

# Resisting Epistemic Partiality: Character, Values, and Evidence

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## Abstract

Do practical commitments require that we believe against the evidence? Recently, several philosophers have argued that our practical commitments – such as friendship and promise-making – make a direct difference for what we should believe. I argue that this is misguided. Practical commitments can make a difference indirectly (by giving you different evidence or directing your attention), but they cannot make a difference directly. I give two arguments for this, one from the nature of rationalizing explanation, another from the relationship between value and action.

First, it is a general feature of rationalizing explanations that they must stem from an intelligible interpretation of persons and actions. If practical commitments made a direct difference in belief, then we would not be able to engage in rationalizing explanations of ourselves and our intimates. So practical commitments cannot make a direct difference for belief.

Second, in order to make actions and persons intelligible, we must interpret them in light of what people value. Knowledge of what someone values is evidence for what they will do and who they are. So viewing someone intelligibly involves taking into account what they value, and this gives us evidence of what they will do and who they are. And this evidence is independent of our practical commitments. As a result, I think it unlikely that a better argument for epistemic partiality will arise.

## Introduction

Do practical commitments require that we believe against the evidence? Recently, several philosophers have argued that our practical commitments – such as friendship and promise-making – make a difference for what we should believe. In the case of friendship, for example, Sarah Stroud argues that esteem is the fundamental virtue, regardless of whether your evidence paints your friend as worthy of esteem. And so our beliefs should be responsive to these practical concerns, and we ought, in important cases, to believe against the evidence.

In this paper, I argue that this idea is misguided. Practical commitments can make a difference indirectly (by giving you different evidence or directing your attention), but they cannot make a difference directly. I give two arguments for this, one from the nature of rationalizing explanation, another from the relationship between value and action. First, it is a general feature of rationalizing explanations that they must stem from an intelligible interpretation of persons and actions. If practical

commitments made a direct difference in belief, then we would not be able to engage in rationalizing explanations of ourselves and our intimates. So practical commitments cannot make a direct difference for belief. Second, in order to make actions and persons intelligible, we must interpret them in light of what people value. Knowledge of what someone values is evidence for what they will do and who they are. So viewing someone intelligibly involves taking into account what they value, and this grants us evidence of what they will do and who they are. And this evidence arises whether we have practical commitments or not.

## Section I. Belief Against the Evidence: Partiality and Promises

In recent work, several philosophers have argued that intra- and interpersonal duties require agents to believe “against the evidence,” or to hold a different evidential standard for some beliefs. They present cases where *epistemically speaking* the agent ought to believe one thing, and *morally/practical speaking* she ought to believe another. The underlying claim is that believing according to the evidence results in a belief that undermines or violates the status of a deeply important relationship. If we are to satisfy our moral duties, or to live rich and full lives, the argument goes, we ought to believe against the evidence. Call these cases Epistemic Partiality cases.<sup>1</sup> Here are two paradigmatic cases. The first is from Berislav Marusic, the second from Sarah Stroud.<sup>2</sup>

### COMMITMENT

You are considering whether to marry your beloved. You’ve lived together a while, and you are ready to commit to spend the rest of your life with this person. But you also know that half of all marriages end in divorce. And in order for you to sincerely promise your marriage vows (that you will love, honor, and cherish, until death parts you), you must *believe* that you can make good on those promises. But you know that many others have been in the same position as you, and yet their marriages did not last. So, according to the evidence, you should not believe you will fulfill your promise, and so you cannot sincerely commit to marry your beloved. But if you are to commit to marriage, you must believe against the evidence.<sup>3</sup>

### FRIENDSHIP

You overhear two acquaintances discussing a close friend, Sam. They are recounting a story about Sam that paints him in a bad light. Sam dated a mutual friend, and then ghosted her, leaving her heartbroken. Epistemically speaking, you ought to believe that the Sam ghosted the mutual friend, and accept that he is a callous and inconsiderate person. But this is inconsistent with being a good friend. If you are to be a good friend, you have a duty to search for an explanation that paints Sam in a better light – either Sam is not the person in question,

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<sup>1</sup> Marusic does not use the language of partiality. He prefers “believe against the evidence.” However, as I will address in a moment, he does accept the counterfactual test, which is all I mean by partiality.

<sup>2</sup> See Stroud (2006) and Marusic (2013, 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Marusic, Evidence and Agency (2015)

or there is some other explanation of his actions. To be a good friend, you must believe against the evidence.

