



Testimonial liberalism and the balance of epistemic goals

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Abstract

There are two broad views in the epistemology of testimony, conservatism and liberalism. The two views disagree over a particular necessary condition on testimonial justification: the positive reasons requirement (PRR). Perhaps the most prominent objection levelled at liberalism from the conservative camp stems from *gullibility*; without PRR, the thought goes, an objectionable form of gullibility looms large for liberals. In this paper I aim to make two main contributions: to introduce a new metric for adjudicating this debate; and to argue that, from the perspective of this new metric, the liberal view is stronger than has been appreciated. Drawing on work from James (*The Will to believe* and other essays in *Popular Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1896), Goldman (*Epistemology and Cognition*, Harvard University Press, 1986), and Kelp et al. (*Synthese* 197:5187–5202, 2020), I firstly countenance the distinction between *positive* and *negative* epistemic measures. Positive measures concern, roughly, the acquisition of truths, whereas negative measures concern the avoidance of falsehoods. Both, it is argued, are relevant to epistemic justification, but this debate has proceeded in such a way as to overemphasise the importance of the latter over the former. Once this distinction is made, new conceptual terrain opens for the liberal. Rather than being resigned to a predominantly defensive role—of mitigating worries about negative measures—the liberal can go on the offensive, and explore the independent epistemic strengths of their position. The upshot is that liberals have a new way to dispel their most prominent objection.

Keywords Testimony · Justification · Gullibility · Epistemic goals · Liberalism

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1 Introduction

Consider a foolhardy epistemic agent, Fred, who believes everything he's told, no matter the content, source, or circumstances. You testify to something, he'll believe it. A very natural critique of Fred's testimonial belief-forming policy is that it is simply too risky to be justification-conferring. In other words, the fact that his chosen strategy involves no safeguards whatsoever against the non-negligible risk of false testimony means that he does not count as justified in believing when he does. Fred's is a clear-cut case of gullibility.

This thought is a straightforward and intuitive one, yet two details are worth noting. The first is that the style of epistemic critique at play here is *policy-based*.¹ Fred's beliefs aren't just unjustified, they're unjustified *because produced by a bad policy*. The critique thus instantiates a very plausible idea, namely that the justificatory status of one's belief bears some overlap with the epistemic quality of the policy that produced it.² Moreover, the precise worry with Fred's doxastic policy is not just that it is bad, it is bad *because objectionably gullible*. The policy he adopts in response to testimony exemplifies gullibility, and gullibility is no route to justified belief.

I home in on this policy-based critique because it has played a prominent role in the epistemology of testimony—in particular, in the well-known debate between liberals and conservatives about testimonial justification. Here's the liberal view:

Testimonial liberalism A hearer has testimonial justification for believing that *p* on the basis of some speaker's say-so just so long as they lack any undefeated defeaters for the proffered testimony.³

According to liberalism, a 'no-defeater' clause is all that's required: it is perfectly permissible to go ahead and believe just so long as one lacks defeaters. Conservatives disagree. They object that without independent support—i.e. non-testimonial, positive reasons—for thinking that one's interlocutor is trustworthy, liberalism is vulnerable to the style of critique just outlined. While perhaps not as egregious as Fred's, the liberal's policy is similarly criticisable: ultimately, it fails to confer justification because it simply lacks the necessary safeguards against the risk of false testimony. Such a policy is, as Fricker puts it, "...an epistemic charter for the gullible and indiscriminating." (1994, 126)⁴

Conservatives advance a competing policy:

Testimonial conservatism A hearer has testimonial justification for believing that *p* on the basis of some speaker's say-so just so long as they are in possession of suf-

¹ This 'policy' language enters the epistemology of testimony with Elizabeth Fricker's seminal work on the topic (1994; 1995). I return to Fricker's work in detail in § 2.

² For the same idea put to work elsewhere in epistemology, see Douven (2008) and Kelp (2014).

³ The view originates with Reid (1764) and is endorsed by Burge (1993); Coady (1992); Goldberg and Henderson (2006); Graham (2006, 2010); Simion and Kelp (2020).

⁴ See also Fricker (1995: 404) and Lackey (2008: 170, fn. 32).

ficient independent reasons for thinking that the proffered testimony is likely to be true, where such reasons are not themselves defeated by any undefeated defeaters.⁵

An absence of defeaters won't suffice on conservatism; one must also be in possession of positive reasons for justified testimonial belief. This *positive reasons requirement* (PRR) thus divides the views and, at least according to conservatives, allows them to avoid the gullibility worries that plague more lenient approaches.

Fred's foolhardy policy was certainly too gullible to be a source of justification, but are conservatives right in thinking that the same goes for liberalism? The issue can be understood in terms of reliability: the conservative worries that without PRR liberalism is too unreliable to sanction non-gullible belief. In this article I defend liberalism from this charge with two broad theses: the first concerns the *metric*, or standard of evaluation, at play in the debate; the second concerns liberalism's reliability-maintaining resources. I firstly argue that the metric employed in the debate up until now has, by anyone's standards, overemphasised the importance of reliability. What matters is not only reliability—its ratio of true-to-false beliefs—but also *productivity*—the total number of truths produced. I thus defend a metric which evaluates policies by reference to their overall balance between reliability and productivity.

