the treatment of testimony implies, in other words, critical respect for others' judgments, that is, that they are not ignored or rejected just because they differ but are taken into account as potentially decisively influencing one's own reasoning, especially in circumstances in which much is at stake.
RESPONSIBLE INFORMANTS

The central question in the epistemology of testimony has been whether and to what extent one is justified in basing a belief on information one has only received from others and not obtained oneself. A main tenet of debates about testimony is, accordingly, the issue whether testimony is rightly to be treated as a source of knowledge. These important topics were almost completely blinded out in the previous sections, since I worked only with the assumption that testimony has practical significance in familiar epistemic processes. In particular, I took first steps toward giving an account of how recipients of information should deal with information they receive through testimony and how they should behave with respect to their informants. These considerations are largely independent of the position one takes with regard the exact epistemic status of beliefs based on testimony. The idea here is to spell out how responsible agents do or would do this, which amounts to naming some of the central character traits agents are required to develop to meet reasonable conditions on responsible epistemic agency. As we turn to the informant's side of a communicative situation now, the gist of the reflections does not fundamentally change, so we can continue to work with the concepts and cases already introduced. The intention now is to say more about informants' responsibility with regard to the beliefs others form about an issue based on what their informants say about it.

For simplicity's sake, I will use the variations of the ship owner case again and offer a characterization of responsible informants. The scenarios to consider now fall into three main categories: (1) those in which the informant about an issue is an expert vis-à-vis a nonexpert, (2) those in which informant and receiver of information are epistemic peers regarding the issue in question, and (3) those in which the receivers of information are epistemically dependent on their informants.

(1) Recall that in the first variation of the case, the ship owner, moved by doubts about the seaworthiness of his timeworn ship, turns to a naval architect who then recommends having the ship refitted before its next departure. In focusing on the expert's role and responsibility in this case, we can ask whether or to what extent she is responsible for the belief the ship owner forms in view of the judgment she communicates in certain way, but we might also ask whether she has a share in the responsibility for the departure and subsequent sinking of the ship.

To approach the first of these questions, we need to make explicit that even though the ship owner is said to turn to the expert for advice, he is still in a position to disregard what the expert says and base his decision on his own considerations. We assumed earlier that the naval architect's status as an expert, her neutrality, and her trustworthiness are undisputed. But so far we elaborated only on what she says, not on how she communicates her opinion and the strength she explicitly attaches to her recommendation. If she, for instance, failed to communicate her opinion in such a way that the
ship owner (or her audience, generally) can understand its content and evidential basis, the ship owner could have reason to disregard her judgment. She may also fail in getting across that given the high risks involved in the situation she would particularly advise against letting the ship depart, so that the ship owner may view her own considerations as trumping an expert's judgment that is presented as weak. Now, it would be overly simple to say that a responsible informant is one who just does not commit these failures. The ability to express one's judgments clearly, so that the audience has a fair chance to understand it, and in an appropriate manner, conveying the strength of the judgment, is what is required of the informant in this kind of situation. An adequate manifestation of this ability presupposes an assessment not just of the exigencies of a situation but also of what mode of communication is suitable for the audience present. Consequently, the informant is required not only to respect evidence and circumstances but also to be sensitive to the mode in which the audience is adequately addressed. With respect to the case at hand, we should conclude that the naval architect is responsible for communicating, among other things, the risks involved in the situation in such a way that the force of her decided recommendation is clear.

The second question mentioned goes beyond this, as it seems possible to extend the informant's responsibility beyond the content and the mode of communication. This issue is not as odd as it may seem, as we can easily imagine cases in which we ask how far into a causial chain of events the responsibility of the agent who prompted it (in some sense) extends. It is decisive here to consider both whether the informant can foresee the consequences of the decision made by the recipient of information and whether she is in a position to interfere at some later stage. The latter is clearly ruled out in the ship owner case, for the ship owner is depicted as being completely in charge of the decision, and the informant is depicted only as an advisor. Regarding the foreseeability of the consequences, we have captured those by pointing to what is at stake for whom in the situation and in the requirement that the informant choose an adequate mode of communication her assessment and recommendation. Provided she does so she may be held to meet her responsibilities and be exempt from blame for the ship owner's ignorance as well as the consequences of his decision, but this depends very much the details of the respective context. There is an important analogy to this kind of scenario in cases involving doctor-patient relationships and, in particular, situations in which a doctor informs a patient about therapeutic options and recommends a specific treatment. Beyond the role obligations of a doctor, we could usefully ask which epistemic virtues are required of them qua expert and informant.