COMMITMENT and FRIENDSHIP differ in important ways. COMMITMENT involves forming beliefs about the future; FRIENDSHIP involves a belief about the past. COMMITMENT seems to crucially rely on you and what you will do; FRIENDSHIP does not. COMMITMENT involves deciding what kind of commitments to undertake; FRIENDSHIP involves understanding the commitments and character of someone else. But both cases support the general thesis of EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY.

EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY: The most significant and central features of our lives – our relationships with ourselves and our intimates – systematically require us to hold beliefs that are not justified from the epistemic point of view.

Proponents of epistemic partiality do not think that the epistemic point of view is irrelevant in the Epistemic Partiality cases. Rather, they think that partiality requires we resist evidence up to a certain point. If the evidence is overwhelming, then our relationships cannot require us to be patently irrational. As agents and friends, we should be epistemically insensitive.

EPISTEMIC INSENSITIVITY In partiality cases, our beliefs should be resistant to the evidence, but not to insurmountable evidence.

Our inter- and intra personal relationships do not require delusion. Our beliefs should not be immune to the evidence. The evidence matters, but does not determine what we should believe. What we ought to believe is largely determined by practical reasons. But in the limiting case, evidence again comes into play. I will return to this point later.

In order to make sense of EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY we need an account of what the “epistemic point of view” would require us to believe. What does the evidence require of us in Epistemic Partiality cases? What beliefs does the evidence justify? In order to settle these questions, proponents of epistemic partiality endorse DIFFERENT BELIEFS\*:

DIFFERENT BELIEFS\* In Epistemic Partiality cases, we ought to believe differently than an impartial observer (a bookie or a stranger).

According to proponents of partiality, the epistemically ideal person is exemplified by the impartial observer (a bookie who cares only about winning bets, for example, or a stranger with no personal involvement to the situation). The impartial observer tracks only the evidential features of the situation. In COMMITMENT, the impartial observer looks at the features of your relationship and the overall statistical likeliness that the relationship will last, and concludes that there is a significant chance you will not make good on your commitment. In FRIENDSHIP, the stranger would immediately form certain beliefs about Sam (on the basis of the overheard testimony). And since there is a difference between what the epistemically ideal person would believe and what the friend would believe, friendship must require partiality.

DIFFERENT BELIEFS\* doesn't yet support Epistemic Partiality, however. This is for two reasons. First, if a stranger or a Bookie were swapped in to COMMITMENT or FRIENDSHIP, they would believe differently than you would. But this is because a stranger or a Bookie doesn't have the same information you have. You know things about yourself and your relationship to your beloved that the Bookie wouldn't know. You know things about your friend Sam that a stranger would not know. The difference in beliefs can be explained by a difference in evidence. As a result, we need to make explicit that, the person being swapped in to the case has the same evidence you have.

DIFFERENT BELIEFS In Epistemic Partiality cases, we ought to believe differently than an impartial observer (a bookie or a stranger), were they in the same epistemic situation.

But even DIFFERENT BELIEFS is not yet enough to get EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY. One could accept DIFFERENT BELIEFS and reject EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY if one also rejects INVARIANTISM:

INVARIANTISM For any two subjects, S and S', necessarily, if S and S' have the same evidence for/against *p*, S is justified in believing *p* iff S' is also.<sup>4</sup>

If we reject INVARIANTISM, we can accept that the impartial observer and the friend may *both* be justified in their respective attitudes towards *p*. Two general positions that reject INVARIANTISM have been defended in response to cases like FRIENDSHIP. Kathrine Hawley argues that epistemic permissivism makes it possible that the stranger and the friend are both justified in their belief.<sup>5</sup> Permissivism holds that S and S' could have the same evidence but different attitudes towards *p*, and both attitudes be equally justified. Jason Kawall argues that if we accept Pragmatic Encroachment, the moral and interpersonal stakes make the stranger justified, but not the friend.<sup>6</sup> If we adopt Epistemic Permissivism or Pragmatic Encroachment, then the DIFFERENT BELIEFS does not give us EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY.

It is difficult to see how these approaches could be applied to Epistemic Partiality cases other than friendship. Consider COMMITMENT. If I am deciding whether to marry my beloved, the stakes are very high. On permissivism, this means that the evidence warrants the stranger in believing that my beloved and I will not last; but it also (the exact same evidence) warrants me in believing that we will. But if both views are epistemic possibilities, it seems like the evidence only grounds agnosticism, not permissivism.<sup>7</sup> On Pragmatic Encroachment, high stakes means I would need *more* evidence to be justified in believing that my beloved and I will make it for the long haul. This means that I am even *less* justified than on a standard view of epistemic justification. As a result, it is unlikely that these responses could give a unified response to Epistemic Partiality cases. Additionally, giving up INVARIANTISM has a cost. It is strongly defended and widely accepted principle in epistemology. I think that this gives us enough reasons to pursue another response to Partiality Cases.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Fantl and McGrath (2002). They call this principle "Evidentialism," but I find this name unhelpful because it refers to too many things.