Secondly, I argue that, from the perspective of this metric, the gullibility worry can be dispelled: even if somewhat less reliable, the liberal policy strikes a good overall balance. Firstly, and unsurprisingly, I show that liberalism scores well on productivity. The main contribution of this second section, however, is to argue that liberalism's productivity advantage is not outweighed by a reliability deficit. In particular, if we understand the no-defeater clause as incorporating the notion of *normative defeat*, we see that liberalism is in fact more reliable than has thus far been appreciated. With my two theses taken together, we see not only that reliability matters less than we thought it did, but also that liberals can say more about it than we thought they could. Therefore, if you accept my new metric, and you accept the notion of normative defeat, the gullibility problem for liberalism is dispelled.

Here, in more detail, is how I proceed. In § 2 I briefly canvass the way in which liberals and conservatives have approached this debate until now. I question whether liberals should accept the current terms of the debate—whether by doing so they are not playing into the hands of the conservative. In particular, I draw the distinction between positive epistemic measures, which aim at the acquisition of truths, and negative epistemic measures, which aim at the limiting of falsehoods. I argue that whilst both are relevant to epistemic justification, the debate has played out in such a way as to overemphasise the importance of the latter over the former.

In § 3 I advance and defend an alternative framework, the *balance metric*, which evaluates doxastic policies by reference to the overall balance they strike between competing epistemic goals. In a nutshell, whether or not some doxastic policy is a *prima facie* source of justification is not only a matter of its *reliability*, but also its *productivity*. This metric, though friendly to the liberal, is based on some well-established, theory-neutral insights from outside of the current debate.

⁵The view originates with Hume (1740) and is endorsed by Fricker, 1994, 1995, 2006a, b; Adler, (1994); Malmgren (2006); Kenyon (2013).

Having motivated a move to a new metric, I then assess the results for the liberal. In § 4 I discuss liberalism's performance on productivity, demonstrating that on this score it fares significantly better than its opponent. In § 5 I discuss its performance on reliability, showing here that it fares better than has hitherto been appreciated. In particular, I draw on the notion of normative defeat to strengthen an already powerful reliability-maintaining resource: the no-defeater clause. If we accept this development of the clause, we see that liberalism's impressive score on productivity need not come at an excessive cost to reliability. In § 6 I conclude.

The main payoffs of employing the balance metric in this context are as follows: we have a new and independently plausible metric for this debate and at the same time we see that, once it is employed, liberals have a new way to dispel their most prominent objection.

2 Pinpointing the debate

Consider the following case to demonstrate the gullibility problem for liberalism:

Anonymous blogger One day, at the beginning of the March 2020 global coronavirus pandemic, Tracy is mindlessly surfing the web when she comes across a post from an anonymous blogger. The post claims that the global coronavirus pandemic is in fact a cleverly-designed hoax to enable governments to install millions of 5G stations during lockdowns. Tracy adopts the corresponding belief on the basis of the anonymous blogger. Crucially, as of this moment, Tracy has no other evidence one way or the other regarding the proper cause and explanation of the pandemic.

Tracy behaves gullibly in believing on the basis of an anonymous blogger, yet she lacks defeaters for said belief. The epistemic problem in such a case is thus not explained by defeaters, for there are none; the problem rather has to do with a lack of independent support.⁶ If this is right, then an absence of defeaters is compatible with the agent's nevertheless believing gullibly, and liberalism looks to be in trouble.⁷ This is the gullibility problem (GP).⁸

Now, evaluating competing belief-forming policies is a complex business. And there are two distinct questions that are relevant here. On the one hand, there is the question of whether liberalism really does license a justification-undermining form of gullibility.⁹ But there is a more fundamental question, often-overlooked, which needs to be settled before we can answer the first, namely the question as to the *metric*. We

⁶In what follows I grant the conservative that, at least *prima facie*, there are no defeaters in such a case, though I return to this case in § 5.2. For a liberal defence that makes no such initial concession, see Perine (2014).

⁷Fricker (1994, 1995, 2006a) most notably presses this worry, though Lackey (2008) also presses a version of it in defending her hybrid alternative to both conservatism and liberalism. I set aside hybrid views such as Lackey's (2008), Faulkner's (2011) and Greco's (2020) in what follows.

⁸The gullibility problem has elsewhere been referred to as 'the subjective source problem' (Simion & Kelp, 2020).

⁹See Fricker, 1994, 2006a; Goldberg and Henderson, (2006) for debate over this question.

need to agree upon the standards of evaluation here before we quarrel over the verdict delivered by these standards.

2.1 Clarifying the metric

In what sense is Tracy gullible? And, importantly, in what sense would she avoid this charge if she adopted conservatism? Answering these questions will help us identify the metric at play in the debate.

The work of Elizabeth Fricker, the most prominent contemporary proponent of the GP, will be instructive here. Fricker (2006a) characterises the objection as follows: a hearer behaves gullibly when she “adopts a policy for doxastic response to testimony which fails to screen out false testimony”. This is the case, moreover, for any agent who forms a belief in “...any environment in which false testimony is likely enough for that risk to be epistemically relevant.” (Fricker, 2006a, p. 620).

Here’s the thought: given the method (testimony), and the environment (one in which testimony is often false), the liberal policy (which in this environment licenses testimonial belief even in the absence of positive reasons) is a sanction for an epistemically objectionable (and thus justification-undermining) form of gullibility.¹⁰

The above is instructive when it comes to clarifying the metric. Here’s what we’ve learned. Just like our critique of Fred at the outset, the method of evaluation at play is *policy*-based. The idea, roughly, is that *prima facie* testimonial justification corresponds to the doxastic policy the agent adopts in forming their belief. One’s belief may be unjustified by virtue of its being the result of a bad policy. The second point worth noting is that the metric is *reliability*-based. The objection to the policy is not just that it licenses gullibility in some unspecified sense. It’s gullible because (at least in that environment) it’s unreliable.¹¹ This much is clear from the Fricker quotes above. The liberal policy would not do a good enough job of screening out false testimony to be justification-conferring. One should instead adopt the conservative’s policy, which presumably would.

