EDUCATIONAL THEORY

ON THE SPECIAL EPISTEMIC OBLIGATIONS OF THE EDUCATOR

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Abstract. This paper examines the relationship between educators' epistemic character and their professional responsibilities, arguing that the role of educator carries unique epistemic obligations. Drawing on virtue epistemology and the ethics of belief, Jeff Standley contends that these obligations stem from education's core epistemic aims: cultivating knowledge and understanding, teaching reliable methods of inquiry, and fostering intellectual virtues. The paper demonstrates how educators' epistemic character influences their ability to navigate complex epistemic environments, serve as role models, and avoid impediments to teaching caused by evidentially unsupported beliefs. While acknowledging that perfect epistemic character is unattainable, Standley argues for a "good enough" standard where educators must at minimum avoid significant intellectual vices that could hinder responsible epistemic inquiry and harm student development. He concludes by considering practical implications for educator recruitment and development, advocating for greater attention to epistemic qualities in these processes.

Key Words. teacher character; professional responsibilities; epistemic fitness; intellectual virtues; ethics of belief

It is almost uncontroversial to claim that educators have some kind of moral responsibility to help their students acquire knowledge in the form of beliefs that are true rather than false; well-supported rather than based on insufficient evidence or reason; and formed through reliable and ethical methods rather than unreliable or unethical ones, such as indoctrination. Similarly, we want to encourage students to be responsible and virtuous believers and knowers, open to revising their beliefs should the available evidence demand it, rather than closed-minded and dogmatic thinkers unable or unwilling to do so.

Though it seems uncontroversial for educational aims and practices to be guided by such epistemic norms, the notion that an educator's responsibility to adhere to these should extend into their own personal lives beyond the classroom is far more contentious. The view that we may believe as we wish in our private lives, provided this does not inappropriately infringe on our professional work, tends to prevail, and understandably so. However, it is accepted that certain controversial beliefs — for example, those considered racist, sexist, or homophobic — may be deemed unacceptable for an educator to hold, regardless of any perceived right to freedom of belief. This is precisely because we fear such beliefs may negatively impinge on their professional work. Furthermore, given such beliefs seem morally and epistemically unsound, they also cast doubt on the quality of the moral and epistemic character of the believer, leading to concerns about their suitability as educators.

In this paper, I argue that the expectations of the educator role, in light of the epistemic aims and dimensions of the educational process, require educators to be held to higher epistemic standards than the layperson. The ethics of belief, which concerns the ethical constraints governing our habits of epistemic judgment and belief, applies to educators in a special way. This is cashed out in a special

obligation to try to maintain their epistemic fitness to practice through their personal and professional habits of epistemic conduct and belief-formation. In part one, I explore the epistemic aims and dimensions of education. In part two, I outline the importance of educator epistemic character for meeting these aims across the relevant domains, before considering how certain networks of beliefs may act as impediments to an authentic and congruent approach to teaching particular subjects. In part three, I elucidate the special epistemic responsibility educators hold to try to cultivate and maintain a "good enough" epistemic character to ably perform the key functions of their role. Finally, I briefly consider some of the implications of the paper's central thesis.

Epistemic Aims and Dimensions of Education

To make sense of the notion of a *good* educator and what qualities their epistemic character may consist of, we must revisit education's purposes. The epistemic capacities that we may find desirable in educators follow from the epistemic aims that they must support their students in fulfilling. A trawl through the literature in the field reveals three commonly cited sets of epistemic aims, which broadly track Israel Scheffler's distinctions between knowledge, skills, and dispositions:[1]

1. The cultivation of meaningful knowledge and understanding.
2. Induction into the methods and norms applied to appropriately conduct epistemic inquiries to reliably attain knowledge and understanding.
3. The fostering of epistemic virtues enabling students to consistently apply said methods effectively to achieve a healthy degree of intellectual autonomy.

I shall now explore these aims further to illustrate how they function collectively to shape students into competent epistemic agents. I shall then consider the epistemic demands placed on the educator as a result, given the epistemically complex contexts in which they operate.

Knowledge in the form of true belief is often held up as the main goal of education.[2] This claim seems intuitively correct — surely, we should question the worth of an education where no knowledge at all was attained. But, as Harvey Siegel notes, "True belief, absent supporting reasons and evidence is educationally

1. Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge: An Introduction to Epistemology and Education* (Scott, Foresman, 1965); and Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (Hackett, 1973).

2. Alvin I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Clarendon Press, 1999); and Jonathan E. Adler, "Knowledge, Truth, and Learning," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Blackwell, 2003).

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suboptimal, as is well-supported false belief. From the educational point of view, both are required."[3] We not only want children to believe what is true, we want them to know and understand the reasons for this — to not only have the right answers, but, where feasible, to understand why they are right and how they were reached.

Indeed, some have claimed that understanding, beyond mere knowledge, should be our primary educational target.[4] The mere ability to recite facts, without a deeper grasp of their meaning, value, or relation to each other and the wider world, is inadequate. Imagine an educator who sought to cram facts into their students' minds, enabling them to recite the answers to a set of preformulated questions and equations. Although these children may well *know* the answers in a sense, they may be unable to work out the answers to different, yet related, questions without some kind of internalized map of the theoretical terrain and a grasp of the mechanisms that undergird the facts they refer to. It would be like knowing the coordinates of a location, but having no idea where it sits in relation to other places, and how one would actually get there. Although one's beliefs may be true, their value is questionable.