<sup>5</sup> See Hawley.

<sup>6</sup> See Kawall. Kawall also suggests a view of graded knowledge.

<sup>7</sup> See White (2015).

In this paper, I accept INVARIANTISM, but argue that DIFFERENT BELIEFS is false. This undermines the argument EPISTEMIC PARTIALITY. The strategy that I will pursue in this paper builds on S.C. Goldberg's work in "Against Epistemic Partiality in Friendship: on Value Constituting Reasons." My aim differs from Goldberg's in several key respects. First, I am looking for a general response to Epistemic Partiality, not merely within the context of friendship. While Goldberg suggests that he thinks his account is fully general, he doesn't develop it. Second, while I agree with Goldberg that valuing generates practical reasons, and that these practical reasons can ground epistemic reasons, I do not rely on any of that machinery here. I also argue that an agent's attitude of valuing grounds epistemic reasons to believe certain things of her. But my argument relies on general interpretive principles in the philosophy of action. Finally, Goldberg emphasizes that relationships ground expectations for those involved. While his view is consistent with rejecting DIFFERENT BELIEFS (and he seems to do so in a footnote), it not clearly his focus. By contrast, my central argument is that we should reject DIFFERENT BELIEFS. In order to make someone's actions intelligible, we must view their actions as arising from their nature, and we must interpret those actions intelligibly. This will require that, given equal evidence, a stranger and a friend will form the same beliefs. I offer an error theory of why DIFFERENT BELIEFS seems true: friends often have knowledge that the stranger doesn't have.

My goal in this paper is to give a principled argument for why DIFFERENT BELIEFS is false. In the final section, I will explain why it seemed true. Proponents of partiality have overlooked a vital type of evidence: evidence that comes from knowledge of another person's values and character.

## Section II. But what does the evidence say?

What does it mean to follow one's evidence? Marusic offers the idea of the Bookie. The Bookie, Marusic tells us, creates bets around the truth of propositions. He formulates bets according to odds. Suppose the Bookie has the same evidence that we do. Epistemically, we ought to believe what the bookie believes. Our epistemic reasons are the bookie's reasons.<sup>8</sup> But the Bookie's position, Marusic contends, is at odds with taking up the standpoints of agency, friendship and love.<sup>9</sup>

Consider COMMITMENT. In this case, the Bookie would bet on your relationship failing. That is because this is the belief that will maximize his expected payout, according to Marusic. But why is this the case? Marusic gives a wide array of evidence: knowledge of yourself and your values, knowledge of your partner and your compatibility, knowledge of the statistical chance of success. And it is this last feature that will sway the Bookie to bet against you, Marusic thinks. But is this right? Is that statistic probative? The other evidence (about yourself, your values, your partner and your compatibility) is also relevant. It bears on your potential for success. Provided the Bookie updates on this evidence and has rational priors,<sup>10</sup> his estimation of your success will be much higher.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Marusic, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> (Marusic, 21-22; see also 189, FN 26 and 198)

<sup>10</sup> Or, for the subjective Bayesian, doesn't have wildly unusual priors.

<sup>11</sup> It's a bit difficult to pin down the reference class, but according to a recent CDC report, its well over 70% ([cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_23/sr23\\_022.pdf](https://cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf))

What about FRIENDSHIP? When spelling out what she means, Stroud contrasts the interpersonal perspective with a “view from nowhere,” like the detached observer.<sup>12</sup> The implication of this seems to be that the detached observer is a view from nowhere. But what epistemologist is committed to thinking that the epistemic perspective requires you to take a view from nowhere? All theories of justification take very seriously the context of the believer, the information she is exposed to, the information within her grasp and recall. While epistemic theorizing involves some idealization, it always crucially involves the truth-indicating features of the agent’s situation. For Internalists, this situation is comprised of the contents of her mental states.<sup>13</sup> For the externalist, this situation consists of beliefs produced by reliable means.<sup>14</sup> And for the Knowledge-First crowd, this consists of what she knows or is in a position to know.<sup>15</sup> None of this is a view from nowhere.