The metric in place for evaluating competing policies is thus what I’ll call the *reliability metric* (RM). On this metric, the *prima facie* justification of a belief is a function of the reliability of the policy that produced it. In what follows I take no issue with the metric’s being *policy*-based, and instead focus my attention on its being *reliability*-based. I’ll grant the overlap between doxastic policy and epistemic justification, in order to properly target the idea that reliability is the appropriate standard of evaluation.

To be sure, it is very plausible that whether or not a policy is a source of *prima facie* justification is (in part) a function of its reliability. A policy with no negative measures—e.g. Fred’s foolhardy policy of ‘believe everything you’re told’—is not a plausible candidate source of *prima facie* justification. And, indeed, it’s plausible that

¹⁰ In this paper I set aside Fricker’s empirical premise that false testimony is sufficiently prevalent in the real world to undermine liberalism in this way. For critical discussion on this premise, see Michaelian (2010), Shieber (2012), and Graham (forthcoming).

¹¹ I am thinking of reliability here in Goldman’s (1986) sense, as denoting the ratio of true-to-false beliefs.

the explanation for this has to do with its being a license for gullibility. RM is thus, at least at first glance, a sensible way to settle the debate.

It's worth noting that in their responses to GP, many liberals show that they, too, endorse something like RM, though they of course disagree on the verdict it delivers. Take Goldberg and Henderson (2006); Graham, (2010, 2012, 2018a; Simion and Kelp, (2020), for example. All three cases exemplify a common strategy: the liberal defence is mounted by appeal to various theoretical mechanisms which serve to boost liberalism's reliability score—its negative measures. More specifically, Goldberg and Henderson (2006) appeal to the existence of an innate *monitoring* capacity in hearers, which sifts through all consumed testimony and alerts the agent whenever there are clear signs of deception, incoherence, and so on. Graham (2010, 2012, 2018a), across a series of papers, defends liberalism by appeal both to a *filtering* capacity in hearers and the existence of *social norms* influencing speakers. Filtering, like monitoring, increases the reliability of testimony by flagging to hearers when there are signs of deception. Moreover, it also incentivises truth-telling in the first place, for lies will often get caught. (2010: 173) Alongside filtering, Graham also appeals to the existence of social norms in making the case for default acceptance. Even if it's in their best interests to lie, internalised social norms—including the norm on truth-telling informatively—explain why speakers often nevertheless tell the truth.¹² Simion and Kelp (2020), for their part, similarly appeal to the existence of such social norms in explaining the reliability of testimony, and thus in grounding the view that default acceptance, even absent positive reasons, is a *prima facie* source of justification. Thus, while they differ in the particular features of testimonial exchanges they emphasise, all aforementioned liberals appeal to theoretical mechanisms which—granting that they exist and are effective—would serve to boost the reliability of believing on the basis of mere say-so in the absence of positive reasons.

It is beyond the scope of the current paper to evaluate whether liberals are successful in this endeavour. Instead, I want to pose the question as to whether liberals, simply by accepting the terms of the game, are not playing into the conservative's hand.

3 Changing the metric

3.1 Sceptical policy

Consider a third option as a testimonial belief-forming policy:

Sceptical Policy (SP): A hearer is entitled to believe on the basis of some speaker's say-so just so long as (i) they lack any undefeated defeaters, (ii) they are in possession of positive reasons, *and* (iii) they have established that there is no chance whatsoever that their interlocutor is lying or mistaken.

¹²The thought that there are social norms increasing testimony's reliability is popular one. Examples, which come from each side of the divide, include: Graham (2010, 2012, 2018a; 2019; Fricker, 2006b, 2017); Faulkner (2010, 2011).

As a conservative, why not go a step further and endorse SP? Here's why: while it is of course true that one's policy must encode certain precautions against the risk of falsity, there is a limit. Even supposing we granted that the liberal policy amounts to gullibility, it is doubtful that many would deem SP an adequate replacement. If liberalism can be accused of an epistemically objectionable form of gullibility, SP would certainly be accused of an equally epistemically objectionable form of cynicism. The upshot of this is that a *pure* RM, which tests only for ratio-maintenance and delivers the straightforward verdict that liberalism is objectionably gullible because less reliable, is inadequate, even by conservative standards.

3.2 James, Goldman, and Kelp et al

This thought will be recognisable to most as a manifestation of the familiar James (1896) insight that the epistemic goal of acquiring truths (the truth goal (TG) is in fact ambiguous between two distinct subgoals: the avoidance of falsehoods (AF goal); and the obtaining of truths¹³ (OT goal) (Alston, 1985; Foley, 1987; David, 2001; Riggs, 2003; Carter et al. 2016).