Though we undoubtedly want to cultivate justified true belief, knowledge, and understanding in children, some thinkers contend that our main aim should be to furnish them with the tools to reliably attain these goods for themselves, by introducing them to reliable methods for doing so, involving the application of critical thinking and rationality.[5] Through developing the capacity to identify a range of reliable evidence and arguments, and then evaluate these with care, balance, and thoroughness, children can be socialized into belief formation practices that adhere to epistemic norms requiring belief to be appropriately responsive to reason. By learning how to apply these methods dependably and consistently, along with the application of sound deductive and inductive reasoning, children will become more capable of attaining sound beliefs reliably and independently (though, of course, there will still be other drivers, tied to their identity and social contexts, that may lead their beliefs astray).[6] This brings to mind the oft-quoted proverb: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Aiming only to cultivate knowledge and

3. Harvey Siegel, "Epistemology and Education: An Incomplete Guide to the Social-Epistemological Issues," *Episteme* 1, no. 2 (2004): 130, https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2004.1.2.129.

4. Catherine Z. Elgin, "Education and the Advancement of Understanding," *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 3 (1999): 131–140, https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp201999356; and Duncan Pritchard "Epistemic Virtue and the Epistemology of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 236–247, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12022.

5. Harvey Siegel, "Cultivating Reason," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education*, ed. Randall Curren (Blackwell, 2003), 305–319; and Harvey Siegel, "Truth, Thinking, Testimony and Trust: Alvin Goldman on Epistemology and Education," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 71, no. 2 (2005): 345–366, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2005.tb00452.x.

6. For further explanation, see Neil Levy, *Bad Beliefs: Why They Happen to Good People* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

understanding without helping children develop the tools to do so for themselves amounts to a failure to prepare them for living well as independently thinking adults.

Those who advocate for intellectual character development as the main epistemic aim of education argue that simply knowing the right methods for cultivating reliable knowledge is not enough to ensure that one consistently and appropriately applies them. If we lack the motivation to attain truth, or if we are blocked in our efforts to do so by our character vices — such as closed-mindedness or intellectual pride — then these practices will be of limited value. We must therefore seek to foster the development of *intellectual*, or *epistemic* (both terms will be used interchangeably here), virtues. Such virtues may be conceptualized as "the deep personal qualities or character traits of a good thinker or learner,"[7] such as intellectual thoroughness, intellectual humility, open-mindedness, and intellectual courage, all of which must be underpinned by a motivation to attain truth and knowledge.[8] Now our fisher not only knows how to catch fish, but has the motivation to do so with the necessary persistence and care to be reliably successful in this endeavor.

All things considered, an education that furnishes a child with true beliefs, knowledge and understanding, the methods and practices for reliably attaining these, and the character virtues for ensuring they are appropriately motivated in their pursuit of epistemic goods is desirable. These conjoined sets of epistemic goods should, in theory, result in knowledgeable, rational, and intellectually autonomous individuals with the capacity to effectively navigate the world, execute a life plan of their own choosing, and contribute meaningfully to the society in which they belong. For many, this kind of autonomy is the most fundamental aim of education, to which all others are subordinate.[9] The debate over which epistemic aim is paramount rages on,[10] but whether we view all other aims as just necessary components of autonomy, as merely means to acquire the primary goal of true belief, or as equal aims in their own right, is unimportant for our purposes. That we want children to possess these epistemic goods, regardless of any hierarchy they may be placed into, is enough. The focus now moves onto

7. Jason Baehr, "Is Intellectual Character Growth a Realistic Educational Aim?," *Journal of Moral Education* 45, no. 2 (2016): 117, https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2016.1174676.

8. Jason Baehr, "Educating for Intellectual Virtues," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 248–262, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12023.

9. Eamonn Callan, *Autonomy and Schooling* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); John White, *Education and the Good Life: Beyond the National Curriculum* (Kogan Page, 1990); and Harry Brighouse, *School Choice and Social Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

10. For recent contributions to this debate, see Lani Watson "The Epistemology of Education," *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 3 (2016): 146–159, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12316; Alessia Marabini and Luca Moretti, "Goldman and Siegel on the Epistemic Aims of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54, no. 3 (2020): 492–506, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12398; and Jonas Pfister "Justified Belief as an Epistemic Aim of Education," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (2024): qhae027, https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhae027.

exploring how the character and practice of the educator is central in helping students reliably attain these goods.

The Epistemic Character and Practice of the Educator

Noel Clemente explains that work on virtue epistemology within the philosophy of education field has been primarily concerned with the development of students' intellectual virtues, remarking that "not much has been said … about intellectual virtues that *teachers* must cultivate in themselves."[11] I intend to redress this imbalance here, and forward the claim that we should expect educators to possess a sound epistemic character, consisting of a sufficiently developed range of epistemic virtues, for three reasons: (1) to navigate the complex epistemic environments they encounter in attempting to fulfill the epistemic aims of education, (2) to effectively model the epistemic character traits that we would like students to develop, and (3) to limit any impediment to the educational process resulting from the personal set of beliefs they cultivate and maintain.

Navigating Complex Epistemic Environments

Teaching requires engagement with a diverse range of individuals across a diverse range of contexts. Given the unique conditions many educators operate in, it is not possible to formulate a set of principles or prescriptive rules to guide their behavior in all situations.[12] An educator of good character, however, possesses the kinds of virtues that habitually lead to good actions being taken, regardless of context. So, in the case of one's moral character, when encountering complex ethical territory through which codes of conduct offer no clear roadmap to follow, the educator of good moral virtue possesses their own internal moral compass to guide them toward taking the most appropriate actions. For example, possessing the virtue of moral courage may enable educators to take the right course of action, even in situations where doing so may be particularly challenging or even potentially perilous. Similarly, when encountering complex and potentially hostile epistemic territory, an educator in possession of a range of key epistemic virtues is needed to guide students through this challenging terrain toward knowledge and understanding.