Sometimes Marusic and Stroud contrast the epistemic point of view with the interpersonal point of view. Here, they draw on PF Strawson’s distinction between the objective stance and the interpersonal stance. Strawson uses this distinction to ground appropriate conditions for the application of reactive attitudes, attitudes like blame and forgiveness.<sup>16</sup> When we take the objective stance, we view someone as causally determined, a psychological entity, one that could warrant our pity, but not as a proper object of praise and blame. On the other hand, we might view someone from the interpersonal stance. From this stance, we view someone as primarily an agent, determined by reasons, free, and subject to the reactive attitudes (praise and blame).

One possibility is that Stroud and Marusic think of the Bookie or the stranger as someone who takes the objective stance. What the epistemic perspective requires of us, the thought might go, is to view things from the objective stance. But once we are within the interpersonal stance, the norms and requirements are quite different. We view persons as free, and the concepts we apply are different. And so “interpersonally” we will draw different conclusions than we would “objectively.”

But this cannot be the right way to carve up the distinction. Suppose we were to identify the epistemic with the objective stance. Strawson views the objective and the interpersonal stances as mutually exclusive. You cannot inhabit both at the same time. From this it follows that *no doxastic attitude* taken within the interpersonal stance is epistemically rational. When I believe that you helped me move, freely, because you are my friend, I am epistemically irrational. Why? Because that is a claim that can only be intelligible from the interpersonal stance. Otherwise, the claim would be something like you helped me move because of a range of causal dispositions that makes you react in the moving-way when you are stimulated by vocal patterns of type A. If we identify the epistemic perspective with the objective stance, we make it so that no beliefs grounded in the interpersonal stance (and making use

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<sup>12</sup> Stroud, p. 511.

<sup>13</sup> See Conee and Feldman

<sup>14</sup> Goldman

<sup>15</sup> See Williamson (2000) and all that follows

<sup>16</sup> At times, marusic seems to have something like this in mind.

of interpersonal concepts) count as epistemically justified. And this is certainly not what most epistemologists think, even those of a strongly Strawsonian bent (like Marusic).<sup>17</sup>

So what is the detached observer's perspective? By interpersonal, we must mean something more than the minimal sense of interpersonal (a relation between two persons), since that encompasses both the objective and interpersonal stance and leaves no room for a "non-interpersonal" relationship. And we must mean something stronger than just the "interpersonal stance" in the Strawsonian sense, since it gives us an implausible view of the epistemic domain. A third possibility is that we mean that epistemic partiality is constituted by particular relationships. The thought would be that many relationships have one set of epistemic standards (even when understood within the interpersonal stance), but certain ones (like friendship, and one's relationship to one's self) have *unique* epistemic requirements. The thesis is: particular relationships enjoin special epistemic duties.

### Section III. Character and Charity

Inter- and intrapersonal relationships bring with them many special duties and responsibilities. When my friend is sad, I ought to listen to my friend and try to cheer them up. When my friend needs someone to help them move, I have a responsibility to give them a hand. Relationships also enrich our epistemic position. We come to know the friend's personality and character, their history, and intimate details of their life. With an enriched epistemic position comes a new set of conclusions one can draw. As I noted above, standard accounts of believing according to the evidences will entail that friends believe differently from non-friends. But are there special duties, epistemic loyalties as Stroud puts it, to believe our friends against the evidence? In order to make this case, we will need to discover a case between a friend and a non-friend where DIFFERENT BELIEFS holds.

Similarly, when deciding whether to commit, we cannot rely on a Bookie armed only with a statistical frequency of divorce rates. The bookie must know everything we know, and update his credences appropriately. He knows your history, your character, your values, your beloved's history, character and values, your financial and educational demographic, your income, etc. In order to make this case, we need to discover a case between you and the Bookie where DIFFERENT BELIEFS holds.

We need versions of COMMITMENT and FRIENDSHIP where all informational asymmetries have been removed. Let's consider some cases.

#### RABBI

You are a rabbi who has been asked to marry a couple. Both of the individuals grew up in your synagogue. You have been present for all official life events. You have witnessed them in situations that display their character and personality. You have talked with them in depth about their life goals and relationship, which seem quite compatible. You know they've lived together a while, and you've seen them show genuine love and affection for each other. But you also know that half of all marriages end in divorce. As a matter of personal conviction,

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<sup>17</sup> In Marusic and White (2018), Marusic embraces the idea that he is developing a Strawsonian Epistemology.

you do not agree to marry anyone unless you are strongly convinced that the relationship will last. Given the evidence, should you believe that the relationship will last (and agree to marry them)?