(2) The case in which the informant and the recipient of information are epistemic peers can be treated in close analogy to the case of the expert. What becomes relevant in an exchange between peers, such as the one between the ship owner and another ship owner he asks for an opinion, is that the informant is required to be sensitive to the standpoint and interests of his opposite. In a situation that is symmetric regarding the epistemic competence of the agents involved, a responsible informant will seek to track whether, on his account, the decisive aspects of the situation, including what is at stake for whom, enter and are given proper weight in the recipient's reasoning, and he will seek to communicate his assessment accordingly. As long as the recipient is independent in his reasoning and judgment, the informant's responsibility for the other's beliefs encompasses only the content and the communicated strength of the assessment.

(3) Cases in which the recipients of information are epistemically dependent on their informant are especially precarious. For present purposes, I refer only to a rather extreme form of epistemic dependence, in which those who are dependent in this way have no other means of acquiring information available than referring to one particular informant. The ship owner case can be modified to meet his condition, as we saw at the end of the previous section. If the ship owner holds on to his position, he will tell the inquiring and possibly worrying passenger that the ship is seaworthy and the journey will be safe. This would not even be deceptive or a lie, given that the ship owner himself believes this to be accurate. However, it seems problematic to say that one can be a responsible informant without being an epistemically responsible reasoner in the sense specified previously. In this respect, the requirements that can plausibly be articulated for responsible informants come second to the more general requirements of epistemically responsible agents. Agents who are epistemically responsible in their treatment of evidence, their reasoning, and their sensitivity of what is at stake in a given situation are required to be sensitive to the demands of their audience when they are to function as responsible informants. Epistemically irresponsible agents, on the other hand, do not qualify as responsible informants even if they inform others according 'to the best of their knowledge.'

Whereas cases of such extreme epistemic dependence appear to be rare and artificial, they do give a cue to reflecting about cases in which informants are in a position to exert some degree of influence on others' beliefs about certain issues. In contrast to the control of others' beliefs present in extreme cases such as the last variation of the ship owner scenario, the possibility of such influence may be grounded in a specific social or institutional role and thus combined with a reasonable presumption in favor of the reliability and trustworthiness of the informant. Under such circumstances, the recipients of information may well be in a position to undertake further inquiries, but they may omit to do so due to the proclaimed trustworthiness of the informant. Responsible informants, to offer a principle straightforward, do not exploit such asymmetries and the epistemic authority they are presumed to have, even if there is no sign of expertise or other hints that would make the ascription of epistemic authority plausible. This point, too, takes further shape via negativa, if we consider, for instance, Thabo Mbeki's denial of the connection between HIV and AIDS and the subsequent policies adopted by his administration. It is certainly not far-fetched to assume that Mbeki,
who followed the position of an extremely small group of ‘experts,’ led large parts of the South African society at the time to believe that the established explanation of an incurable disease that spread widely across the country was false. Economists and teachers who disseminate ideas that lack evidentiary support provide other examples for influence of this sort.

CONCLUSION

The picture of responsible epistemic agency that emerges from the discussion in this contribution, and that certainly needs further scrutiny and support, comprises the following three aspects: responsibility with respect to the agent’s epistemic processes, responsibility with regard to the ways others’ beliefs enter these processes, and responsibility with regard to the ways others’ beliefs are influenced by the agent’s way of communicating them. On all three counts, a responsible epistemic agent is here characterized as involving complex forms of contextual sensitivity regarding what is at stake in a given situation and regarding the epistemic status, the perspective, and the interests of one’s opposite.

I have sought to frame the foregoing reflections as an extension and integration of two separable projects in epistemology. On the one hand, I have noted how the project of virtue epistemology can be extended and complemented in view of situations in which epistemic agents receive information from others and situations in which they function as informants. On the other hand, I have recast issues of social epistemology with a view to their import for a characterization of responsible epistemic agency. A more complete understanding of the normativity of epistemic agency can be accomplished, I hold, if this interleaving of epistemological endeavors is deepened and further elaborated. Since responsibility plays such a central role in social assessments of agency in general, which should be familiar from practices of assuming and ascribing responsibility, it is only consistent to inquire how the concept of responsibility can be applied to and adapted for epistemic agency and exchanges of information. The virtue-theoretic perspective, finally, helps to anchor these reflections in a characterization of agents, so that at the end of the day we are equipped with the conceptual tools to answer the questions whether and to what extent agents can indeed be responsible with respect to their and others’ beliefs.