For our purposes it's worth emphasising that these two goals are *competing*. In other words, they can pull in opposite directions; they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment (James 1896, 203-4). As Carter et al. put it:

Weighting the [first] aim more would lead one to be more cautious in order to avoid possible misrepresentation. Weighting the [second] aim more would lead one to be bolder in order to possess more truths. (2016, 2336)

Goldman makes a similar point in the following passage:

Complete reliability can be achieved by extreme caution, or conservatism: producing beliefs only in the 'safest' circumstances, where it is virtually impossible to go wrong ... But such radical caution would probably be purchased at the price of (extensive) ignorance. If hardly any beliefs are produced, hardly any true beliefs are produced. This spells (extensive) ignorance. (1986, 26)

If overly concerned with the OT goal, one may be pushed toward carelessness; but equally, if overly concerned with AF goal, one would be pushed toward cynicism.

¹³ James (1896) sometimes spoke in terms of truth, and sometimes in terms of knowledge. For the sake of simplicity, I will continue with truth, though nothing substantive hinges on this decision for my argument.

Neither represents a good policy.¹⁴ To reflect this insight, Goldman highlights the importance not only of reliability but also of what he calls ‘power’.¹⁵ He continues:

If the antidote to error is reliability, the antidote to ignorance is (intellectual) *power*. Power is the capacity of a process, method, system, or what have you to produce a large number of true beliefs; or, slightly differently, the capacity to produce true beliefs in answer to a high ratio of questions one wants to answer or problems one wants to solve. Although power, like reliability, incorporates the ingredient of true belief, it is clearly a distinct standard. A method or system can be very reliable without being very powerful; and a method or system can be pretty powerful but not terribly reliable. (1986, 27)

We can find similar insights reflected in Kelp et al. (2020), who distinguish between different standards of appraisal we might employ when assessing epistemic performances. Adopting a Sosa-style telic normativity framework, Kelp et al. consider an idealised model of performing (epistemic) agents, and ask: what makes one epistemic performance better than another? They note that, alongside reliability, performing agents can also be more or less *productive*. (2020, 5196) In other words, what matters is not merely the proportion of successful-to-unsuccessful performances, but also the total number of successful performances produced.¹⁶ As Kelp et al. put it, “All else equal (including the degree of reliability), agents are better at producing performances of a certain type if they are more productive.” (2020, 5196)

Consider the following example to make these points salient.

Reliable randy and productive pete In forming his beliefs Randy employs belief-forming policy A, which produces *only* true beliefs but does so very slowly. Pete, on the other hand, employs policy B, which is a little more fast and loose; it produces only *mostly* true beliefs, but produces beliefs quicker than A. As a result, Randy has 1 belief in total, and it is true. Pete, on the other hand, has 100 beliefs, 99 of which are true, 1 of which is false.

Here’s the thought: the correct verdict is that Pete’s policy is the better one, epistemically speaking. But this verdict is not delivered by RM, which tests only for

¹⁴This thought is closely related to the debate between White and Kelly over doxastic ‘uniqueness’ and ‘permissivism’. The former is the thesis that if an agent whose total evidence is E is fully rational in taking doxastic attitude D to P, then any subject with E who adopts an attitude other than D to P is less than fully rational. The latter, on the contrary, is the thesis that different agents with the same evidence might well be fully rational in adopting different doxastic attitudes to P. The overlap here is complicated, but I don’t need to take a stand on that debate one way or another. One may read my argument as conditional: if uniqueness is true, then my argument is for the conclusion that liberalism is the superior policy; if permissivism is true, then my argument is for the conclusion that it is no worse than conservatism on account of being less cautious. Either way, the force of the GP is dispelled. Thanks to Chris Willard-Kyle for helpful discussion on this point.

¹⁵Alongside reliability and power, Goldman also discusses ‘speed’, though I set it aside for present purposes.

¹⁶Productivity, at least when the performance at issue is an epistemic one, is thus very similar—if not identical—to what Goldman called ‘power’.

ratio-maintenance. Strictly speaking, Randy's is more reliable. But, of course, it's epistemically worse; an epistemic agent ought to adopt Pete's policy rather than Randy's in spite of the reliability deficit.

Bringing this together, we can draw a distinction between *positive* epistemic measures, which concern the acquisition of truth, and *negative* epistemic measures, which concern the avoidance of falsehood. In what follows, I'll simply speak of a policy's 'productivity' when discussing its *positive* evaluation (assessment of its truth-production), and 'reliability' when discussing its *negative* evaluation (assessment of its truth-to-falsity ratio). All of the accounts just discussed point to a compelling idea: insofar as we are in the business of epistemically evaluating competing doxastic policies, we had better look not only to reliability, nor only to productivity, but rather to some balance of the two.

This, I think, carves out some untapped territory for the liberal. They may grant that there is important overlap between epistemic justification and one's doxastic policy, and yet deny that RM is how policies are to be evaluated. The conservative line in response to a sceptic ought to be that while their policy is indeed less reliable than the sceptic's, it is not *gullibly* so. But, the liberal may point out, likewise for liberalism in comparison to conservatism. Heightened reliability alone does not deliver heightened epistemic justification.

Let's specify a metric that puts these insights to use:

Balance Metric (BM): Some doxastic policy X is epistemically superior to doxastic policy Y if and only if X enjoys a better overall balance with respect to reliability and productivity, where reliability denotes a policy's true-to-false belief ratio, and productivity denotes the number of true beliefs a policy produces.¹⁷

BM simply makes explicit the intuitive distinction between reliability and productivity. All-else-equal, (including degree of productivity) the more *reliable* the better; similarly, all-else-equal, (including degree of reliability) the more *productive* the better (Kelp et al., 2020, 5196). Significant increases in either property might outweigh slight deficits in the other; some policy might properly be considered epistemically superior to another, even if less reliable, so long as it is significantly more productive, and vice versa.¹⁸

Perhaps none of this would apply if we were limitless epistemic agents—free from our cognitive and temporal constraints. In such circumstances, plausibly, reliability really would be our sole concern; we should do what we can—no matter the cost to

¹⁷Strictly speaking, for reasons pertaining to the well-known problem of trivial truths, it cannot be brute number of true beliefs. I take it, however, that for present purposes this formulation gives us a sufficiently tight grip on a metric that would better capture what we're looking for. For discussion of trivial truths, see Zagzebski (2003), and Grimm (2008).