#### NEMESIS

You know your Nemesis quite well. You have a – perhaps unhealthy – obsession with following their career. They post prolifically on social media, and you follow all their posts. You take pains to be professional and friendly in social settings. Deep down, you want to best them professionally, so you don't actually have any concern for their welfare and success. But you've known each other for a long time, and you know how they respond in various social settings, how they conduct their professional life, and how they treat their grad students. You are not friends by any stretch, but you have a fairly well-formed notion of their character and you know them to be non-nefarious. One day, you overhear two acquaintances discussing your nemesis. The story paints your nemesis in a bad light. It shows them to have done something inconsiderate and rude, and indicates something quite bad about your nemesis' character. What should you believe?

In both of these cases, you have a great deal of knowledge about the person (or persons) in question. This is symmetrical with COMMITMENT and FRIENDSHIP. Of necessity, the information you have in RABBI is not identical to the information in COMMITMENT (though FRIENDSHIP could be identical, or nearly identical, to NEMESIS; you could be masquerading as a friend hoping to get your nemesis when she is weak). So now we must ask, does the difference in relationship status necessitate a difference in beliefs?

In the case of NEMESIS, even though you want the rumor to be true, you will still have trouble believing it. You have in-depth knowledge of your nemesis' annoyingly decent character. In order to make sense of these claims against Nemesis, you will have to scrutinize them, see if there was any indication in past behavior that suggested Nemesis was capable of this action, look for more evidence. The reason you will perform these actions (even though you desperately just *want* the claim to be true) is because in order to attribute an action to a person, it must be *intelligible* for them to perform that action. Actions that are radically out of character are unintelligible. They cannot be interpreted as arising from the person herself. I will return to this in a moment.

Let's consider RABBI. The Rabbi has ample evidence of the character, personality, and life goals of the couple. All of that suggests that they are compatible and will have a healthy, rich marriage. To counter that, the Rabbi has a statistic about marriages ending in divorce. But is that enough to prevent the Rabbi from agreeing to marry the couple (or any couple, for that matter)? Consider that the statistic is taken across all marriages. But how does this fact bear on the other things the rabbi knows about the couple? In fact, college educated, middle class couple with stable employment over age 25 have a



very *low* divorce rate.<sup>18</sup> But even if the Rabbi is not aware of this particular statistic, the rabbi is epistemically justified to take these first order facts about the couple (rather than the statistical abstraction) to count in favor of his conclusion.<sup>19</sup> The Rabbi, let's suppose, has no knowledge of these statistical variances (he only knows the raw statistic about 50%). But he does take the individual features – values, education, character, life position – to be good indicators of the union's success. And in fact, *they are* good indicators of the union's longevity. And so, the Rabbi is perfectly justified in believing (as are both members of the couple) in believing the marriage will last.

To see the role background evidence is playing in this argument, consider a different case.

#### COMMITMENT\*

You are considering whether to marry your beloved. You are both 17 and expecting a child together. Neither of you has a job, nor have you yet completed high school. You know your community support will be slim, if you decide to marry. You also know that half of all marriages end in divorce. And in order for you to sincerely promise your marriage vows (that you will love, honor, and cherish, until death parts you), you must *believe* that you can make good on those promises. According to the evidence, you should not believe you will fulfill your promise, and so you cannot sincerely commit to marry your beloved.

But, if Marusic is correct, what you ought to do is believe against your evidence that the marriage will last. However, there is a big evidential difference between COMMITMENT and COMMITMENT\*. In COMMITMENT, the non-statistical evidence makes nuptial success far more likely. While the evidence is not entailing (evidence rarely is), it does present a strong evidential basis for concluding that the relationship will last. By contrast, in COMMITMENT\*, the non-statistical evidence supports a conclusion that the marriage's chance of success is *far less* than 50%.

We do sense that it is perfectly permissible to believe in COMMITMENT. But I think this shows that it is not the relationship or the commitment that's doing the work, but the fact that we are implicitly relying on the first order facts (rather than an abstract generalization) to make our assessment. There is an epistemic difference between the two, and it is explained by the facts, not by the commitment.

Stroud explicitly denies that we can explain the differences in judgment by information asymmetries. She contrasts the case of friendship with the work of a historian, or the evaluation of a former friend. She thinks there is no normative or intuitive pressure for the historian or the former friend to believe the way the friend believes. Let's explore this by expanding our case of FRIENDSHIP from above. We should add more details about Sam.

(Some FRIENDSHIP backstory)

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<sup>18</sup> It is unclear exactly, but probably over 70% chance of staying married according to CDC report, [cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr\\_23/sr23\\_022.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Many standard accounts of justification allow that one does not have to *know* that a particular indicator is reliable in order to be justified in the conclusions one draws from that indicator.

