Credibility Trouble: When "I Believe You" is an Epistemic Wrong

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This article defends the counterintuitive conclusion that public assignments of credibility – including statements, by hearers, of "that's right," "she is credible," or "I believe you" – can actually constitute a pernicious form of epistemic wrong. Sometimes referred to colloquially as "lip service," the wrong occurs when, owing to ethically poisonous epistemic failures, hearers outwardly validate testifiers' credibility despite not fully or duly believing them. To explain this wrong, I introduce a distinction between *performed* and *internal credibility assignments* (PCA and ICA) and describe an epistemic dysfunction in which they misalign. I focus on cases in which misaligned PCA of "credible" falsely – although sometimes non-deliberately – signal to testifiers and bystanders that testifiers have been believed; Republican hearers' positive reception of Christine Blasey Ford's 2018 testimony serves as a central case. Although some misaligned PCA are not wrongful, when epistemic and ethical failures including forms of identity prejudice and pernicious ignorance lead PCA of "credible" to misalign, the PCA wrong testifiers in their capacities as knowers. These epistemic wrongs are particularly pernicious because the PCA conceal that testimony has not been efficacious, inflicting and exacerbating distinct harms.

keywords: epistemic injustice, epistemic oppression, credibility, Blasey Ford

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Introduction

"I believe you." "That sounds right." "You are credible." As testifiers, we would generally to be happy to be met with responses like these – all the more so given what we know about what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls *testimonial injustice*, and how testifiers may be wronged by audiences whose prejudices lead them to judge speakers as less credible than they otherwise would. But this article considers how outward validations of a testifier's credibility – what I call *performed credibility assignments* (PCA) – can be marked by an epistemic dysfunction that disadvantages speakers, in which PCA communicate false information about hearers' actual doxastic responses. I argue that a subset of these PCA actually constitute pernicious epistemic wrongs, undermining testifiers in their capacities as knowers (Fricker 2007, 1; McKinnon 2016). These wrongs are so pernicious because they are characterized, counterintuitively, by a hearer's public affirmation that a speaker *has* been believed. To see how PCA can constitute epistemic wrongs, it helps to consider a *prima facie* case.

On September 27th 2018, Christine Blasey Ford testified to the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding her sexual assault by Brett Kavanaugh; Kavanaugh testified later that day, denying the accusation. After a brief, limited FBI inquiry, the Republican-controlled Senate confirmed Kavanaugh on October 6th as the newest member of the U.S. Supreme Court. Kavanaugh's confirmation was not a surprise to those disheartened by the U.S. government under Donald Trump and the Republican Senate. But what was more surprising – or perhaps more troubling – was the positive manner in which Blasey Ford's testimony was received by the Republicans who ultimately championed Kavanaugh's confirmation.

"I thought her testimony was very compelling," said Trump. "She looks like a very fine woman to me, very fine woman…But certainly [Ford] was a very credible witness. She was very good in many respects" (Reints 2018). "I thought she looked credible," said Republican Senator Richard Shelby (Bolton and Carney 2018). Texas Senator John Cornyn commented, "I found no reason to find [Ford] not credible" (Peterson 2018). "Something happened to this woman," claimed Republican Senator Lindsay Graham. Noting Kavanaugh's denial, he continued, "I don't know how she got there or how she left but somebody brought her there, somebody took her away and the trauma that happened on that day and that place that's an important event for me" (Wagner et al. 2018). Then there was Senator Orrin G. Hatch: "I don't think she's uncredible. I think she's an attractive, good witness…In other words, she's pleasing" (Stolberg and Fandos 2018).

The foregoing statements are affirmative examples of *performed credibility assignments*, outward expressions by hearers that they find some testimony to be credible. Normally, if a hearer makes a PCA of "credible," we expect their behaviors to reflect having judged that testimony to be believable, that is, as true. But here, the opposite was the case. The FBI inquiry was limited to one week, and neither Blasey Ford nor Kavanaugh were interviewed; also not interviewed were over twenty-five witnesses suggested by another of Kavanaugh's accusers, Deborah Ramirez (Pogrebin and Kelly 2019).[1] In the days following Blasey Ford's testimony,

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[1] Ramirez also shared that FBI officers told her that they found her credible, but were prohibited from investigating further (Pogrebin and Kelly 2019).

the Republican narrative changed; where she had once been "credible," Blasey Ford became a "victim of the democrats," a phrase that was equally applied to Kavanaugh and thus distracted, foreseeably, from the content of her testimony (ABC News 2018). On October 2nd, notoriously, Trump mocked Blasey Ford at a rally in Mississippi. Of course, most divergent from the PCA was Kavanaugh's swift confirmation to the Supreme Court.

I do not claim to be able to read the minds of Blasey Ford's Republican hearers. However, the behaviors we can observe suggest that hearers' PCA of "credible" did not reflect how her testimony was actually received.[2] In fact, the evidence indicates that Blasey Ford may have been the victim of a distinct epistemic wrong, which we sometimes refer to colloquially as "lip service" (although this phrase can mean other things).[3] The wrong occurs when epistemic and ethical failures – including, but not limited to, "ethically poisonous" forms of prejudice (Fricker 2007, 22 and 34-5), pernicious ignorance (Dotson 2011), willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012; Dotson 2012), and epistemic vice (Medina 2013 and 2021; Fricker 2021) – prompt hearers to perform belief despite not fully or duly believing testifiers. Even if non-deliberate, ethically poisonous epistemic failures lead testifiers to be unduly deprived of helpful information regarding the actual receipt of their testimony, which wrongs them in their capacities as knowers. I locate this epistemic wrong at the site of the misaligned PCA of "credible." While it may coincide with other epistemic wrongs, like testimonial injustice, this wrong is distinguished by hearers' public expressions of belief; it can therefore go unnoticed by ordinary onlookers and social epistemologists – often focused on private credibility deficits (see Fricker 2007; Maitra 2010; Origgi 2012; Carel and Kidd 2014; Pohlhaus 2014; McKinnon 2016 and 2017) – who may find it quite counterintuitive that testifiers could be wronged by expressions of, "I believe you." These epistemic wrongs are pernicious because the PCA obscures that testimony has not been efficacious, which can provide a cover for prejudicial hearers, deter bystanders from offering support, and instigate feelings of self-doubt, confusion, and betrayal in testifiers.