In some instances, it may be very clear what is the "right" direction in which to epistemically guide students. If teaching basic mathematics, for instance, we can teach the answers to simple equations and the methods and procedures for reliably generating these answers independently. But how should one teach about complex and controversial topics such as transgender rights, the Israel-Palestine

11. Noel L. Clemente, "Pedagogical Virtues: An Account of the Intellectual Virtues of a Teacher," *Episteme* 21, no. 2 (2024): 683 (emphasis in original), https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2022.25.

12. David Carr "Character in Teaching," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55, no. 4 (2007): 369–389, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2007.00386.x; and Sandra Cooke and David Carr, "Virtue, Practical Wisdom and Character in Teaching," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 62, no. 2 (2014): 91–110, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2014.929632.

conflict, or the ethics of eating meat?[13] The epistemic terrain through which we must guide students is treacherous, and clear maps for safe navigation may not exist.

Michael Hand rightly contends that in the case of genuinely controversial issues where rational disagreement exists, an educator must seek to impartially present to students the range of reasonable perspectives held toward the matter and their supporting grounds.[14] This requires the intellectual *nous* to explore, comprehend, and explain the nuances of these different positions without letting one's biases lead to their misrepresentation. Linda Zagzebski, who first popularized virtue-responsibilist philosophy in her book *Virtues of the Mind*, noted open-mindedness, intellectual perseverance, intellectual courage, intellectual humility, and intellectual autonomy as being key virtues that aid us in our knowledge-seeking inquiries.[15] Let us consider how these may be applied to an educator-led inquiry into the ethics of meat eating.

First, to give all legitimate viewpoints, including the moral, environmental, and religious claims, a fair hearing, an educator must possess a sufficient degree of *open-mindedness* toward these. They would also need the *intellectual perseverance* to rigorously assess the relevant evidence without certain valid arguments being ignored, misrepresented, or their strength unjustly deflated, consequently skewing students' understanding of the issue. If they do not like the answers they turn up because they contradict their own strongly held beliefs about meat eating, for example, which may be quite central to their very sense of identity, then *intellectual courage* is required to persist through the resulting psychological discomfort. If their investigations reveal that their own views simply do not stand up to scrutiny, then a healthy dose of *intellectual humility* is needed to accept this fact and persist regardless.

This vignette illustrates how a range of virtues functioning collectively afford us the *intellectual autonomy* to independently explore the intricacies of complex issues to reach sound judgments. Jason Baehr explains that an intellectually virtuous individual is not "content with a fleeting or superficial grasp of epistemically worthy subject matters. Rather, her aim is deep understanding: she is concerned with a firm personal grasp of fundamental principles, underlying causes, and how the various facts within a given domain hang together."[16] This quality is paramount to such inquiries.

13. This is not to say all educators will teach about such topics, though students will often raise these regardless, given the relevance to their lives and the media attention they receive. However, most educators will, at some point, have to address genuinely controversial topics where the available evidence proves inconclusive.

14. Michael Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 213–228, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2008.00285.x.

15. Linda T. Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

16. Baehr, "Educating for Intellectual Virtues," 251.

Contrary to virtues are vices. While virtues are qualities that reliably help people attain what is good, vices reliably impede this process. Imagine our educator is now blighted with vicious traits. Rather than being open-minded, they are *closed-minded* and *dogmatic*, avoiding or dismissing ideas and evidence about meat eating that do not fit with their preconceived viewpoint. Alternatively, they may be naive and too open of mind to the point of gullibility, meaning that they consider alternatives that they should not, such as evidence shared on discredited websites known to host unreliable and biased material. This demonstrates the importance of balance between the vices of excess and deficit. Rather than having the perseverance that ensures they will be thorough, their *intellectual laziness* tends to prevent our vicious inquirer from assessing the evidence they encounter with care, meaning they more readily miss or misinterpret important facts. Possessing *intellectual cowardice*, rather than courage, means they may be more inclined to shut their inquiries down once the possibility of inconvenient truths, such as the extent of animal suffering required to sustain their meat eating, causes them any discomfort. Similarly, their *intellectual arrogance* and pride may result in them deciding, unjustifiably, that they already have a sufficient grasp of the complexities of the topic, and therefore need not investigate further.

Quassim Cassam explains that the very problem with these negative traits is that they "impede effective and responsible inquiry, which in turn is what makes them intellectual vices rather than virtues."[17] For Robert Roberts and Jay Wood, above all else, the epistemic virtues serve us by regulating our truth-seeking inquiries.[18] If one lacks possession of the epistemic virtues or possesses the opposing vices, then we have compelling reasons to cast doubt upon their capacity to reliably direct epistemological inquiry toward meaningful knowledge and understanding, which, as I have explained, is central to the educator's role.[19]

Ultimately, knowledge is a highly complicated and multifaceted phenomenon. It brings with it challenging questions pertaining to what knowledge is to be taught and its connection to truth, evidence, belief, and our own lives. For this reason, Hugh Sockett argues that we need educators imbued with a certain epistemological presence of mind, who can support children in unraveling these complexities, helping them grasp the different criteria of proof of knowledge and helping them learn how to scrutinize evidence to come to well-informed judgments.[20] We

17. Quassim Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," *Monist* 99, no. 2 (2016): 164–165, https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onv034.

18. Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

19. For an illustration of how a community of inquiry model may be used to help model appropriate epistemic inquiry and intellectual virtues to students, see Danielle Diver's contribution to this symposium: "Educating Open-Mindedness through Philosophy in Schools," *Educational Theory* 75, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.70013.

20. Hugh Sockett, *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions* (Routledge, 2012).

want educators who not only refuse to shy away from such complexity, but who positively delight in it. But this requires an educator of sufficiently good epistemic character who can carve out the necessary epistemological space within the classroom where complexity can be engaged with and children's explorations within it sensitively facilitated. This must also be a space where it is welcomed when children question what they are told and where they feel free to explore their understanding, as well as their misunderstanding, against a backdrop of sensitivity toward the range of beliefs and epistemic commitments already held by students.[21]

The complexity of epistemic challenges faced by educators is heightened in the technological age we live in, where we are bombarded with incomprehensibly vast amounts of information, rendering the process of discerning meaningful knowledge increasingly challenging.[22] Sockett explains that information is "just stuff" that can be committed to memory and possibly one day forgotten, if not underpinned by appropriate explanation and evidence, and judged alongside an appropriate consideration of alternatives.[23] Educators must also distinguish between mere information acquisition and the cultivation of knowledge of significance that is coherently organized in a manner that shapes an understanding of the world so as to usefully inform children's thoughts and actions.[24]

In attempting to manage such challenges, educators must contend with the hostile epistemic environments in which some students are reared. *Hostile epistemology* refers to the study of how our limited cognitive capacities can be exploited by various aspects of our environment.[25] For instance, children may regularly encounter a range of conspiracy theories over the internet, false information over social media, and live in communities structured like echo chambers in a world where major institutions and even experts are often considered untrustworthy.[26]

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21. I have previously addressed how educators may sensitively respond to certain common contentious and false student beliefs in Jeff Standley, "The Santa Claus Deception: The Ethics of Educator Involvement," *Theory and Research in Education* 18, no. 2 (2020):174–190, https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878520947042; and Jeff Standley, "Lessons in Love: Countering Student Belief in Romantic Love Myths," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 56, no. 5 (2022): 739–751, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12687.

22. Pritchard, "Epistemic Virtue and the Epistemology of Education"; and Cassam, "Vice Epistemology," 164–165.

23. Sockett, *Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning*, 6.

24. Emily Robertson, "The Epistemic Aims of Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, ed. Harvey Siegel (Oxford University Press, 2009), 11–34.

25. C. Thi Nguyen "Hostile Epistemology," *Social Philosophy Today* 39 (2023): 9–32, https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday2023391.

26. As Laura D'Olimpio notes in her contribution to this symposium, social media may also encourage unhelpful epistemic practices such as *manifesting*. See Laura D'Olimpio, "What's Wrong with Wishful Thinking? Manifesting as an Epistemic Vice," *Educational Theory* 75, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.12653.

Such circumstances pose serious challenges to students' development into effective epistemic agents, especially when considering children's epistemically vulnerable nature and natural disposition toward naivety and gullibility. Just as a chef tasked with serving a poisonous fish must be an expert practitioner in carefully preparing it to protect the consumer from harm, so must an educator possess the epistemic *nous* to serve students with meaningful knowledge and truth while protecting them from the ever-present threat of epistemic harm in the modern world.

The Educator as Epistemic Role Model

In facilitating epistemic inquiry in the way described, educators are not only guiding their students to knowledge and understanding and conveying to them appropriate methods for conducting such inquiry, they are also acting as epistemic role models through embodying the intellectual virtues they wish to cultivate in their students. In doing this, they are also effectively endorsing these qualities as worthy of emulation. The idea that the young can develop virtues by regularly being exposed to virtuous behavior in significant others — that virtue is "caught" rather than simply taught — is a widely held traditional Aristotelian notion.[27] As Mike Degenhardt points out, we cannot just teach epistemic virtue into children, "What matters most is to exemplify it in our teaching."[28] Put another way, educators must "walk the talk" and "practice what they preach."[29]

The notion that virtue can be developed through such means intuitively makes sense. Those who benefit from prolonged and regular contact with an influential figure, such as a teacher or any kind of educator, who consistently displays positive traits, whether concerning matters of epistemic inquiry or moral behavior, seem far more likely to adopt such characteristics than those who rarely witness such traits in action. This seems particularly crucial for students who lack good epistemic role models in their homelives. Although this viewpoint seems like common sense, it has been questioned just how much influence educators truly have as role models,[30] and whether their sway has been overstated in the literature.[31]

Just seeing positive traits in action may not guarantee the development of these in the observer.[32] However, even if educators' influence as role models may be weaker than some claim, it seems an inevitable risk that children who consistently encounter negative behavior from significant adults will more likely repeat such

27. Richard D. Osguthorpe, "On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character," *Journal of Teacher Education* 59, no. 4 (2008): 288–299, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108321377.

28. Mike A. B. Degenhardt, "The Ethics of Belief and the Ethics of Teaching," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 32, no. 3 (1998): 333–344, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.00099.