NOTES

Material from this contribution was presented at the Philosophical Colloquium at the Humboldt University in Berlin (December 2009); in the Berlin School of Mind and Brain (June 2010); at the conference “Knowledge, Virtue, and Action” in Jena (September 2010); and at the University of Hannover, Germany (January 2012). I would like to thank members from the audiences at those events for their criticisms and suggestions, especially Jason Baehr, Daniel Friedrich, Thomas Grundmann, Tim Henning, Frank Hofmann, Jennifer Lackey, Christian Nimtz, Jason Stanley, and Ernie Sosa.

5. For a discussion of epistemic dependence and its ubiquity in everyday exchanges of information, see Hardwig (1985).
8. Cf. Clifford (1877, 290): “Let us alter the case a little, and suppose that the ship was unsound before all; that she made her voyage safely, and many others after it. Will that diminish the guilt of her owner? Not one jot. When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that.”
9. The ultimate view on this question may turn out to be that there is really only one kind of responsibility referred to regarding moral and epistemic agency (cf. Raz 2011).
10. In an earlier passage of the same essays, Clifford gives the following alternative formulation: “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford 1877, 295). The principle is most directly voiced against William James’s view that in some contexts it is permitted to believe without sufficient evidence; cf. James (1896 [1979]) and the discussion in Van Inwagen (1996). Engaging with the historical context of this principle or its practical applicability would go beyond the scope of this contribution.
11. Of course, a lot more needs to be said about this opposition between evidence-based and faith-based beliefs and their justificatory status.
12. For the account of intellectual dispositions invoked here, see Greco (2010, ch. 2).
14. The considerations in this paragraph take up arguments for pragmatic encroachment put forth by DeRose (1992) and Fani and McGrath (2007).
17. This description blunts out that we could very well require the expert to argue for and explain her assessment of the issue, and that we could then question whether or to what extent she succeeds in leading the ship owner to understand why the judgment should take one and not the other form. Referring to the expert as being an epistemic superior vis-à-vis the ship owner, such complications are ignored for the sake of simplicity.
18. I would like to thank Jennifer Lackey and Christian Nimtz for helpful remarks concerning this point.
19. Cf. Foley (2001) and, for a diverging view, Thomas Grundmann’s discussion in his contribution to this volume.
20. Corlett’s (2008) rich analysis of (dimensions of) acceptance speaks to this point but regards primarily the self-relationship of an epistemic agent and generally his acceptance of a proposition. Providing a background for an
extension of this account to the social case is one intention of the present discussion.

21. Along these lines, Montmarquet (1993) suggests to centrally refer to 'impartiality' and 'epistemic conscientiousness' as core epistemic virtues. I suggest to center the normative conception of epistemic agency around the concept of epistemic responsibility, for it seems to me better suited to explicitly account for the other-regarding dimension of epistemic virtues.


23. There is, of course, a distinction to be made between an expert's statement, which is mainly a specifically informed and qualified assessment of a situation on evidential grounds, and an expert's recommendation, which additionally implies that a certain course of action is advised for. Although I acknowledge the distinction as highlighting different aspects of what an expert's testimony may be viewed as, I find it hard to see how, in situations such as those we consider here, these expert testimonies can be mere statements of opinions that do not imply recommendations. It seems to me more adequate to say, first, that expert statements recommend a certain belief whereas expert recommendations speak for a certain action in line with a recommended belief, and second, that there is no sense in taking an expert to recommend a belief but not the respective action.

24. Note that I do not claim that these kinds of failure exhaust the spectrum; they do, however, seem to be particularly familiar, with respect to the excuses heard both from recipients of expert testimony—who say that the message was too complicated—and from experts—who say that the force of their recommendation was not acknowledged.

25. I leave aside further reflections on whether it may be justified to resort to other means of persuasion besides truthful recommendation, such as lying or deception.

26. Thabo Mbeki was President of South Africa from 1999 to 2008.

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