I begin by introducing a distinction between *performed* and *internal* credibility assignments (PCA and ICA) and describe an epistemic dysfunction in which they misalign. Although some cases of misalignment are not wrongful, when ethically poisonous epistemic failures explain why PCA of "credible" misalign, the PCA constitute epistemic wrongs, meaning that they wrong testifiers in their capacities as knowers. I offer four readings of the Blasey Ford case, illustrating different ways that PCA of "credible" can misalign and constitute epistemic wrongs. Emphasizing that these wrongs can belong to broader patterns of epistemic oppression, I argue that they are of a particularly pernicious and troubling kind, worthy of further attention and response.

A clarification. The wrongs described in this article are epistemic injustices, on Fricker's account, because they wrong testifiers as knowers (2007, 1-2). However, I typically use the phrase "epistemic wrongs" – defined here as wrongs to agents in their capacities as knowers – and do not categorize these wrongs as a particular form of epistemic injustice, like testimonial injustice, for two reasons. First, while many of my cases will reveal ICA marked by the

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[2] I take it as a kind of premise that by looking to hearers' behaviors after receiving testimony, we gain insight (however imperfectly) into their private judgments.
[3] The phrase "lip service" does not always refer to credibility assignment; when it does, it can refer to a gap between PCA and behaviors, rather than PCA and private credibility judgments. This article is not a general account of "lip service."

prejudicial credibility deficits that delimit the most relevant form of epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007, 17-29), *these* wrongs are characterized precisely by a public assignment of "credible," rendering an internal-deficit-based framework confusing. Second, while many of these wrongs will be driven by prejudice, some can be explained by other failures and might be analyzed as other forms of epistemic wrongs.[4] These include what Kristie Dotson calls *epistemic violence*, which occurs when pernicious ignorance leads audiences not to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange, that is, to not even perceive testifiers as knowers or recognize their intent to communicate knowledge (2011, 236-43). Pernicious ignorance refers to "any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)"; reliable denotes "ignorance that is consistent or follows from a predictable epistemic gap in cognitive resources," often emerging from patterns of social and epistemic oppression (Dotson 2011, 239 and 2014). I use the term "epistemic wrongs," and explain how misaligned PCA can *wrong* testifiers, in the hopes of remaining pluralistic about which models of epistemic injustice or epistemic oppression might be helpful for explaining particular instances of this pattern.

Performed and Internal Credibility Assignments

"In face-to-face testimonial exchanges the hearer must make some attribution of *credibility* regarding the speaker," writes Fricker (2007, 18). Drawn from the epistemology of testimony, this insight is an uncontroversial starting point for literature on epistemic injustice; it organizes research on how credibility attribution can go awry (see McKinnon 2016, 437). But theorists have primarily focused on one form of credibility attribution: spontaneous, inner perceptions and private judgments (see Fricker 2007, 36; Maitra 2010, 198-9; Origgi 2012, 233; Carel and Kidd 2014, 531-2). While certainly worthy of attention, these private, internal judgments are not the only way that hearers "assign credibility" in testimonial exchange. There is a more public side to our practices of credibility attribution, and identifying the wrongs in which I am interested requires that we expand our attention to these practices.

In testimonial exchange, hearers often *outwardly* assign credibility. Through effusive nods, sounds of affirmation ("mm-hmm"), and statements like "that sounds right" and "I believe you," hearers indicate to testifiers and bystanders that they find testimony credible. Hearers also express disbelief by shaking their heads, with a skeptical raise of the eyebrow, or by saying, "I'm not so sure" or "I don't believe you." I call these, and phenomena like these, *performed credibility assignments* (PCA), which occur when hearers outwardly communicate that they do or do not take a speaker to be credible. To distinguish PCA from the internal, private assessments scholars have emphasized, I refer to the latter as *internal credibility assignments* (ICA). Importantly, PCA are often just as spontaneous as ICA; while they can be the product of deliberation, hearers commonly make PCA as they receive testimony in real time.

In general, PCA function to provide testifiers and bystanders with information about whether a hearer perceives testimony as believable. Consider a typical interaction: Milo arrives at work and finds his colleague, Sally, extremely upset. She tells him about ways that their boss has treated her with disrespect. As Sally speaks, Milo nods his head effusively and makes

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[4] The work by women of color to theorize epistemic wrongs has often gone unacknowledged. For some discussion and relevant citations, see Dotson (2011, 242 and footnote 5) and McKinnon (2016, 438-9 and footnote 7).

statements like, "Oh yeah, that sounds like him," "that's true," and "I totally buy that he did that." These are PCA, and through them, Milo communicates to Sally that he believes her. This information is helpful to Sally; it indicates (albeit not decisively) that her testimony has gained uptake, bolsters her confidence that she is not overreacting, and provides evidence that Milo might be trusted as a confidant or supporter in the future.

This scenario reveals something important about the typical relationship between PCA and ICA; when testimonial exchange is functioning normally, PCA and ICA align. By align, I mean that if interrogated, Milo's ICA and PCA will reveal the same basic credibility assignment, in this case, "credible." The reason for the tendency of PCA and ICA to align is traceable simply to the usual function of PCA: to communicate hearers' actual judgments of belief or disbelief. It is the fact of general alignment that makes PCA useful to testifiers, providing them with helpful information about whether their testimony has been believed.

But sometimes, an epistemic dysfunction occurs in which a hearer's PCA provide inaccurate information about their ICA (or adjacent epistemic processes).[5] When this happens, we can say that PCA and ICA *misalign*. In the next section I describe the epistemic dysfunction that consists in misalignment, and then consider how a subset of these dysfunctions reveal PCA as epistemic wrongs.

Epistemic Dysfunctions and the Problem of Misalignment

Most straightforwardly, misalignment occurs when – with respect to some testimony – a hearer makes a PCA of "credible" and an ICA of "not credible," or visa-versa. However, I will also include cases in which a PCA of "credible" accompanies an ICA of "only credible in a truncated sense" or an ICA of "credible" that meets with what Fricker calls *inferential inertia*, a problem of epistemic follow-through in which judgments fail to impact other beliefs (2021, 101). I leave the latter forms of misalignment, however, to readings #3 and #4; the point, here, is that PCA can be said to misalign when they do not reflect hearers' actual doxastic responses.