¹⁸It's worth noting that, in emphasising the importance of balancing both reliability and productivity, one is not thereby obliged to provide a neat formula for doing so. As Goldman points out, we should take comfort here from ethics, where noting that there are competing values to be balanced (individual rights with social justice, for example) does not mean that there is a neat or precise formula for doing so. (Goldman, 1986, p. 125)

productivity—to form reliable testimonial beliefs. But we are not limitless in this way: our minds are limited and so is our time. Alone, there is only so much we can perceive, there are only so many phenomena into which we can inquire, and only so many conclusions we can infer or deduce. My proposal is that we therefore need a metric which responds to our epistemic situation by placing explicit emphasis on the balance between reliability and productivity (hereafter, just *balance*).¹⁹ BM does just this.

4 Liberalism and productivity

I've argued for a new metric, BM, for settling the debate between liberals and conservatives over reliability. The metric we had been employing until now overemphasised the importance of reliability, and in so doing played into the hands of the conservative. Liberalism's reliability worries are downplayed if we accept BM; reliability is no longer the sole issue determining whether a policy is justification-conferring, because productivity also matters. The next stage of my argument is to assess liberalism's performance on BM. I assess its productivity in this section (§ 4), and its reliability in the next (§ 5).

Recall that satisfaction of PRR requires independent reasons on the part of the hearer which somehow speak in favour of the credibility of their interlocutor.²⁰ The problem, however, is that we lack precisely these kinds of reasons in many ordinary, everyday cases. This, I will argue, leads to a significant productivity advantage of omitting PRR.

Consider the following examples.

Bar Sophie is running late to meet a friend at a bar. When she arrives, she asks the first person she sees whether someone fitting her friend's description has arrived at the bar. They say they have not, and so Sophie forms the (true) belief that her friend has not yet arrived.

Child A child, Ben, asks his caregiver whether his parents will be home in time for tea, his caregiver replies that they will, and so Ben forms the (true) belief that his parents will indeed be home in time for tea.

¹⁹ Balance here is not intended to denote *neutrality*, or *evenness*, with respect to these competing epistemic measures. A more neutral distribution between the two measures does not represent a better balance. When assessing two policies by utilising the current proposal, a reliability advantage might contribute to an overall advantage, provided the productivity deficit—if indeed there is one—is not so severe as to outweigh this advantage. And vice versa. What is ultimately crucial is that both features matter, and interact with one another.

²⁰ Note that I proceed with a *local*, rather than *global*, interpretation of the conservative's position. The reason for this, in short, is that the shortcomings of the former have been well-rehearsed in the literature, including, notably, by Fricker herself (1994). For further discussion, see Lackey (2008, 146–149); Weiner (2003, 258); Coady (1992, 82).

Given that these are perfectly ordinary, unremarkable cases, the like of which take place on a daily basis, one would be forgiven for thinking that there's therefore nothing particularly epistemically interesting going on here. Indeed, such cases are just part and parcel of the everyday exchanges we commonly find ourselves engaged in. But their banality is what makes them pertinent. Such cases represent the kinds of instances in which some of liberalism's independent epistemic strengths, *qua* doxastic policy, are on show.

In BAR and CHILD, true beliefs are available, but positive reasons are not. Sophie and Ben simply lack independent reasons that speak in favour of their interlocutor. Sophie lacks any background information whatsoever, and Ben—being a child—lacks the ability to cognise independent, positive reasons speaking in favour of his interlocutor.²¹ Though for slightly different reasons, then, Sophie and Ben are in the same epistemic boat insofar as all they have to go on is the proffered testimony, combined with the absence of any particular reason to think that it's wrong or misguided.

Such cases are worth drawing attention to because they highlight a significant cost of adopting the conservatives' more stringent policy. If the heightened stringency of conservatism meant that they got things exactly right—that is, it ruled out belief whenever one's belief would be false and allowed belief whenever one's belief would be true—then it would be the perfect policy. However, both policies come with costs, and it is worth reflecting on them in order to ascertain which has the overall advantage. The heightened reliability of conservatism doesn't come for free. Cases such as BAR and CHILD are the problem cases for conservatism. They are, I contend, the quite ordinary everyday contexts in which we lack independent support for true testimony. Given that conservatism disallows any testimonial belief in the absence of positive reasons, it thus follows that there is a class of would-be true beliefs which are placed out of reach by their policy. Insofar as what we care about is, roughly, obtaining truth and avoiding falsity, there is a significant epistemic cost associated with adopting the more stringent policy.²²

Of course, there is nothing particularly novel or radical about pointing out that positive reasons are oftentimes in scarce supply. Indeed, one of the most common objections to conservatism is precisely that it makes testimonial justification too hard to come by.²³ What liberals have not yet done, however, is attempt to thereby mount

²¹ See Graham (2018a, b) for helpful clarification and extended discussion of the challenge conservatives face from infant/child testimony.