29. Osguthorpe, "On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character," 292.

30. Ibid.

31. Cooke and Carr, "Virtue, Practical Wisdom and Character in Teaching."

32. For a fuller treatment of contextual barriers to this process, see Seunghyun Lee's contribution to this symposium: "Teaching Open-Mindedness for Challenging Classrooms," *Educational Theory* 75, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.70010.

actions and develop related habits of character than those who do not, even if this likelihood is relatively small for some. And if there were students who were not directly influenced by an educator's character vices at all, we would still not want these to be implicitly endorsed in the classroom by the educator's actions, thus undermining the values and norms we wish to promote. Therefore, we should at least seek to avoid educators who are outright bad epistemic role models, holding and displaying an array of epistemic vices.

Questionable Educator Beliefs as an Impediment to Teaching

Another concern we may have about educators of poor epistemic character is the likelihood of them forming false and unfounded beliefs, or failing to correct those they may have inherited from their formative social contexts, due to their epistemic vices leading them astray. But need we worry about a set of questionable beliefs impacting upon one's teaching practice as a cultivator of knowledge? Jennifer Lackey uses the example of a creationist teacher to suggest that such concerns may be unjustified.[33]

We may consider a creationist who rejects any role for evolution in explaining the origin of life on the planet as a poor epistemic agent, given how far their beliefs stray from the position clearly endorsed by available arguments and evidence. One may naturally question whether such a person could reliably teach about fundamental scientific principles related to such beliefs. However, Lackey has argued that such an "unreliable believer could still be a reliable testifier."[34]

Ultimately, educators do not have to believe the relevant evidence to teach in accordance with it — they can still bring their students to hold the appropriate knowledge even if they themselves do not. The creationist teacher could assert, for example, that "Modern day *Homo sapiens* evolved from *Homo erectus*,"[35] even if they personally believe this to be untrue. In such a case, the teacher is a mere conduit for transmitting knowledge, accrued through consulting reliable sources, to their students. As David Bakhurst frames it, the teacher is a mere facilitator who speaks for the subject matter rather than for herself.[36] Though this view seems plausible, I contend that, in practice, it poses a range of unwelcome problems.

First, if our unreliable believer was incapable of assessing the available evidence to reach a reasonable conclusion themselves, it raises questions about their ability to appropriately guide students toward doing this. Assumedly, they

33. Jennifer Lackey, *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

34. Ibid., 49. I should note here that this is not to say that teaching is *only* about testifying, but it is still a relevant component. Ultimately, educators inevitably express some stance on "how things are" in the world through their teaching, however much they may avoid relying on transmission-based models of educating.

35. Lackey, *Learning From Words*, 48.

36. David Bakhurst, "Learning from Others," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 47, no. 2 (2013): 187–203, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12020.

disregarded, deflated, or failed to seek appropriate pieces of evidence in the process of their own belief formation. Or, if these beliefs were inculcated from a young age, they lacked the capacity to reflect on and revise these in light of evidence later encountered, possibly due to a close-minded or dogmatic attitude toward the matter. We may therefore be concerned that this approach would be mirrored in their preparation for teaching such subject matter, leading to the misrepresentation of the relevant evidence in class. However, Heather Battaly makes a helpful distinction here. The closed-minded nature of one's beliefs may stem from two possibilities: (1) an *inability* to engage with relevant alternative options, or (2) an *unwillingness* to do so.[37]

Let us assume our educator *is* perfectly capable of evidence gathering and assessment for professional purposes in a contrasting manner to personal belief formation purposes, allowing them to identify the "truth" of the matter to be endorsed to their students and a reasonable assessment of the evidence to be presented in support of this. But on accomplishing this, it seems they should logically come to revise their beliefs according to this now-established truth. A failure to do so appears to suggest a *disregard* for evidence and apportioning belief according to a careful deliberation of this — an ill-fitting attitude for an educator to hold when charged with promoting the opposite attitude in their students. Of course, they may feel their beliefs are supported by *superior* evidence: God's revelation via scripture. But given there is insufficient evidence to endorse the view that biblical scripture is the product of divine revelation, their position remains evidentially insecure.

Second, assuming a teacher taught against their personal creationist beliefs according to the scientific evidence, from their perspective, they would be teaching for belief in false propositions. This contravenes an assumed fundamental duty of a teacher, that "as a trusted authority, the more trusted the greater the immaturity of the learners, he has a special obligation to make as sure as he reasonably can that what he says is the truth."[38] To consistently promote belief in (what they consider to be) untruths requires the relinquishment of any concern for students to attain true beliefs, or for they themselves to be a consistent truth-teller. They must either be content for their students to acquire false beliefs or accept that their own beliefs are false or at least sit on shaky foundations. A concern for the truth — apparently lacking here — must be held paramount by any educator who values the cultivation of meaningful knowledge and understanding, in accordance with the epistemic aims of education previously outlined.

Teaching against one's own beliefs to encourage belief in a reality so starkly different from their own outlook, leading them away from perceived important

37. Heather Battaly "Closed-Mindedness and Dogmatism," *Episteme* 15, no. 3 (2018): 261–282, https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2018.22.

38. Robert F. Dearden, "Education and the Ethics of Belief," *British Journal of Education Studies* 22, no. 1 (1974): 5–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.1974.9973394.

truths, may produce a sense of incongruence and inauthenticity, as the educator betrays a fundamental part of themselves, presenting a worldview strongly opposed to their own. This will also be a worldview that, whether they intend it or not, their students will presumably assume they endorse. Richard Osguthorpe contends that teachers should offer an authentic presence in the classroom and owe it to their students to present themselves genuinely.[39] Similarly, Shirley Pendlebury holds that insincerity and inauthenticity in teachers undermines trust in the teaching relationship, trust that must form the background of any cooperative endeavor.[40] Therefore, the teacher's apparent dishonesty and misrepresentation of a core part of themselves seems undesirable.

