

On Radical Moral Encroachment: Distancing Epistemology From Truth

Roshan Dahale

The University of Alabama at Birmingham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dahale, Roshan () "On Radical Moral Encroachment: Distancing Epistemology From Truth," *Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy*. Vol. 11, Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.emich.edu/ac/vol11/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History and Philosophy at DigitalCommons@EMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Acta Cogitata: An Undergraduate Journal in Philosophy by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@EMU. For more information, please contact lib-ir@emich.edu.

On Radical Moral Encroachment: Distancing Epistemology From Truth

Roshan Dahale, The University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

Rima Basu has described radical moral encroachment as a theory that detaches wrongdoing from action and attaches it to the belief instead. Furthermore, the stakes are associated with the wrongness of the belief rather than the risk of being false. Basu believes that this form of encroachment accurately captures our modern intuition on how racism functions. However, this paper lays out objections to this form of thinking. The rebuttal includes making the distinction between assumptions, probabilities, and outright beliefs. Probabilities and assumptions cannot be equated with an outright belief. Next, there is the issue of making the wrongdoing of another an internal action. It remains unclear how one can wrong another without any action toward the other. Third, there is the dilemma of the point at which the truth can outweigh a “racist fact” or “immoral fact”. If one admits that any moral wrongness outweighs the truth, then it would be easy to become detached from reality and truth. If one admits that the truth holds more importance, there would be no need to uphold any form of moral encroachment at all. Finally, there is the extreme burden that would be placed on those who attempt to practice epistemological responsibility under radical moral encroachment. This paper provides objections that serve to refute the validity of radical moral encroachment as a useful or practical epistemological theory.

In this paper I will describe the argument for radical moral encroachment, why the argument fails, and the objections that lead to the failure of this theory.

To best understand radical moral encroachment, it is helpful to understand its more moderate form to grasp why radical moral encroachment is so ‘radical’. A moderate form of moral encroachment will reflect a similar structure compared to pragmatic encroachment. In pragmatic encroachment the threshold for a successful justification is adjusted by the pragmatic stakes at hand. An example of pragmatic stakes would be being five minutes late to meet your friend versus being late to an interview for one’s dream job. Maybe double checking that one has their alarm set for the right time in the morning may be more important in the latter case. In this case, the threshold for sufficient evidence is adjusted to account for the different levels of pragmatic results.

Moderate moral encroachment works in a very similar fashion compared to pragmatic encroachment. Moral encroachment simply recognizes that moral factors may also play a role in adjusting the threshold to be met for sufficient evidence for holding a belief. For example, a trucker should check his brakes on his truck because if he does not, he may run the risk of losing

control and hitting and killing others on the road. However, there may be little to no moral consequence for choosing to eat a pancake compared to a waffle for breakfast.

Radical moral encroachment takes the basic form of moral encroachment to the next level. A helpful distinction to make between moderate moral encroachment, pragmatic encroachment, and radical moral encroachment is to discuss the link between action and belief. In moderate forms of encroachment there is a strong link between beliefs and actions. Without a resulting action from the belief the stakes involved in adjusting the sufficiency threshold could not be properly evaluated. However, in Basu's radical moral encroachment the link between action and belief is weakened if not severed. She argues for doxastic wrongdoing. Which means that it is possible to wrong someone simply by thinking an immoral thought about the other, even if there is no actual action taken as a result (Basu, 13). Basu backs this argument by describing how a racist thought about someone is still wrong and wrongs them even if no action is taken as a result of the belief.

Radical moral encroachment pivots from typical encroachment theories by attaching the stakes to the belief rather than the action as well as by detaching the stakes from the truth of the belief (Basu, 14). This means that one could have a belief that is true and results in no harm to others but may still be immoral. So, one may ask, how then do we determine the threshold for a sufficient belief according to Basu's radical theory? This would be done through exercising moral care depending on the environment that one is in. If one were in a traditionally segregated and all white social club, extra moral care would be required in an environment that was historically saturated with injustice (Basu, p. 15).

In summary, Basu attaches the moral stakes to the beliefs and independent of the truth value of a belief (p. 17). Basu argues that this is a healthy way to account for the fact that racist beliefs wrong others in themselves and that moral risk is about the belief rather than the risk of being false. Basu believes that this view based on moral care depending on injustice in the surrounding environment can rectify injustice that will result from "facts" that have been tinged by racism in a systemically racist culture and society. This would all undermine evidentialism if true. Evidentialism would fall apart under radical moral encroachment because justification would be supervening (arising from) more than just pure evidence.