Here are some illustrations of straightforward misalignments between PCA and ICA. Bonnie and Lorraine work in the same field. Lorraine gives Bonnie some career advice, stressing the difficulties of getting hired without a particular set of qualifications. Bonnie has no particular reason to doubt Lorraine, and as she listens, she validates Lorraine's credibility, saying, "that's true," and "I trust you." However, in the aftermath of the conversation, Bonnie finds herself unmoved by Lorraine's counsel. Upon reflection, she realizes that she did not really find the testimony convincing. Bonnie's affirmative PCA misaligned from an ICA of "not credible."

Alma and Jacob are good friends. Unbeknownst to Alma, Jacob privately harbors the opinion that Alma has poor taste in movies. One day, she says, "Oh, you haven't seen *Wedding Crashers*? It is truly the best comedy of all time." Jacob does not wish to hurt Alma's feelings, and so he responds with effusive expressions of belief, nodding excitedly and agreeing, "I'm sure that's true." But Jacob's PCA of "credible" are underwritten by ICA of "not credible."

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[5] The phrase "epistemic dysfunction" comes from Fricker (2007, 17-22).

On a June day, Ravi's roommate, Nadia, tells him, "It's cold – wear a jacket!" Ravi scoffs and replies, "There's no way; it's nearly summer." But as he leaves home, Ravi grabs a warm coat. He realizes that he may have trusted Nadia more than he thought. Ravi's PCA of "not credible" misaligned from his ICA of "credible."

We can learn at least two things from these examples. The first concerns the explanatory role of epistemic opacity; in two of these cases – the first and the last – misalignments are not deliberate, but an accidental byproduct of the fact that when making ICA, we are not fully transparent to ourselves. Misaligned PCA are not always the result of deliberation; Ravi's is something like a "gut reaction," and Bonnie's is a learned response to receiving advice. Second, misalignments need not be marked by any *prima facie* evidence of injustice. Even Jacob's deliberate misrepresentation seems like a white lie, and does not obviously wrong Alma.

However, the misalignment of PCA and ICA constitutes an epistemic dysfunction because misaligned PCA send false information to testifiers and bystanders about whether testimony has been believed, belying their usual function. Even if accidental, non-negligent, and unrelated to patterns of social injustice, this dysfunction can disadvantage the parties to testimonial exchange. To see why, consider Fricker's comments on the adverse effects of merely erroneous credibility deficits. She describes an ethicist who, through neither prejudice nor negligence, mistakenly believes an interlocutor to be a medic rather than a fellow ethicist and so unduly mistrusts his testimony. Although the testifier has not been wronged epistemically, both parties suffer a disadvantage; the testifier is unduly disbelieved, and the hearer misses out on knowledge (Fricker 2007, 21-2). Likewise, erroneous misalignments between PCA and ICA can disadvantage the parties to testimonial exchange. Lorraine may approach future interactions with an inflated sense of her own advice, or feel snubbed by Bonnie when she notices that her guidance went unheeded; Alma and Jacob may both be frustrated when, on the basis of his misaligned PCA, she brings *Wedding Crashers* to an event and finds him unenthused.

What I wish to consider, however, is how a subset of misalignments actually reveal PCA as epistemic wrongs, and those that are particularly hard to see because they are characterized by a hearer's having indicated, "I believe you." For this reason, the remainder of the article considers only cases of misalignment in which the misaligned PCA is "credible." In the next section, I argue that when ethically poisonous epistemic failures lead a PCA of "credible" to misalign, the PCA constitutes an epistemic wrong.

Before moving on, however, I offer some brief comments on those cases that will henceforth be excluded, in which a PCA of "not credible" misaligns from an ICA of "credible." In such circumstances – where testifiers really *are* believed – misaligned PCA generally result from one-off errors of attention and do no epistemic injustice. There are, however, some cases in which misaligned PCA of "not credible" wrong testifiers. These can also be demarcated – on the basis of the forthcoming arguments – by whether some ethically poisonous epistemic failure explains the misalignment. If, for instance, Ravi's PCA of "not credible" misaligns owing to identity prejudice, then Nadia suffers an epistemic wrong at the locus of the PCA.

Finally, PCA of "not credible" can constitute epistemic wrongs if they occur in the context of *gaslighting*. According to Veronica Ivy (formerly Rachel McKinnon), gaslighting is an epistemic injustice that occurs when, owing to identity prejudice, a testifier is unduly and outwardly invalidated by a hearer she sees as an ally (McKinnon 2017, 168-9). These outward invalidations can include PCA of "not credible." But the epistemic wrong inflicted by a PCA of "not credible," in cases of gaslighting, admits of a different explanation than those in which I am

interested, because such PCA are not generally misaligned. In gaslighting, the undue credibility deficit impacts hearers' judgments and their outward behaviors (McKinnon 2017, 169); both ICA and PCA are "not credible." An exception would be those rare cases of gaslighting as "psychological abuse," if hearers know that the testimony they are invalidating is true (McKinnon 2017, 168); here, misaligned PCA of "not credible" could constitute epistemic wrongs on my account. In general, however, the epistemic wrongs of gaslighting are better captured by Ivy's analysis.

When "I Believe You" is an Epistemic Wrong

The project of this section is to identify what delineates the subset of cases in which misaligned PCA of "credible" constitute epistemic wrongs. I have suggested that Republican hearers' responses to Blasey Ford are *prima facie* examples of PCA as epistemic wrongs. But in this case, one explanation of the wrong is especially tempting; we might think that these PCA were straightforwardly dishonest, and conclude that *insincerity* delimits those PCA which wrong testifiers as knowers. Such a conclusion would be incorrect. In fact, many hearers whose PCA of "credible" constitute epistemic wrongs are perfectly sincere, and take themselves to have genuinely assigned credibility. To assess these wrongs, it helps to reflect on a scenario in which explanations arising from the dishonesty of politicians are not so tempting.