Three possible solutions that could free the educator from this unwelcome bind offer themselves, though each has serious flaws. First, they could just insist on teaching what they think is the truth and reject the established scientific view. Though it ensures teacher congruence, authenticity, and sincerity, this option is a nonstarter. As the evidence is clearly stacked against their view, a great deal of manipulation and misrepresentation of the balance of evidence would be required for this to be presented as reasonable and correct. As Anthony Quinton notes, whereas in many social situations we express our beliefs to others on equal terms without pressure for these to be accepted, an educational audience is captive, naïve, and suggestible, and may not previously hold any beliefs on the matter being taught.[41] Therefore, the teacher presenting their own flawed beliefs as *true* would amount to indoctrination and an abuse of their authority, violating basic ethical standards of education.[42]

A second alternative involves the educator teaching according to the evidence, but, alongside this, also explaining their personal views. In principle, there seems nothing morally perturbing about this option. The students are taught according to the evidence and the educator remains honest and transparent. However, they run a serious risk of undermining their epistemic authority and communicating troubling messages. On the one hand, they are telling their students that the evidence strongly demonstrates that creationism is false, while on the other hand, they are saying that despite what the evidence shows to be the case, they refuse to believe it. This endorses a disconcerting notion of what constitutes knowledge that removes weight of evidence from the equation, suggesting that it is inconsequential to belief, thus undermining the second of our aforementioned epistemic educational aims.

39. Osguthorpe, "On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character."

40. Shirley Pendlebury, "Accuracy, Sincerity and Capabilities in the Practice of Teaching," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 2 (2008): 173–183, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-007-9088-5.

41. Anthony Quinton "On the Ethics of Belief," in *Education and Value: The Richard Peters Lectures*, ed. Graham Haydon (Institute of Education, University of London, 1987), 37–55.

42. For an account of why indoctrination is unacceptable educational practice, see Michael Hand's contribution to this symposium: "Does Indoctrination Still Matter?," *Educational Theory* 75, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.70004.

A third way of dissolving the problem could be to reconceptualize the whole situation. Neil Van Leeuwen argues that our factual beliefs about the world are part of a separate cognitive map from our religious and ideological *credences*. While our factual beliefs respond involuntarily to the evidence around us and seek to track reality, our credences act more like a species of imagining, are partially under our voluntary control, and are closely tied to our sense of identity.[43] So, in theory, one may not factually believe in creationism, yet may *creed* this. Claiming belief in creationism in this sense may be more about affirming one's particular group affiliation and preferred way of conceiving the world than what is true.

On Van Leeuwen's account, our creationist teacher may not literally believe what they claim to or may only believe it in a weaker sense. If one can separate these different cognitive attitudes out in the way described, then the factual believer persona of the teacher may well be able to suspend their credences to facilitate teaching in the way that Lackey suggests, thus mitigating any apparent conflict. However, it seems too grand an assertion to say that all those who claim to hold creationist beliefs are mistaken, and that we know their beliefs better than they do. And though some may well hold religious credences in the way Van Leeuwen claims, he recognizes himself that this may not be true of everyone. Credences may be something we generally transition toward holding from the original factual beliefs held about religion in childhood. For those for whom religious belief is merely an imagining, our problem may have been somewhat weakened, but for those who stay "true believers," it remains unresolved.

As Quinton puts it, "it is the moral responsibility of teachers, and so, to some extent, of every communicator of belief, not just to tell what they believe to be the truth, but to tell only what they have good reason to believe is the truth."[44] It is apparent that in some instances, however, the distance between what the teacher believes is true and what they have good reason to believe is true is so vast that it cannot be easily bridged. Though teaching against our beliefs may well be *possible*, it does not follow that it is *desirable*. It is important to note that this would be the case for a whole host of networks of beliefs that an educator may hold, not just religious beliefs.

Consider the case of an anti-vaxxer who stands in opposition to all vaccinations, denies their efficacy in preventing disease, and contends that malevolent forces lie behind the drive to administer them to the public. This stance involves believing contrary to a wealth of scientific evidence that confirms the effectiveness of many vaccines and contrary to the vast historical evidence recording the total eradication of diseases like smallpox and the near eradication of polio and tuberculosis over the past century, preventing serious illness in many and saving the

43. Neil Van Leeuwen, *Religion as Make-Believe: A Theory of Belief, Imagination, and Group Identity* (Harvard University Press, 2023).

44. Quinton, "On the Ethics of Belief," 42.

lives of millions. They also stand in opposition to important health information we may wish to promote to students.[45]

Whether one's evidence-opposing network of beliefs is religious, ideological or of some other category in nature, when sufficiently global and extreme, it seems likely to impede the educator in supporting their students in constructing a more accurate model of reality, or at least in their capacity to do so in an authentic, congruent, and honest manner. It must be noted, however, that many religious people effectively integrate well-founded scientific truths with their religious beliefs — for example, accepting some role for evolution in addition to God's creative act[46] — and many who are reluctant to take certain vaccines are merely *hesitant* regarding the efficacy and necessity of certain vaccines rather than denying the efficacy and positive intentions of all vaccines in a more global sense.[47] There will be instances for all educators when not everything they personally believe accords with what they are expected to endorse in the classroom,[48] but while pockets of minor discord may be inevitable and plausibly manageable, this may often not be the case for those whose beliefs have strayed significantly from the evidentially supported perspective.