²² Ahlstrom-Vij (2015, 2016) brings similar considerations to bear on the GP. He distinguishes between multiple possible interpretations of the problem, and argues that all fall short of establishing the claim that there is anything epistemically remiss about deferring to testimony in the absence of positive reasons. He concludes that a liberal policy leaves us no worse off, epistemically speaking—and might well leave us better off—than a conservative policy. Though similar in spirit, our approaches have important differences. In particular, there is a way of understanding the GP that is overlooked in Ahlstrom-Vij's disambiguation project, namely that an agent who adopts a liberal policy is gullible precisely because said policy is too unreliable. In other words, we might interpret the conservative as complaining that satisfying PRR, and nothing less, is what ensures a sufficient reliability level to avoid the gullibility charge. Perhaps this reading can be subsumed under one of Ahlstrom-Vij's, but it is not obvious that it can, and it is this reading that my solution speaks to.

²³ See Coady (1973: 151–3); Schmitt (1987: 49); Plantinga (1993: 79) for early formulations of the problem as it pertains to conservatism. See Greco (2020: 30) for more recent discussion of the same idea.

a defence of their view by appeal to testimony's productivity.²⁴ If positive reasons are hard to come by, then believing only in their presence will have a negative impact on one's productivity.

5 Liberalism and reliability

BM tests for both reliability and productivity. Unsurprisingly, liberalism compares favourably on productivity. But how significant is the reliability deficit thereby incurred? The BM puts the reliability worries into perspective; if we accept this metric, reliability is no longer the sole issue driving policy evaluation. However, any policy needs some reliability-maintaining measures. The final piece of the puzzle is to assess the liberal's.

To better understand this issue, I'd like to introduce the distinction between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* justification. Conservatism and liberalism are views of *prima facie* justification: they recommend competing policies for how one ought, all-else-equal, to form testimonial beliefs. We are all in agreement that some countermeasures are needed to address the risk of false testimony, and the conservative proposal is to implement them at the *prima facie* level, by adopting a more stringent testimonial policy across the board. But another route, available to the liberal, is to implement measures at the *ultima facie* level—to explore what resources we have for placing principled restrictions on the *prima facie* justification licensed by our policy. The focus here, perhaps unsurprisingly, will be on the liberal's no-defeater clause (NDC), which is their main limiting resource. However, in this section I'll argue that if liberals countenance the notion of normative defeat—as they have good reason to do—then it is more powerful than has been fully appreciated.

5.1 No-defeater clause

The NDC blocks a hearer's justification to believe whenever the hearer is in possession of any particular reason *not* to believe their speaker. But defeaters come in different shapes and sizes; indeed, there is a well-known distinction in the literature between what are known as *rebutting* and *undercutting* defeaters (Pollock, 1986). One has a rebutting defeater when one acquires some reason to think that their belief

²⁴ A notable exception here is Zollman (2015), who uses a computer-aided thought experiment to demonstrate that a liberal community of epistemic agents would fare better than a conservative one insofar as they would cultivate larger and more heterogeneous pools of interlocutors. In other words, they would score higher on productivity insofar as there would be more—and more diverse—groups of people from which they could solicit testimony. The conservative groups, on the other hand, would remain smaller and more homogeneous, such that though there would be tight-knit groups of highly reliable individuals, there would equally be tight-knit groups of highly unreliable individuals, with little crossover between them. While we are engaged in different projects, then, it is good news for the view I develop here if Zollman turns out to be right. My argument concerns the conditions of testimonial justification, his work addresses what we should do when constrained as to how much testimony we can solicit. As he notes himself, my question is more abstract than the one he discusses, and its connection to action more remote. But if the two answers line up, then all the better for the liberal; such a result would simply be taken as further indication of the underlying plausibility of the view.

is in fact false, whereas one has an *undercutting* defeater when one acquires some reason to doubt that, in the circumstances in which it is formed, their source of belief is adequate (Pollock, 1986, p. 484; Kelp forthcoming, 7). The NDC is a powerful liberal resource insofar as a great deal of would-be unjustified testimonial beliefs can be handled by the presence either of a rebutting or an undercutting defeater.

Greco's well-known cases will serve us well here as a case-in-point:

Case 1 A suspect in a murder mystery tells the detective that he was not at the scene of the crime.

Case 2 A used car salesman tells a customer that the car has never had any faults.

Case 3 A teacher tells his pupil that France is in Europe.

Case 4 A mother tells her child that there is milk in the fridge. (Greco, 2020, p. 4)

Greco argues that even if positive reasons are not required in cases like 3 and 4, they surely are in cases like 1 and 2. Even if liberalism is broadly plausible, then, cases such as 1 and 2 seem to suggest that the NDC is not always enough—PRR is at least *sometimes* required to avoid gullibility.

However, once we look a little closer at the supposed problem cases, it becomes clear that they can be adequately handled by a properly understood NDC. In short, here's why: cases 1 and 2 very plausibly involve undercutting defeaters. The hearers in such exchanges (the detective and the customer) have significant reason to doubt what they're told (Simion & Kelp, 2020, 2862). In particular, the fact that the speaker is a suspect is a strong reason not to simply go ahead and believe what they tell you. Similarly, the fact that the speaker in case 2 sells used cars for a living is a strong reason not to simply go ahead and believe that the car is in mint condition. Of course, one might prefer to characterise these factors as contextual cues that signal a need for positive reasons. But, at the very least, it is equally natural to characterise them as defeaters. They signal a need for defeater-defeaters, and this much can be accommodated by the liberal's NDC, which forbids belief in the presence of undefeated defeaters. Some, e.g. Simion and Kelp (2020), have even argued that a liberal treatment of such cases is in fact *preferable* to a conservative treatment.²⁵ But for present purposes we need not endorse this stronger conclusion. Suffice it to note that the NDC, properly understood, is all the liberal needs to handle a wide range of cases, including the seemingly problematic ones (e.g., case 1 and case 2 above).