Sam is impulsive, impetuous, quick to fall in love, quick to be distracted. But Sam is also one of those magnetic fun people that everyone loves to be around. Full of quick wit, warm affirmation, and overflowing with positive energy, Sam is the sort of person that everyone is a little in love with. Sam gives great warmth and love to friends, but is easily caught up with new people. While Sam never stops loving people, he can be very “out of sight, out of mind.”

FRIENDSHIP\* You are Sam’s friend, and you’ve been friends for a while. You hear a rumor that Sam ghosted a girl on a date, leaving her heartbroken. You judge that he meant no harm, but that his typical effervescent nature must have just gotten caught up with someone else.

According to Stroud’s analysis, you are required, as a friend, to believe something charitable of Sam. He wasn’t ill-intentioned; maybe it was someone else; maybe the case is overstated. This is radically different, she thinks, from the case of the historian. But why? Consider:

FRIENDSHIP\*\* You are a historian studying Sam. You have done enough research into Sam to know about his character and personality. You’ve read journal entries of the people he knows intimately. You’ve seen his facebook pictures and followed his Instagram posts. You’ve heard extensive details about his childhood, and spoken with close friends to get their perspective on him. You come across someone who mentions that Sam ghosted a girl on a date and left her heartbroken. You judge, based on your knowledge of Sam’s personality and character, that Sam meant no harm, but his effervescent nature was attracted to someone else.

The historian and the friend conclude the same thing. Why? The action is very *in character* for Sam. In order to attribute an action to someone, you must view it as a manifestation of that person’s self. This means you must see the action as flowing from their character, as an expression of their values. Since this is consistent with your conception of Sam (and the historian’s conception of Sam), you conclude the same thing. But suppose the rumor you heard was quite different:

RANTING SAM Sam’s personality, values, and character are the same as the case above, but in this instance, the rumor you hear is that Sam went gone on an angry, vindictive rant against someone in his close circle of friends. You are Sam’s good friend. You think, “That doesn’t sound like Sam. I wonder if there’s some mistake.” And then you think, if there was no mistake, what would have possibly made Sam do that? Because you are Sam’s friend, and have been for a while, you know about Sam’s dispositions, and you think about when Sam might behave that way and what would provoke such a reaction. Because it is so out of character for Sam, you think, if there is no mistake, something devastating must have happened.

RANTING SAM\* You’re the historian. You know all about Sam’s warm, loving disposition, you know accounts (all secondhand) of his relationship with his close friends, you know how he has reacted to adversity in his life, and how he generally handles

conflict. Then you come across an account of an angry, vindictive rant he gave against a close friend. It doesn't fit with your picture of Sam's character at all. Given what you know of his character and dispositions, you think about what would have caused this. You conclude that there must be a mistake, or if there wasn't a mistake something huge must have happened to make Sam behave so out of character.

The reason the historian makes the same conclusion as the close friend is that the historian is trying to construct an intelligible person. Given a large body of evidence about Sam's character and personality, there is no other conclusion to draw but that this was an aberration or mistake. If the close friend and the historian have symmetrical evidence of Sam's character, they will draw the same conclusion. This is because when we form beliefs about someone, we are trying to form an intelligible view of that person.

These observations severely restrict *when* relationship-constituting special duties could be in play. When the behavior is perfectly in character, then it makes no sense for the assessments to be different. In order to make an intelligible interpretation of someone's actions as their own, we must view them as stemming from the person's character and values. When the behavior is completely out of character, then it makes no sense for the assessments to be different. If I know someone fairly well, and I hear a report of some action attributed to them that is out of character, then I cannot intelligibly attribute action to the person, given my understanding of their character and values.

Stroud points out that actions can be subsumed under different descriptions. Sam could be carefree and effervescent. Or he could be careless and thoughtless. Friends, she thinks, should search for the positive descriptions, rather than the negative ones. This, it seems to me, will not do for people we know extremely well. If the person is a casual acquaintance or a stranger, we can search for other ways to describe the action. But when we know the person intimately, our knowledge of their character and values will substantially restrict which versions of their action are plausible. This is why, for example, when a friend does something we consider to be out of character, and they endorse this action, we might be tempted to say, "It turns out, I didn't know them at all." Knowledge of character and values is so predictive of behavior that if the person endorses behavior that is considered "out of character," it erodes our entire understanding of who that person is.

The most that the proponent of partiality has shown is that in borderline cases, when it isn't entirely clear what would be in character, there is room for interpretation. It is completely consistent, for example, that Sam be flighty and also that Sam be a magnetic, charming and kind person. And if the claim is just that friends have the duty to interpret their friends charitably, then this is a fairly weak claim.