Consider the following case, which draws on contemporary discussions – led by activists of color and queer activists, often on social media – of performative allyship. Asia, a Black, queer woman who is a graduate student in philosophy, routinely experiences discriminatory treatment by her professors. Although she works in philosophy of mind, faculty assume that Asia's philosophical interests lie in philosophy of race or queer theory; one professor misgenders a trans person in front of Asia and laughs off Asia's attempt at correction, another asks her for a "woman's opinion" on the layout of his office.

Suppose that Asia approaches a fellow student, Emma – a white woman known for her advocacy in the department – and describes these experiences. As she does, Emma is responsive and validating; she says things, apparently sincerely, like, "That sounds like him," "I believe you," and "Yeah, I totally buy that he did that." Emma indicates her support to Asia in bringing her complaints to the department's climate committee. In the following weeks, however, Asia hears nothing from Emma. Asia is confused because she initially felt so validated by Emma's responses; she actually waits longer to approach Emma again than she normally would, and does not pursue other avenues of support, because she was so reassured by Emma's responses. After finally approaching her, however, Emma tells Asia that "now is not a good time" to raise these complaints. She advises Asia to let it go.

Emma's initial responses include apparently sincere PCA. However, her subsequent behavior suggests that her PCA and ICA may have misaligned; for the sake of the example, let us assume that they have. The question, then, is whether Emma's PCA wrong Asia as knower. Answering this question requires that we distinguish between epistemic dysfunctions that do, and do not, constitute epistemic wrongs.

In the last section, I raised Fricker's example of an ethicist who mistakenly deflates her interlocutor's credibility, noting that all epistemic dysfunctions can have adverse effects. But Fricker's discussion of this example also contains a useful argument for what characterizes those epistemic dysfunctions that wrong testifiers as knowers. In the original example, Fricker explains that the ethicist's mistaken credibility deficit does not wrong her interlocutor – it "does not

constitute a case of testimonial injustice" (2007, 22) – because the ethicist is guilty of no ethical or epistemic failing. Fricker comments, "It is simply an innocent error…an unlucky mistake" (2007, 22). She then amends the case, imagining that the credibility deficit results from an epistemically culpable error like a "hopelessly careless" web search. Fricker maintains that even here, there is no epistemic injustice, because there is nothing ethically bad about the ethicist's carelessness. Fricker writes, "Her unduly deflated credibility judgment of him does not insult or undermine him as a knower, for she has simply made a stupid mistake. While her error is epistemically culpable, its ethical non-culpability still seems to prevent the resultant credibility deficit from constituting a testimonial injustice" (2007, 22). To be *wronged* as a knower, Fricker insists, is an ethical matter as well as an epistemic one (2007, 1-2 and 43-5); thus, "It seems that the ethical poison of testimonial injustice must derive from some ethical poison in the judgement of the hearer" (2007, 22). Fricker settles on prejudice, focusing particularly on the negative identity prejudices that mark systematic cases of testimonial injustice (2007, 22, 27, and 34-5).

Drawing on Fricker's reasoning, we can identify the subset of cases in which misaligned PCA of "credible" constitute epistemic wrongs. The difference lies in whether the misalignment is explained by some ethically poisonous epistemic failure. I focus on two: ethically noxious forms of prejudice (e.g. negative identity prejudice; Fricker 2007) and pernicious ignorance (e.g. harmful, reliable ignorance about what constitutes sexual assault; Dotson 2011). However, such failures can take other forms, including willful hermeneutical ignorance (e.g. active white ignorance about the realities of racial injustice; Pohlhaus 2012 and Dotson 2012, see also Mills 2007 and Medina 2013) and persistent or "capital" epistemic vices (e.g. chronic epistemic laziness in response to testimony by trans people; Medina 2013 and 2021). Notably, not all epistemic failures are ethically poisonous; those lacking ethical poison might include a prejudice against a scientific method (Fricker 2007, 35), a one-off vice of inattention (not a habit), or the harmful, reliable ignorance of the child, described by Dotson, who is unaware of the dangers of fire (2011, 240).[6] Epistemic wrongs are produced only by epistemic failures that are also ethically bad. When ethically poisonous epistemic failures lead PCA of "credible" to misalign, the PCA wrong testifiers in their capacities as knowers.

Importantly, the ethically poisonous epistemic failures that can drive wrongful misalignments include those – like socially widespread forms of implicit bias or pernicious ignorance – for which particular hearers might not be obviously or individually culpable. Where social and epistemic oppression persists, some epistemic failures are so pervasive, and look so reasonable to most, that we exculpate individuals for exhibiting them (Fricker 2007, 100-1; Dotson 2012, 38-9; Medina 2013, 139-43). Partly for this reason, Dotson generally avoids the language of culpability and stresses that epistemic injustice can be perpetrated by hearers who are not blameworthy for acting upon structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources (2011, 242 and 2012, 37-41).[7] I am also wary of delineating epistemic wrongs on the basis of whether blame

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[6] Although the child fails to reciprocate a testifier's warning, I would not describe them as having *wronged* the testifier epistemically, because their reliable ignorance, although harmful, lacks "ethical poison." My view of epistemic wrongs is narrower than Dotson's model of epistemic violence (2011, 239-40).

[7] Dotson argues that Fricker's distinction between "epistemic bad luck" and epistemic injustice risks obscuring cases like these (2012, 37-41). In one section, however, Fricker clarifies that hearers who have unluckily and non-culpably inherited certain prejudices *can* inflict epistemic injustice (2007, 100-1).

is appropriate. But even where we might not *blame* hearers for exhibiting socially widespread forms of prejudice or pernicious ignorance, these epistemic failures are still ethically *bad*, because they emerge from and reinforce persistently harmful forms of social and epistemic oppression. Furthermore, these failures are still tainted by an (unintentional) denial of the testifier's epistemic agency, in ways that errors bearing no relation to existing injustices are not (see Fricker 2007, 43-5; Dotson 2012, 32; Medina 2013, 141-2). By arguing that epistemic wrongs are driven by ethically poisonous epistemic failures, I seek to preserve the ethical component of these wrongs while avoiding a practically troublesome emphasis on the blameworthiness of particular hearers.[8]

When ethically poisonous epistemic failures lead PCA of "credible" to misalign, the PCA constitute epistemic wrongs. Such PCA wrong testifiers as knowers because, owing to epistemic and ethical failures, the PCA falsely communicate that testifiers have been believed; testifiers are unduly deprived of information regarding the actual receipt of their testimony, and may be misled into thinking that their testimony has been efficacious, when it actually has not. The epistemic wrongs constituted by misaligned PCA may coincide with others; if, for instance, identity prejudice leads the PCA to misalign from an ICA of "not credible," then the prejudicially-deflated ICA is a locus of testimonial injustice.[9] But the PCA of "credible" nonetheless constitutes a distinct epistemic wrong, which can inflict unique epistemic and ethical harms. To identify these harms, return to Emma and Asia.