²⁵To see why, note that on the most plausible construal of PRR, what's needed is some independent reason for thinking that this particular subject is a generally reliable testifier, perhaps with respect to the particular topic at hand. However, note that in these cases this kind of reason will not suffice. The murder suspect may in fact be an esteemed FBI agent themselves, and be a generally highly reliable testifier (in particular on the topic of murder mysteries). Of course, such a reason won't help in this case, when they themselves are the suspect. What's needed in such a cases is a more particular kind of reasons: one that defeats the undercutting defeater *that they are a suspect in the murder mystery*. But this is just the result that the liberal—and not the conservative—will get.

This much has been noted elsewhere, so I will not belabour the point here. Instead, I want to countenance the notion of *normative* defeat, the power of which has yet to be fully demonstrated by liberals in this debate. If this notion exists—and, though not uncontroversial, it is highly plausible that it does²⁶—then this would further enhance the power of NDC, and thus further enhance liberalism’s credentials with respect to negative epistemic measures.

Consider the following case:

Syllabus Regina takes a metaphysics class on Wednesdays. When she wakes and begins planning her day, she infers that, as it is Wednesday, she has a metaphysics class. She has the belief ‘I have metaphysics today’. However, she has not checked the course syllabus, and were she to check it, she would see that this week is a reading week and so there’s no class scheduled today.

It seems very natural to most to say that Regina ought not to have believed that her class was on, but note that the explanation for why this is so is going to be importantly different than ordinary instances of undercutting or rebutting defeat. In this case, she has a rebutting defeater that renders her belief unjustified (that the course syllabus says otherwise). What’s different about this kind of rebutting defeater, however, is that Regina has not psychologically registered it. In order to accommodate the intuition that failing to psychologically register a defeater does not get one off the normative hook, we need to countenance the existence of defeaters *external* to the agent’s psychology.²⁷ Enter the notion of *normative defeat*. One has a normative defeater when there is new information which undermines one’s justification for their belief *irrespective of whether or not they register this new information*. Many have argued that cases like SYLLABUS support the existence of such defeaters (Harman, 1973; Goldberg, 2015, 2017; Kelp, 2023; Simion, 2023, 2024).

Further support for the phenomenon of normative defeat can be found in cases of testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007). Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is assigned less credibility than she is owed through systematic identity prejudice (against her sex, gender, or ethnicity, for example). To see why such cases can be used to support the existence of normative defeat, consider the following case, developed from Lackey (2018) and discussed in Kelp (2022):

Scientist A sexist male scientist, Pete, owing to his prejudice, simply fails to register the contributions of his female colleagues. The thought that a female scientist could make any serious contribution to science is so far from his worldview that he will zone out when they speak, ignore their emails, and so on. Now suppose that Pete comes to believe some scientific hypothesis SH on the basis of he and his male colleagues’ research. However, as is pointed out to him by his female colleague, Sara,

²⁶ See Bergmann, 2006; Kelp, 2023; Simion, 2023, 2024 for the case that it does. See Nottelmann 2021 for the case that it does not.

²⁷ For this reason, some have opted for the label ‘external defeaters’ (e.g. Kelp, 2022). There are reasons to prefer this label, however for the sake of simplicity, and consistency with the majority of the literature on the topic up until now, I will proceed with the label ‘normative defeaters’ in this paper.

SH is demonstrably false. Unsurprisingly, Pete fails to even register Sara's decisive counterevidence, and remains undeterred in his belief that SH is true.²⁸

Clearly, Pete's belief that SH is true is unjustified despite the fact that he is not in possession of any reasons to doubt it. If that's right, then we need the notion of normative defeat to explain the situations in which one's justification is undermined by rebutting or undercutting defeaters one has not psychologically registered. (Kelp, 2022)

5.2 Incorporating normative defeat

I lack the space to further bolster the case for normative defeat. Instead, in what follows, I will simply take it for granted that examples like SYLLABUS and SCIENTIST suffice to demonstrate that there is strong, independent motivation for countenancing such a notion.²⁹

Recall that what is at issue is liberalism's negative epistemic credentials—what resources it has at its disposal for restricting the justification it licenses. NDC is the obvious place to start, and the cases just outlined speak in favour of a refinement of this liberal resource. Understood in this way, the NDC is capable of handling not only instances in which the agent psychologically registers a defeater, but also certain instances in which their justification is undermined despite having failed to do so.

To appreciate the value of incorporating normative defeat, let us return to the ANONYMOUS BLOGGER case with our sharpened NDC in hand. The worry was that Tracy lacks a defeater for such a belief but is nevertheless gullible. NDC alone is thus said to be insufficient for avoiding the gullibility charge, and the case for conservatism is strengthened. However, now, having developed our NDC, we see that there is a plausible avenue of response. In particular, it looks as though the case is underspecified, and that, depending on how the missing details are spelled out, the liberal has a solid response.