But why not think that we owe charity to all people?<sup>20</sup> Davidson advocated the Principle of Charity. He thought that in order to make others' bodily movements intelligible, we must interpret them

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<sup>20</sup> Hawley makes this point in passing.

charitably. This means we interpret their beliefs to be largely true (insofar as we can) and their intentions to be mostly good (insofar as we can). But if we accept the principle of charity, this means that there is no case for partiality in friendship. The fact we treat friends better than strangers is a failure to do as we ought.

Davidson's principle of charity is consistent with the epistemic point of view. If we cannot see something as stemming from a person's character, we ought to interpret their action charitably. The cashier who is rude to me, the person who cuts me off in traffic: the epistemic perspective in fact requires that I do not judge they are a terrible person off such slim evidence. The person may just be having a bad day. The epistemic point of view does not sanction casting a person's entire character from the mold of a single encounter. Because no single encounter could possibly be a good guide to something as complex and multilayered as a human being. Thus, from the requirement for charity in friendship, it does not follow that we owe epistemic partiality. Instead, I think, it follows that we owe all persons charity. People are very complicated beings, and many interpretations of them can be equally true.

## Section IV. Values and Evidence

In this section, I will take one aspect from Sanford Goldberg's account – the fact that being a Valuer gives us reason to protect, promote, and preserve the thing of value – and apply it to Epistemic Partiality cases in general. I will join this point with the one made in the previous section, that one's character also plays a crucial role in making actions intelligible.

In his paper, "Against epistemic partiality in friendship: value-reflecting reasons," Sanford Goldberg argues that the purported difference between how we treat friends and how we treat non-friends can be explained away by showing that in these cases there is actually a difference of evidence. Goldberg's basic picture is a Valuer (someone who values something) has practical reason to act in ways that preserve, promote, and protect the thing of value. The Valuer also has reason to avoid demoting, undermining or threatening the thing of value. The Valuer has practical reasons to act in these ways. And, further, when the Valuer values friendship, they will have practical reasons to act in ways that preserve, promote, and protect the friendship. The friend can know this of the Valuer, and so have good *epistemic* reason to believe that the Valuer will act in ways consistent with the friendship. Trusting a friend "against the evidence," Goldberg argues, involves recognizing the way values give rise to practical reasons, which in turn ground epistemic reasons to believe certain things. We aren't actually trusting against the evidence. Instead, we have special evidence, grounded in the friendship itself.

Here, I will build on one key feature of Goldberg's account. Our intimate relationships put us in an epistemic position to know various features about the agent: her values and her character. Being in a position to know these things gives one special insight into facts about the sort of actions the agent will perform. Furthermore, anyone who possesses the same information is in a position to draw the same conclusion. Sometimes our nemeses see us better than our friends.

I begin with the philosophy of action. Humans are motivated by what they value. If I value good chocolate, I will spend money acquiring it, store it in an appropriate container, rather than the

glovebox of my car, I will bring it out on special occasions, and I will not trade it away for anything that I value less. If I value the works of Van Gogh, I will buy tickets to museums where I can admire his artwork, I will stop someone from defacing a Van Gogh, I will buy a high quality print for my office. If I value my friend, I will help her move, I will listen to her troubles, and I will go to her poetry reading. If you value something, it will guide your behavior. You will act in ways to promote, protect, and preserve. This follows just from what it is to value something.

The connection between what we value and how we act is quite robust. If we know what someone values, we will be able to predict how they will act. If we observe someone acting across a range of situations, we will be able to infer what they value. Many philosophers of action have argued for an even stronger claim: in order for bodily movements to be *intelligible* as action, we must be able to see what value the agent is responding to.<sup>21</sup>

Traditionally, in the philosophy of action, philosophers have emphasized that there is a *causal* link between our evaluative outlooks and our actions. Davidson begins his classic text by arguing that a rationalizing action must capture what it is the agent saw that was good in the action. Our actions, then, are made intelligible by reference to what we value. We can see what someone values by seeing how they act. And we can predict how someone will act by knowing what they value. The link between value and action is close enough that some have tried to reduce the relationship to a merely causal one.<sup>22</sup> And so knowing what someone values puts us in a very good epistemic position to know what the person would or would not do.