Ultimately, Basu provides an unconvincing argument for a radical form of moral encroachment. First, radical moral encroachment fails to fully dismiss evidentialism based on the examples that were provided to advance the theory. Basu describes a case in which there is a social club that has an all-black staff and all white membership, except for one member who happens to be the first black member. In this example, two white women who are members of the club form the belief that a black man is the coat check. Basu argues that this belief morally wrongs the black man who is there even if they *say nothing* to him. Based on her framework,

Basu thinks that despite the statistical probability, it is wrong to form the belief and thus the white women failed to practice moral care in an unjust environment (p. 10).

Gardiner provides an evidentialist objection to cases such as these. She makes a comparison to an aviary, a case notable for not being socially and politically charged. In this aviary, ninety-five percent of the birds are yellow and five percent of them are blue. We are informed that a bird has died. From this one could assume that the bird that died was *probably* a yellow bird (Gardiner, p. 8). However, this statistical evidence is not enough to form any sort of outright belief that the bird that died absolutely was a yellow bird. Statistical evidence is simply not sufficient to form an outright belief according to Gardiner. Individualized evidence instead would be necessary to form an outright belief (Gardiner, p. 9). In the case of the aviary, one could have a worker there provide testimony that it was in fact a yellow bird that died. Although this confirmed the statistic, the evidence really became sufficient after there was individual testimonial evidence given.

Gardiner's objection can be furthered. Radical moral encroachment fails to make a distinction between assumption, probability, and outright belief. Gardiner appropriately shares how probabilities based on statistics are incapable of formulating beliefs, but the same also goes for assumptions. An assumption (in my definition) is a view formed based on cursory evidence available. It is a sort of temporary or working belief used until more evidence is gathered. For example, if one were to be in Basu's fancy social club thought experiment, one could assume that the black man was the coat check. However, those making assumptions should be self-aware that the assumption is not based on sufficient evidence. This means perhaps going to the person and asking if they have seen the coat check. Or asking a known club member if the said man was the coat check. There are plenty of methods for gathering *individualized* evidence that can be done to confirm or reject the working assumption. Radical moral encroachment would eliminate this (incredibly useful) epistemological purgatory. The reality is that many of us are regularly in a self-aware mental state of assumption. Removing assumptions that are immoral would leave people no room for moral growth (which may matter more to a moral encroacher) or ascertaining the truth (which matters for evidential purists).

Another objection to be made would surround the actual mechanics of doxastic wronging. It is understandable that there are certain beliefs that are morally wrong to believe about another person. For example, it would be wrong to think of someone as less than human due to a certain skin pigmentation. It intuitively would be far more morally wrong to call someone a racial slur due to one's belief that skin pigmentation is correlated with human dignity. However, Basu does not regard the action as central to the wrongness in the situation. She argues that no matter what, it was the belief itself that has done the wronging. The mechanism by which a belief alone wrongs someone remains incredibly unclear. Any explanation of the mechanism appears to automatically swing towards linking action to belief once again to evaluate the given moral stakes and how the sufficiency threshold should be adjusted. For example, one could argue

that a morally wrong belief with no resulting action could make one more *prone* to an immoral action. This again ties action more closely to belief, yet it still fails to make a belief itself the *source* of wrongdoing. Other explanations try to explain the moral wrongdoing as done to oneself yet still to the other at the same time. This quickly becomes overly complex and unclear. Wronging another cannot plausibly be a purely internal process.

The alternative explanations attempting to clarify the mechanism by which someone may be wronged by beliefs without any resulting action either over-complicate or end up recreating a more subtle link between belief and action. At worst this means we must reject radical moral encroachment in its entirety. At best we must at least return to a more moderate moral encroachment which maintains a close link between the resulting morality of an action based on a certain belief.

The second prong of radical moral encroachment is the idea in which the stakes will adjust the sufficiency threshold are not dependent on the belief being false. To Basu, a immoral belief is wrong whether it is false or not. This prong of radical moral encroachment sets us on the path for a difficult dilemma.