We firstly need to know more about the agent's testimonial environment. After all, in a world in which blog posts are, as a matter of fact, the most reliable source of news—perhaps because they go through a rigorous peer-review process—and that they are, in fact, always anonymous so as to maintain the integrity of this process, then Tracy would not be gullible in believing on its basis. If, however, much like the real world, the environment was such that forming beliefs about complex, global, socio-political phenomena on the basis of an anonymous blog post on a random website is a wildly unreliable guide to the truth, then the liberal has the resources to explain this away as an instance of defeat. If Tracy has psychologically registered any of this information about the quality of testimony she is likely to receive from an anonymous blog post, then she has reason to doubt her source. The liberal's NDC

²⁸ See Kornblith (2007, 290-3) for an earlier discussion of a case in which an expert's belief is similarly rendered unjustified by virtue of their having ignored the contributions of their peers.

²⁹ These motivations are independent in the sense that they are not theory-laden. Though I will argue that developing NDC to incorporate normative defeat does important work for the liberal, notice that the motivations for doing so more broadly do not come from the liberal camp. It is friendly to the liberal, but this is not the reason the notion was originally deemed necessary. Indeed, Jennifer Lackey, e.g., has defended the notion of normative defeat whilst, in other work, rejecting liberalism precisely because of the GP.

handles this as an instance of non-normative (psychologically registered) *undercutting* defeat. If instead she has psychologically registered any of the abundance of counterevidence that exists for such conspiracy theories, then she has reason to think her belief is false. The liberal's NDC would thus handle this as an instance of non-normative *rebutting* defeat. Finally, she might have failed to register either but the world she inhabits, much like the real world, is one in which both kinds of reasons are readily available to her at minimal effort. This final interpretation of the case would be handled by the liberal's NDC as an instance of normative defeat. She failed to register the defeating information, but clearly ought to have done so. As we have seen from SYLLABUS and SCIENTIST, there is good, independent reason to think that negligently failing to acknowledge evidence does not get one off the epistemic hook. Insofar as the phenomenon of normative defeat exists, then, I contend that this would constitute an uncontroversial instance.

There is, in fact, one final option. Suppose the details of the case were spelled out such that Tracy lacks any defeater, normative or non-normative; that is, she has not registered a defeater and it is not even the case that she ought to have. Such a world, presumably, would be one in which it is not abundantly clear that anonymous blog posts are a wildly unreliable guide to the truth—perhaps, again, they're actually quite reliable—and there is not, in fact, an abundance of counterevidence for the conspiracy theory proffered. Belief could not be disallowed in such a case because, even on the refined NDC, there is no defeater. However, I submit, this is the right result. Indeed, the subject in such a case is *not* gullible in believing. If the world was such that anonymous blog posts were in fact a decent source of information and there was not, in fact, a whole host of readily available counterevidence to the conspiracy theory, then it is no longer clear that it would be gullible to believe.³⁰ The case is thus crucially underspecified and, once the relevant details are filled in, the liberal has the resources to get the right result. Either (i) Tracy is indeed gullible but the liberal does not permit belief, or; (ii) the liberal permits belief but Tracy is not gullible.

One may worry just how liberal this new version of liberalism is. In particular, are normative defeaters not simple defeaters we don't have but should have had—i.e., ones we would have caught had we been more vigilant? And is this heightened vigilance not precisely what the conservatives have been advocating for all along?³¹

In response to this worry, it is worth emphasising that the view we have ended up with is liberal just by virtue of omitting PRR—a speaker need not have positive reasons to have justification. Once committed to the liberal camp in granting *prima facie* justification in the absence of positive reasons, the question that follows concerns what resources the liberal has for restricting *ultima facie* justification. To this end, I've argued that a normative defeat refinement of NDC can do important work for the liberal—it places further restrictions on justification in a way that is consistent with the omission of PRR, thus strengthening the case that liberalism, while it may be less reliable than conservatism, is not thereby a charter for gullibility. If the NDC, properly understood, allows liberals to handle the seemingly problematic cases, then

³⁰ For an extended treatment of the effect of one's environment on the epistemic permissibility of belief, see Levy (2021).

³¹ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at this journal for pressing me on this point.

so much the better for the view that omits PRR, and thereby secures the productivity benefits that come with so doing.

There is a trade-off between competing epistemic pressures, and liberalism strikes a different balance than does conservatism, but normative defeat helps us to see that the productivity advantage need not come at an excessive reliability deficit. If the conservative can help themselves to similar such reliability-maintaining resources, then so be it. The point remains: this is a powerful resource that is within the liberal's toolbox.

6 Concluding remarks

Liberalism and conservatism recommend different doxastic policies when it comes to testimony. These competing policies are divided over the positive reasons requirement, and the conservative insists that its omission sanctions gullibility. In this article I've sought to address this worry for liberalism in two main stages. The first has been to argue that we should accept a *balance metric* in adjudicating this debate, which evaluates policies by reference to the balance between reliability and productivity. This metric should be acceptable to all: it vindicates the conservative tenet that some policies are too unreliable to be justification-conferring, whilst maintaining that others are too sceptical to be any better. Secondly, I argued that liberalism strikes a good overall balance. Unsurprisingly, it enjoys a productivity advantage over its opponent. But more notably, if we understand the no-defeater clause as incorporating *normative* defeat, then this productivity advantage is not outweighed by a reliability deficit. Therefore, if we accept the balance metric, and incorporate the notion of normative defeat, liberalism's most prominent objection is dispelled.³²

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