Suppose that Emma's PCA of "credible" misaligned from ICA of "not credible" owing to identity prejudice and/or pernicious ignorance about the nature of microaggressions or the harm they can do. Emma's PCA would constitute epistemic wrongs; Asia is wronged as a knower because, owing to ethically poisonous epistemic failures, she receives false information about how her testimony was received. The PCA inflict and exacerbate the epistemic and ethical harms that Asia is likely to experience. They promote a false faith that Emma is on Asia's side, inspiring confusion and, later, making Emma's betrayal all the more painful. Thinking herself duly believed, Asia delays further advocacy on her own behalf, such that her testimony does not gain uptake elsewhere. Bystanders to the interaction might fail to take supportive action, mistakenly thinking that Emma already "has it covered." Asia might also experience self-doubt – unduly blaming herself for misinterpreting Emma's responses – or be less likely to trust other audiences in the future, choosing instead to self-silence.

Notably, the epistemic wrongs that result when ethically noxious epistemic failures lead PCA of "credible" to misalign may be *incidental* or *systematic*, that is, unconnected or connected to broader patterns of social injustice (Fricker 2007, 27-9). There are cases in which PCA constitute one-off epistemic wrongs, for instance, if a misalignment is explained by an undue (but not identity-based) personal bias against a testifier. However, we ought to be particularly worried about misalignments produced by epistemic and ethical failures that are persistent, as when they are driven by a counterfactual incompetence (Dotson 2011, 241), and *especially* when

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[8] If this sounds strange, consider that it is quite ordinary in literature on structural injustice to identify that wrongs have been enacted by individuals who are not blameworthy. See, for instance, Young (2011).

[9] I am inspired, here, by Ivy's identification (formerly McKinnon) that in gaslighting there is more than one site of testimonial injustice: the inner credibility deficit and the outer expression of doubt (McKinnon 2017, 169). Likewise, misalignments between PCA and ICA can reveal several epistemic wrongs and admit of more than one description.

they are connected to patterns of social injustice, as prejudice and pernicious ignorance often are. When these kinds of failures cause PCA to misalign, the epistemic wrongs are systematic, tending to habitually disadvantage already vulnerable testifiers.

We are left with the troubling result that sometimes, "I believe you" is a pernicious and systematic epistemic wrong. In the next section, I show how the foregoing analysis can help us account for PCA as epistemic wrongs in the Blasey Ford case, including in ways that defy the straightforward explanation that hearers deliberately misrepresented their ICA. Even if non-deliberate, if ethically poisonous epistemic failures explain the misalignment, the PCA constitute epistemic wrongs.

Four Readings of the Blasey Ford Case

The following readings illustrate different ways that Republican hearers' PCA of "credible" could have constituted epistemic wrongs to Blasey Ford. These readings are neither exclusive nor exhaustive, and I will not argue that any one explanation is correct (neither in general nor with respect to any particular hearer). Rather, these readings demonstrate how the epistemic wrongs described in this article may have occurred in a particular case; they illustrate several ways that PCA can wrong testifiers, so that we can better identify when they do.

Reading #1
Performed credibility assignment (PCA): credible
Internal credibility assignment (ICA): not credible
What is the misalignment? PCA was a lie; hearer deliberately misrepresented their ICA
This reading embraces the tempting explanation that Republican hearers' affirmative PCA were deliberate misrepresentations of their actual judgments. On this reading, the shoddy FBI inquiry, defenses of Kavanaugh, demeaning treatment of Blasey Ford, and Kavanaugh's confirmation are explained by the fact that listeners deliberately misrepresented their ICA of "not credible." On such an explanation – where PCA are lies, designed to mislead – it is easy to see how PCA would constitute epistemic wrongs to Blasey Ford. The question is simply whether hearers' deliberately misleading PCA of "credible" are explained by ethically bad epistemic failures. It is hard to imagine how this kind of deliberate misrepresentation would not reveal these features. If hearers exhibited ICA of "not credible," but intended with their misaligned PCA to conceal a bias against Blasey Ford or toward Kavanaugh, or to provide an unearned defense against the accusation that they did not take Blasey Ford seriously – to "save face," despite knowing their ICA to be "not credible" – then the misaligned PCA constitute epistemic wrongs.

Note that on this reading, we might also locate testimonial injustice at the site of the ICA, if Blasey Ford was the victim of a prejudicial credibility deficit. However, the misaligned PCA of "credible" itself constitutes an epistemic wrong. By misrepresenting their actual judgments, and doing so owing to ethically poisonous epistemic failures, Republican hearers wrong Blasey Ford as a knower. Driven by such failures, hearers falsely signal to Blasey Ford and bystanders that they have believed her testimony, although this is not the case; in doing so, they disrespect her as an epistemic agent who would, like all testifiers, benefit from accurate information about the reception of her testimony. This wrong can inflict unique ethical and epistemic harms. In addition to inspiring feelings of anger and betrayal, hearers' PCA obscure that Blasey Ford's testimony has not been efficacious; they provide fuel to those who wish to defend the integrity of Kavanaugh's nomination, causing and compounding harms to Blasey Ford long after the fact.