It may be impossible to draw a clear line as to what sets of beliefs may cause significant problems and which may not. It will also be the case that different kinds of beliefs will prove more or less problematic depending on what is being taught and to whom. A flat-earther who taught physics, a creationist who taught evolution, or a climate change denier who taught environmental sustainability may all have their practice impaired, and their sense of integrity, congruence, and authenticity compromised. Even teaching subjects that have some relevance to broader worldviews reflected by these beliefs could prove problematic. But regardless of context, an educator of sound epistemic competence uninhibited by numerous evidentially tangential beliefs would be better positioned in general to execute their relevant epistemic duties. In the following section, I shall argue that educators carry a special epistemic responsibility to aspire to be such professionals.

The Ethics of Belief and the Special Epistemic Responsibility of Educators

In some respects, it is uncontroversial to hold people to certain epistemic standards regarding the beliefs they hold and how they come to form them.

45. For further discussion on vaccination in relation to education, see Ruth Wareham's contribution to this symposium: "Should Teachers Promote Vaccination?," *Educational Theory* 75, no. 2 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1111/edth.70012.

46. Over 70 percent of Christians in Europe accept this: David P. Wilson, "European Christians Are at the Forefront in Accepting Evolution," *Evolution and Development* 12, no. 6 (2010): 537–540, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1525-142X.2010.00439.x.

47. For example, it may be perfectly rational for members of the Black community to be wary of medical interventions from the state based on historical abuses, such as the Tuskegee experiments.

48. In fact, it may even sometimes be the case that educators are wrongly expected to endorse certain positions on issues that are not warranted — the epistemic fault does not always lie with the educator.

It is also deemed quite reasonable to make negative judgments against many breaches of such standards. Richard Feldman observes how such judgments often mirror their moral counterparts.[49] For example, we may remark that a person should pay their taxes or should refrain from murdering others in much the same way that we may contend that one *should* believe that $2+2=4$ and that the earth is round. In either type of case, we consider people to hold obligations to adhere to certain norms, whether moral or epistemic in nature. The view that we have a duty to adhere to such epistemic norms is known as *evidentialism*.

On this account, our judgments in response to any failures to uphold one's epistemic obligations may be considered deontological judgments, resulting in believing poorly reflecting negatively on the believer and believing well reflecting positively. Just as our negative judgments about theft and murder limit inclinations to commit such acts, our negative judgments of believing falsehoods and propositions that do not fit the evidence help guide us toward forming and holding beliefs in the "right way," in response to appropriate reasons, evidence, and argument. Without these norms, we would struggle to believe the testimony of others and to form functioning intellectual communities.

The latitude given to people in their adherence to standard epistemic obligations varies. Though possibly few of us would be as strict as one of evidentialism's most famous proponents, William Kingdon Clifford, in his pronouncement that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence,"[50] few would argue that the flat-earther's beliefs are beyond condemnation, having strayed so far from epistemic norms in forming these. However, these extreme positions leave the believer a lot of scope. Feldman explains that one way of determining the permissibility of deviations from the evidentialist position is by considering the roles and positions that those in question occupy within society.[51]

Sarah Wright agrees that the epistemic standards by which we judge a person's conduct are directly tied to the obligations of their social roles, leading to varied sets of standards being applied.[52] She gives the example of a doctor and a layperson who both read the same magazine article about a new drug for treating heartburn. While the layperson would not be acting unvirtuously in believing the drug successfully stopped heartburn, for the doctor to act virtuously, they should withhold judgment and seek more information before forming such a belief. As Wright states, "On deciding to become a doctor, an agent takes on many responsibilities,

49. Richard Feldman, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, ed. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (Oxford University Press, 2004), 166–196.

50. William Kingdon Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," *Contemporary Review* 29 (1877): 295.

51. Feldman, "The Ethics of Belief."

52. Sarah Wright "Virtues, Social Roles, and Contextualism," *Metaphilosophy* 41, nos. 1–2 (2010): 95–114, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.2009.01629.x.

including the responsibility to be particularly epistemically careful in evaluating claims about the effectiveness of new drugs."[53]

Similar to Wright's doctor, I contend that on deciding to become an educator, an agent also takes on special epistemic responsibilities. This is because of the complex epistemic territory in which they work and the range of epistemic aims they must try to fulfill, such as those outlined throughout this paper. It is on this basis that educators must be held to a higher epistemic standard than the general populace. This does not rule out the right to hold certain ill-supported beliefs, but it should lead to disapproval of the kind of belief-forming practices and their underlying epistemic vices that commonly give rise to false and evidentially tangential beliefs, which may put educators "at risk of losing their evidential moorings."[54]

To further reinforce this argument, let us consider a very different but analogous case of a professional athlete. For the nonprofessional, most people (in contemporary Western society at least) would consider drinking alcohol and eating junk food as a minor vice, but it may be considered a greater moral failure if, for example, a professional footballer[55] were found to be habitually indulging in such unhealthy behavior. This is because such dietary habits directly impair their capacity to carry out their social role. An educator who displays bad habits of believing may similarly compromise themselves, as the repeated exercise of epistemic vices strengthen these traits, encourages further false beliefs, and, in doing so, weakens their professional competence. Clifford captured this sentiment well in his famous paper on the ethics of belief, noting that:

> No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts.[56]

Of course, generally speaking, neither the educator nor footballer would, or indeed should, be disqualified from their profession for the actions described. However, in both cases, their actions may be considered to reflect negatively on them, considering the expectations of their professional roles, whether it be because their physical fitness or their epistemic fitness is compromised. In each case, it does not matter if these behaviors consistently occur outside of their working hours, as their effects inevitably leak into their professional domain. Ultimately, the footballer's special obligation to try to maintain physical fitness has been breached, just as the educator's equivalent obligation to maintain epistemic fitness has been. We may also pick out specific virtues that we expect other professionals to hold to a higher

53. Ibid., 97.

54. Jeff Standley "The Ethics of Belief in Student Ability," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 53, no. 1 (2019): 61–76, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12311.