While the connection between valuing and action is quite close, it is not perfect. There are two reasons we might act in ways that fail to value the things we value. The first is because we value something else more, and the two goods are in conflict. In this case, we might (rationally) choose one good over another. The second is because we lack the ability to follow through on our commitments, or perhaps even see how to promote the things we value. We are weak-willed. We are ineffective at planning. I might value helping vulnerable people in my field, but fail to know who the truly vulnerable people are and end up not helping them. I might value taking care of my friend, but become easily distracted by the demands of other people so that I cannot form a coherent plan to help my friend. I might be so overwhelmed by anxiety and fear of failure that I fail to finish a task that matters a great deal to me.

Given the close connection between value, character, and evidence of what one will do, it seems that the appropriate question to ask in COMMITMENT is not “what is the likelihood that this lasts?” but rather, “how much do *I* value this? Am I willing to trade all potential benefits in order to promote and protect my relationship with this person?” and also, “am I capable of following through on this promise? Do I have enough wisdom and strength to perform the *right* actions, the ones that in fact promote this relationship?” If you sincerely answer yes to these questions, then that is a good indicator

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<sup>21</sup> Tal Brewer, *The Retrieval of Ethics*, 2009 develops this line in great detail. But this is implicit in many accounts of the philosophy of action, from Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, to Davidson’s “Actions, Reasons, and Causes.”

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, “Actions, Reasons, and Causes” (1963) is the classic text, but this is reiterated throughout the philosophy of action.

of your future behavior. If values and character can predict character at all, then this will do it. And so, if you settle what you should do, by asking what you value and whether you are able to make good on it, you will be justified in believing that you will keep your promise. It also grounds the friend's trust that you will make good on what you promise. As long as you promise sincerely, accurately identifying what you value, this is itself a good indicator of what you will do.<sup>23</sup>

If we want to understand what someone (including ourselves) will do, then, we must look to their values and their character. If we understand these features of a person, and we have a fairly stable notion of what kind of person they are, then we will know what they will do in various situations. This is why the case of the friend who ghosts someone is either in character and hence very plausible and odd to deny, or out of character, and so easy to deny, or at least redescribe. And all of this is from an epistemic point of view.

Now we are in a position to see why statistical generalizations are largely irrelevant in the Epistemic Partiality cases. A robust statistical generalization of behavior does not capture the character and values of the individuals who behave that way. If you are a bookie averaging over a large number of bets, the details may not matter, provided values and character traits are instantiated in predictable ways. But if you are a bookie aware of the character and values of the individual, you will conditionalize on this information and reach a new conclusion. Similarly, when deciding whether to get married or run a marathon, the relevant question is "what do you value?" You will have to forego many other things in order to value this thing well. Do you value this thing above what you will be asked to exchange for it? In the case of marriage, do you value the relationship above the excitement of a new crush, or the freedom to set one's ends without consulting others? And further do you have the character to make good on this promise? If it is your eighth marriage, perhaps you have commitment issues.

It's not quite the case that you are *predicting*. You may be *deciding* what you value. But once you sincerely decide that you value the relationship over any foreseeable trade, then you may justifiably believe that you will fulfill your promise. Here's the argument:

1. Values and character together are what guide and motivate the agent in the pursuit of her ends.
2. We can know the values and character of ourselves and our intimates.
3. So this knowledge generates evidence of what sorts of actions the agent will undertake.

When faced with COMMITMENT or FRIENDSHIP, the knowledge of values and character (in oneself or another) can ground a justified belief that one will remain faithful, or that a friend is not a bad person (or perhaps is even innocent entirely). But this knowledge is not dependent on the person being my friend. The Bookie can have this knowledge, too, if he also knows what the valuer values.

Human persons are not piles of psychic energy, blown around by the winds of chance, frenetically animating bodily movements by impulse and whim. While we have physical and psychological

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<sup>23</sup> I wish to remain neutral whether your decision *creates* the valuing relation, or merely *discovers* it.

limitations, and we can change over time, our actions are shaped by our evaluative outlook and our character. It is not random whether you will make good on your commitments, or whether your friend Sam is capable of ghosting someone. Our evaluative outlook comprises the things that we value; our character involves our psychological ability to act in ways that promote, protect, and preserve the things we value.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that there is no case for Epistemic Partiality. I have argued for this on two general grounds: first, in order to see actions as authentically those of the person, we must see them as reflecting their character and values. And so we cannot draw different conclusions between friend and nemesis, when the person's character is known. The most we can conclude is that when multiple descriptions of the action can be applied, we ought to be charitable. But this, I argue, is a general principle that we must apply to everyone. And so friends and strangers should believe in the same way. Secondly, I argued that actions are motivated and guided by our evaluative outlooks. And so knowledge of what someone values is evidence of how they will behave. This is much better evidence than the evidence provided by statistical generalizations. As a result, there is no rational pressure to believe against the evidence.

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