Reading #2

> *Performed credibility assignment (PCA):* credible
> *Internal credibility assignment (ICA):* not credible
> *What is the misalignment?* hearer was self-deceived or confused about ICA

This reading allows for the possibility that although Republican hearers genuinely took themselves to have judged Blasey Ford credible, they actually did not. At first, the stakes of the case led me to believe that this interpretation was not particularly likely. However, I now think that there are versions of this reading that are explanatory, and reveal more subtle ways that PCA can constitute epistemic wrongs, opaque even to hearers.

Here is a plausible version of reading #2. As Audrey Yap shows, the conception of *rapist* in the dominant social imaginary does not capture the reality that perpetrators may be "relatively ordinary people," good students, professionals, even purported feminists (2017, 9-11). Yap's comment that "we might also be confused and skeptical if we hear about a male feminist sexually assaulting a woman" strikes me as particularly relevant (2017, 9); it calls to mind the often-reiterated fact that Kavanaugh was his daughters' basketball coach. Perpetrators of sexual assault who do not fit the dominant idea of rapist – men like Brock Turner and Brett Kavanaugh – often benefit from onlookers' disbelief that they could possibly be guilty of sexual violence.

It is quite possible that some Republican Senators who made affirmative PCA took themselves to be genuine, or took themselves – without interrogating their actual judgments – to be "saying the right thing," but actually exhibited the judgment that Blasey Ford could not possibly be credible. Why? Not because of identity prejudice against Blasey Ford, but because their idea of Kavanaugh did not, could not, align with their conception of "the kind of person" that commits sexual assault. This would be a case of pernicious ignorance; a reliable ignorance about the actual perpetrators and circumstances of sexual violence that, in this context, is harmful. Despite genuinely thinking that they found Blasey Ford credible, listeners' ICA may have been infected with disbelief by this unwarranted faith in Kavanaugh's innocence, such that their ICA of "not credible" and PCA of "credible" misaligned.

The foregoing is not the only possible version of reading #2. If hearers dutifully and without pernicious ignorance judged Blasey Ford "not credible," but were mistaken about those ICA, then their misaligned PCA of "credible" would not constitute epistemic wrongs to Blasey Ford. But if pernicious ignorance does explain the misalignment, then PCA of "credible" constitute epistemic wrongs. Although not deliberate, pernicious ignorance leads Blasey Ford's hearers to pay "lip service" to her credibility despite not actually judging her as such; owing to this form of epistemic and ethical poison, they falsely signal that her testimony has been believed, undermining her as a knower. This wrong is pernicious because PCA give the impression that "everything has gone right," obscuring that Blasey Ford's testimony has not been efficacious and inhibiting efforts to criticize hearers for unduly disregarding her testimony.

Reading #3

> *Performed credibility assignment (PCA):* credible
> *Internal credibility assignment (ICA):* only credible in a truncated sense
> *What is the misalignment?* PCA does not reflect that testifier is not judged competent to
> rationally interpret or inform others about facts

This reading identifies that Republican hearers' PCA of "credible" may have mislead Blasey Ford and bystanders by concealing a truncated form of credibility assignment compared to what

Blasey Ford was actually due. The first of these forms is what I will call "competent to testify." In contrast with a fuller notion of credibility – let's say, "trustworthy with respect to the content of the testimony" – "competent to testify" is a measure of whether someone is *potentially* a knower, and not disqualified from fact-finding projects. We can frame this idea in J.L. Austin's terms. In certain legal proceedings, an utterance that someone is "competent to testify" – made by a person with authority, and in the right way – is an illocutionary act that confers a particular status on a witness (Austin 1962, 25-38). Such an utterance might be "masquerading" as a statement of fact, when actually, it is not descriptive; it merely succeeds or fails to confer the status (Austin 1962, 2-4). If "competent to testify" is what listeners meant (intentionally or unintentionally) by their PCA of "credible," their actions in support of Kavanaugh can be explained by identifying that these PCA did not actually concern the content of Blasey Ford's speech; their PCA did not reflect ICA of "credible," but only competent in this truncated sense.[10]

To identify both a misalignment and an epistemic wrong on this reading, what we must notice about Kavanaugh's nomination process is that the content of Blasey Ford's speech *matters* – or at least, it ought to. The circumstances of the case were not that of a legal proceeding, and what was being asked of Republican hearers was distinctly different from what might be asked of an expert in court, where the jury alone is the fact-finding body; their job was to weigh in on the content of the testimony, that is, on the facts. Thus, for listeners to make a PCA of "credible" when all they meant was to confer the status of "competent to testify" is epistemically irresponsible at best.

On this explanation, the misalignment consists in the fact that, while PCA of "credible" normally align with and reflect ICA of "credible," in this case, they do not. Given the circumstances of the case – knowing that hearers were being asked to weigh in on the facts – Blasey Ford and bystanders would be quite warranted in understanding the PCA as evidence that the testimony has been believed, but this is not what occurred; hearers have not exhibited an ICA of "credible." Even if not blameworthy, this constitutes a misalignment and an epistemic dysfunction. The PCA sends false information about hearers' actual epistemic responses.

The question is whether the misaligned PCA wrong Blasey Ford as a knower. If explained by a truly non-prejudicial lapse of attention, then the PCA would not be epistemic wrongs. But if the PCA misaligned owing to ethically poisonous epistemic failures – including identity prejudice, persistent epistemic laziness in response to testimony about sexual assault, or motivated ignorance about the relevance of Blasey Ford's testimony to the confirmation – then they constitute epistemic wrongs. The PCA send false information to Blasey Ford, and do so owing to ethical and epistemic failures, wronging her as a knower.

A second version of reading #3 identifies that PCA of "credible" may have misaligned from truncated ICA of the following sort: "not credible with respect to facts, only feelings." On this explanation, Blasey Ford was judged credible with regards to her subjective experience and affective responses, but not facts or rational analysis. As Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) explains, women and femmes are particularly vulnerable to this kind of judgment. Owing to identity prejudice, audiences often perceive women and femmes' speech as "wholly personal"

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[10] One might wonder if these *are* PCA, since the hearer does not intend to assign credibility to the testimony itself. But on my minimal view of PCA – outward expressions of "credible" or "not credible" – I maintain that they are, including because testifiers and bystanders would be quite justified in thinking that hearers *have* judged the testimony credible.

expressions of subjective experience – not truth-apt, and not bearing on others' perceptions – rather than objective assertions of "how things are" (Kukla 2014, 451-3).