Let us grant that it is true that ninety-nine percent of green people knock things over as they walk through an aisle. However, in every other way green people are just as human as the rest of us and deserving of dignity and respect. They are the same except for the fact that they are green and nearly every one of the green people will knock things over in a store aisle. A store owner has also had thousands of dollars of his products broken and left on the floor. Let us also grant that it is racist and wrong to associate being from a certain race and culture with crime or anti-social behavior in our current modern multi-cultural society. Would the owner of the store be wrong to believe that the green person walking into the store is almost certainly going to knock something over? Is he wrong to check the aisle cameras and the mirror in the back of his shop? If it is still immoral for him to practice “racist” actions because of his statistically backed belief, at what point would he be right believing that a green person in his shop is likely to knock something over? Would Basu argue that there is ever an evidential threshold that could outweigh the wrongness of this racist belief?

From this example we could conclude that the threshold for a morally wrong belief does not exist and is always morally wrong even if all the evidence lines up for the “morally wrong” but true answer. This answer would be deeply concerning for any epistemologist who is attempting to aim belief toward truth in the world. Depending on one’s morality it seems that it would be easy for one to lose themselves in a world where *any* hint moral wrongdoing (even without any resulting action) can trump all evidence for a belief. This is a recipe for disaster as many would drift away into epistemic irresponsibility in the name of some moral crusade or another.

The other option is that there is a certain amount of evidence that can outweigh a moral concern. However, even this could be problematic. If certainty is required to overcome a moral wrong, we are back in a situation in which most beliefs would have to be outweighed by moral concerns. If any amount of credence can weigh in and potentially outweigh a moral wrong, we may as well return to (at minimum) a moderate form of moral encroachment where evidence is weighed alongside the morality and moral actions that result from a belief. Finally, if truth is our main goal, then why maintain radical moral encroachment or encroachment at all? A pure form of evidentialism would aim far more clearly at grasping the truth of the matter. This means returning to the truth in the simple and banal platitude that Basu expressed disdain for: Facts cannot be racist.

Lastly there remains the practical difficulty of maintaining “wokeness” which is essential for practicing an epistemically responsible life under radical moral encroachment. Wokeness according to Basu is perpetually being aware of the moral environment and then having a moral sensitivity that will adjust the threshold for belief based on how “unjust” the environment is (p. 17). This burden placed on people is not only far too difficult for the average person, but also entirely unworkable in practice.

The burden for each person to be consistently and constantly aware of an unjust environment would require too much caution for any person attempting to regularly form beliefs for practical purposes. We are not always aware of environments being unjust and furthermore we cannot confirm just how deep the rot may go. If America is a racist, sexist, homophobic, and xenophobic country, does that then mean that heightened moral care is required *all* the time? Furthermore, what does Basu mean by injustice and to whom does it apply. In Basu’s examples it was only privileged white people from whom moral care was required. Does this then apply to any historically disadvantaged group in any situation at all? Surely, those who may be disadvantaged in some senses are still privileged in others. The expectation for everyone everywhere to be aware of any injustice present in an environment and thus requiring them to adjust the threshold for sufficiency would be difficult, if not impossible, for most people to consistently maintain.

Basu has described radical moral encroachment as a theory that detaches wrongdoing from action and attaches it to the belief instead. Furthermore, the stakes are associated with the wrongness of the belief rather than the risk of being false. Basu believes that this form of encroachment accurately captures our modern intuition on how racism functions. However, I have laid out objections to this form of thinking. The rebuttal includes making the distinction between assumptions, probabilities, and outright beliefs. Probabilities and assumptions cannot be equated with an outright belief. Next, there is the issue of making the wrongdoing of another an internal action. It remains unclear how one can wrong another without any action toward the other. Third, there is the dilemma of the point at which the truth can outweigh a “racist fact”. If one admits that moral wrongness outweighs the truth, then it would be easy to become detached

from reality. If one admits that the truth holds more importance, there would be no need to uphold any form of moral encroachment at all. Finally, there is the extreme burden that would be placed on those who attempt to practice epistemological responsibility under radical moral encroachment. Each of these objections serves to refute the validity of radical moral encroachment as a useful or practical epistemological theory.

References

Basu, R. (2019). Radical moral encroachment: The moral stakes of racist beliefs. *Philosophical Issues*, 29(1), 9–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phils.12137>

McCain, K. (2018b). Believing in accordance with the evidence: New essays on evidentialism (synthese library, 398). In G. Gardiner (Ed.), *Evidentialism and Moral Encroachment* (1st ed. 2018 ed., pp. 169–195). Springer.