I think it extremely plausible that identity prejudice led some of Blasey Ford's listeners to privately assign her credibility only with regards to her subjective experience. This truncated ICA may have been enabled by excess credibility given to Kavanaugh and even themselves, in the form of the prejudicial belief that they alone were the rational arbiters of "what actually happened." Such an explanation clarifies how Republican listeners so easily wrote off Blasey Ford's testimony; they refused to see her as doing anything other than sharing her feelings, which needn't bear on their analyses. This might explain the response of Senator Susan Collins, who justified her vote for Kavanaugh by saying of Blasey Ford, "I believe that *she* believes what she testified to" (Stewart 2018).

Again, however, it was the facts that *mattered*, and Blasey Ford certainly took herself to be communicating them. If Republican hearers who made PCA of "credible" exhibited ICA of this truncated kind, then this constitutes the epistemic dysfunction of misalignment; the PCA send false information about how Blasey Ford's testimony was actually received. This is true even if blameless and non-deliberate. If, however, the misalignment reveals identity prejudice, then the PCA constitute epistemic wrongs.

On reading #3, the epistemic wrong can be assessed on Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.'s account (drawing on Cahill) of *derivatization*, in which a speaker is not treated with the respect due to her as a knower but only heard or reciprocated within bounds set by her listeners (2014, 105-6). The derivatization is not just confined to the ICA, although, notably, we might also identify this as a site of derivatization or – if pernicious ignorance meant that Blasey Ford was not even recognized as a *potential* knower – epistemic violence (Dotson 2011, 237-8). But the wrongful truncation of Blasey Ford's epistemic agency also occurs at the site of the misaligned PCA "credible" if the misalignment is explained by an epistemic and ethical failure like identity prejudice. Here, what ought to be a communication of how Blasey Ford's speech was actually assessed is transformed into a mere signal that hearers have fulfilled their epistemic duties, although they have not. It constitutes a wrongful case of "lip service" that conceals that Blasey Ford's testimony has not been duly believed. As with the other readings, this wrong causes distinct harms; the PCA can inspire feelings of self-doubt and betrayal, deceive well-meaning bystanders, and provide fuel to malicious bystanders who can cite the PCA as evidence that Blasey Ford *was* treated justly.

Reading #4

> *Performed credibility assignment (PCA):* credible
> *Internal credibility assignment (ICA):* credible, but adjacent epistemic processes inhibit the impact of this judgment
> *What is the misalignment?* PCA does not reflect that the ICA has failed to gain traction in hearers' doxastic processes; PCA misaligns from these processes

This reading allows for the possibility that some of Blasey Ford's Republican listeners exhibited both PCA and ICA of "credible," but that the ICA failed to gain traction in the internal epistemic processes adjacent to that judgment. The misalignment occurs between the PCA and *these* internal processes – other judgments, inferences, and the mechanisms by which judgments become motivational as practical reasons – which inhibited the ICA "credible" from gaining uptake in hearers' doxastic systems.

Again, there are a few forms that reading #4 may take. The judgment "credible" may have been inhibited by the (deliberate or non-deliberate) privileging of other judgments. Listeners may have judged Blasey Ford's testimony credible but irrelevant ("it just doesn't matter"), or credible with regards to the descriptive details of "what happened" but that "what happened" wasn't wrongful. They may have decided to vote primarily (or solely) on the basis of other evidence, such as Kavanaugh's testimony or the FBI inquiry, or along party lines. The privileging of these other judgments may have prevented an ICA of "credible" from having further effect, including in the form of motivating practical reasons.

Another version of this reading draws on Fricker's account of the vice of inferential inertia. She describes cases in which a speaker is really believed – the "credibility judgment of the speaker is not depressed by prejudice of any kind" – and "yet… nothing else happens by way of epistemic follow-through" (2021, 101). Normally, the perception of a speaker as credible will lead to appropriate inferences and doxastic adjustments (Fricker 2021, 101; 2007, 77). But here, it does not; Fricker explains, "This person believes what they are told, but the new information never gets to have its evidential impact. They are guilty of a distinct epistemic vice, that of inferential inertia" (2021, 101). In the Blasey Ford case, an ICA of "credible" may have been stopped short by inferential inertia, and failed to impact hearers' doxastic or motivational systems in the ways that it usually would. Note that for Fricker, inferential inertia is not necessarily a vice of character – it can be a "lapse" – and need not be marked by the ethical poison that characterizes epistemic wrongs; it is so marked, however, when accompanied by prejudice (2021, 100-1).

On the foregoing explanations, the PCA and internal epistemic processes adjacent to the ICA have misaligned. The misalignment consists in the fact that, normally, a PCA of "credible" is evidence that an ICA of "credible" is present and has gained epistemic traction, as most ICA of "credible" do (Fricker 2021, 101; 2007, 77). But here, it has not. Though not necessarily wrongful, this constitutes an epistemic dysfunction.

Again, the question of whether PCA on reading #4 constitute epistemic wrongs to Blasey Ford turns on whether some ethically poisonous epistemic failure explains the misalignment. If listeners genuinely found Blasey Ford credible, allowed that perception to influence their other beliefs, acted with due diligence, but – after hearing Kavanaugh's testimony, other evidence, and considering the limited FBI inquiry – non-prejudicially and without pernicious ignorance determined that, on an appropriate burden of proof, the evidence was sufficient and did disqualify Kavanaugh from confirmation, then Blasey Ford would not suffer an epistemic wrong; this may be the best we can ask of audiences. Frankly, most Republican listeners would likely describe their deliberations in this way.

However, there are good reasons for thinking that if reading #4 is explanatory, the actual epistemic processes that explain the misalignment were biased and wrongful. If listeners really did find Blasey Ford credible, the most likely reasons for ongoing support of Kavanaugh are the influence of party-line bias, pernicious ignorance, and misogyny on the internal processes surrounding the ICA, inhibiting it from gaining traction. I take these to be most likely because of what we already know about the prevalence of party bias in U.S. politics, the pervasiveness of doubt and victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault, and the widespread misunderstanding of what counts as sexual misconduct; in addition, there is the evidence that Blasey Ford was telling the truth, including her hesitancy to come forward, her demand for a broader FBI investigation, the problems with the actual FBI inquiry, and the rarity of false accusations of sexual violence. If

ethically poisonous epistemic failures do explain the misalignment, then the PCA of "credible" constitutes an epistemic wrong.

For reading #4, Fricker helps to identify the nature of the wrong. She writes, "Though the speaker is not misjudged epistemically, still she is just as frustrated in her aim to bring the hearer to appreciate the implications of what she is saying as she would have been in an ordinary case of testimonial injustice. From the point of view of inferential uptake, she might just as well not have been believed" (2021, 101). Fricker's target, here, is the inadequacy of an ICA stopped by inferential inertia. But extending this analysis, we should notice the insignificance of the PCA "credible" if ethical and epistemic failures like identity prejudice have led it to misalign. Consider: would it comfort Blasey Ford to learn that she was momentarily assigned credibility? No – the PCA and ICA of "credible" mean nothing if prejudice or pernicious ignorance preclude these assignments from having any effect. On this reading, the PCA conceal that Blasey Ford's testimony has failed to gain epistemic traction, which it *would* have received if her listeners were not prejudiced. Owing to ethical and epistemic failures, the PCA send misleading information about the actual reception of Blasey Ford's testimony, wronging her as a knower.

PCA as Systematic Epistemic Wrongs

The preceding section illustrates how we might account for PCA as epistemic wrongs in a particular case: Republican hearers' reception of Blasey Ford's 2018 testimony. Even, however, if readers are not convinced that any one of these readings is explanatory, I hope to have offered some broadly-applicable hermeneutical tools for identifying how a public affirmation of a testifier's credibility can actually wrong them. My account shows that PCA can sometimes be mere "lip service" that function to mislead, in which respect is performed but no more; these wrongs are particularly pernicious because PCA of "credible" make it harder for testifiers and bystanders to identify what has gone wrong, giving the appearance of epistemic justice.

To conclude, I wish to reemphasize that these wrongs can systematically impact already vulnerable testifiers, in or across certain contexts. My focus, in this article, has been on identifying how these wrongs may be inflicted by particular hearers. But going forward, we must attend to the persistent exclusions (Dotson 2012; 2014), social injustices (Fricker 2007), and institutional vices (Medina 2021; Fricker 2021) that make misaligned PCA of "credible" more likely to habitually wrong marginalized testifiers. To illustrate these trends (albeit too briefly), I will name two contexts in which these wrongs may be systematically disabling.

Recall my previous mention of performative allyship. A troubling aspect of what is sometimes called "allyship culture" is that those who self-identify as progressives, liberals, or allies – and those who merely wish to *appear* as such – may learn to make PCA of "credible" without interrogating whether failures like identity prejudice or pernicious ignorance affect their actual epistemic responses. Dominantly situated persons may performatively validate the justified complaints of more marginalized colleagues and peers, but fail to actually judge their testimony duly. Such wrongs may be particularly common in institutions, where bureaucratic norms increase the likelihood that authority figures will make affirmative PCA when all they mean is that a testifier has standing to lodge a complaint (reading #3). These wrongs may also systematically impact survivors of sexual assault, as hearers may be habituated to unreflectively say "I believe you" but still behave in ways governed by prejudice, inflicting uniquely painful harms. This is not to say that we ought to avoid validating the testimony of marginalized testifiers or survivors. It does, however, mean that we must be wary of confusing the mere

performance of belief with epistemic justice, and stay alert to the epistemic wrongs that can be inflicted by, and because, hearers say, "I believe her."

Also worrying are healthcare contexts, specifically pain treatment, where doctors' PCA may be encouraged as a standard of care (Edmond and Keefe 2015; Edlund et al. 2017; Linton et al. 2017). Such PCA are not usually wrongful. However, I am concerned about the mistreatment of women, especially Black women, experiencing pain (including chronic pain and pain during pregnancy, labor, and postpartum). Historically, women's experiences of pain have often been interpreted as exaggerated or unreal; Black women have been particularly vulnerable because of the racist and unfounded belief that Black people are less susceptible to pain, as well as other forms of anti-Black racism (Hall et al. 2015; Hoffman et al. 2016; Martin and Montagne 2017). These harms can be exacerbated if doctors performatively validate women's testimony – saying, "I believe you" – but, because of their belief that their testimony does not assert facts (reading #3) or the vice of inferential inertia (reading #4), fail to provide further diagnostics or treatment.

Of course, doctors can have good, medical reasons to validate patients' feelings but not diagnose. But sexist and racist biases are not good reasons. Where performed validations of patients' speech may be perceived as good care, we should consider how misaligned PCA of "credible" can wrong women, especially Black women, whose complaints of pain may be taken less seriously than they ought to be. These wrongs can inflict serious physical, epistemic, and emotional harms. Patients may be confused by doctors' behaviors or find themselves doubting whether they communicated their experiences accurately; more dangerously, they might choose not to follow up or seek alternative care, resigning themselves to the apparent evidence that doctors have already "heard them out." These contexts reveal urgent reasons to attend to systematic epistemic wrongs at the loci of misaligned PCA of "credible."

Conclusion

This article has defended the troubling conclusion that hearers' public assignments of credibility can constitute epistemic wrongs. To explain these cases, I distinguished between two practices of credibility attribution – performed and internal credibility assignments (PCA and ICA) – and offered a new account of the epistemic dysfunction that consists in their misalignment. Focusing on PCA of "credible," I argued that when misalignments are driven by ethically poisonous epistemic failures – including forms of prejudice and pernicious ignorance – PCA wrong testifiers as knowers. I hope that this analysis will be useful for readers aiming to, in Dotson's words (2011), track a pattern of epistemic wrong that can often go unnoticed. This article shows that PCA of "I believe you" may obscure, and be manipulated in order to obscure, that testifiers have not, in fact, been duly believed, including in ways that systematically impact vulnerable speakers. Social epistemologists and ethicists ought to reflect further on how epistemic wrongs can occur even when testifiers are publicly assigned credibility, and develop additional tools for responding to the subsequent harms.

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