55. I am thinking here of what those in the United States may more commonly refer to as a soccer player.

56. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," 292.

degree than others. For example, we would expect police officers to be braver than the layperson to protect the public from harm, and nurses to be more compassionate, just as we may want educators to be more intellectually thorough. Though we may bemoan a lack of these dispositions in any person, our disapproval would not be as great.

In an ideal world, we would hope for all educators to possess characters brimming with well-developed epistemic virtues and devoid of all epistemic vice. Such a hope, however, is futile. Human beings are not perfectly rational creatures — we are all prone to epistemic misjudgment at times,[57] just as we are all prone to erring morally. Consequently, we all possess some beliefs that may be false or lack epistemic warrant. In fact, holding certain beliefs about ourselves and the world that are tangential to the available evidence may even help us function more effectively in aspects of our lives[58] and manage threats to our mental health, facilitating better epistemic functioning in certain cases, rather than impeding this.[59] However, when the number and significance of evidence-resistant beliefs held reaches a critical mass, our habits of belief formation may become seriously dysfunctional and our epistemic virtues significantly degenerated, leaving us unfit for certain practices, with teaching being just one of these.

It is very difficult to pinpoint exactly when innocent, or potentially helpful, false and unwarranted beliefs become excessive, and vices degenerate to the extent that they create an unacceptable impediment to our healthy epistemic functioning. This may be because character traits are not easily, if at all, quantifiable — we tend to think of a character trait as either good or bad, rather than something that exists along a broad spectrum. Though an outright bad epistemic character would be a poor fit as an educator, we must accept that the perfect epistemic character simply does not exist. So, just as Donald Winnicott spoke of the "good enough mother,"[60] it may be helpful to think of the "good enough educator," whose epistemic character, although necessarily flawed, is competent enough to perform their duties sufficiently well.

For example, though open-mindedness may be considered a positive trait, no educator will always be open-minded to the perfect extent in all situations. But an educator who is open-minded enough to deal with the epistemic challenges of the classroom, which may differ greatly depending on who and what they are

57. For a range of examples, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Penguin Books, 2011).

58. For a discussion on the importance of positive illusions, see Ryan T. McKay and Daniel C. Dennett, "The Evolution of Misbelief," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, no. 6 (2009): 493–510, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0140525x09990975.

59. For a discussion on the concept of epistemic innocence, see Lisa Bortolotti "The Epistemic Innocence of Motivated Delusions," *Consciousness and Cognition* 33, (2015): 490–499, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2014.10.005.

60. Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34, no. 2 (1953): 89–97, https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271367.003.0034.

teaching, without significantly impeding epistemic inquiry, modeling unhelpful epistemic vices, or leading children toward false or poorly founded beliefs should be considered *good enough*. Though they may not always fulfill the desired epistemic aims of education to an optimum level, they shall rarely directly hinder efforts to do so. When considering the quality of educator dispositions, perhaps "the most basic requirement for how good a teacher needs to be is akin to 'do no harm.'"[61]

The least we can demand, then, is the absence of stable traits in educators that impede the execution of their epistemic duties. One lacking in certain epistemic virtues may not perform their role perfectly (who does?), but one riddled with vices may hinder and harm children's learning and development. So, even if a full justification for wanting an educator of good epistemic character is difficult to provide, a weaker claim calling for educators to not be of outright bad epistemic character is harder to deny. However, avoiding the recruitment of individuals of poor epistemic character during selection processes may well prove challenging, just as it can be when attempting to avoid recruiting those of poor moral character. Unfortunately, character vices are not immediately perceptible to others, and there is no simple test for detecting these.

One inappropriate and unjust approach would be to try to determine one's character simply on the basis of the range of beliefs one possessed. Barring obvious cases, where specific beliefs may act as a direct impediment to effective practice in their role, like those described earlier in this paper, one's personal beliefs should remain private. I agree with Robert Dearden that to concern ourselves with an individual's beliefs over their actions would result in "a misguided intrusion into individual privacy."[62] Also, merely totting up an individual's "bad beliefs" would not necessarily tell us the full story of their epistemic character. One may have grown up in an epistemically hostile environment leading to the accrual of many false beliefs, which they have worked hard to partially eradicate since due to their good qualities of character. Contrastingly, another may have grown up in an epistemically friendly environment and have generally accurate beliefs simply by luck and despite the possession of certain vices.

Possibly the most effective, yet admittedly imperfect, way to identify the quality of prospective educators' epistemic character is through the same means we use to assess their general suitability: the application and interview process. Selection panels may observe epistemic virtues and vices in action through responses to penetrating application or interview questions, as well as through the teaching of specifically chosen lessons designed to showcase these. Requests for professional references could also focus on asking for opinions on the candidate's epistemic character. Just as we ask about the reliability and punctuality of candidates in judging their suitability, we may also wish to inquire about their open-mindedness or intellectual humility. Though we can never guarantee that selection processes will

61. Osguthorpe, "On the Reasons We Want Teachers of Good Disposition and Moral Character," 295.

62. Dearden, "Education and the Ethics of Belief," 6.

always be successful in finding the ideal candidate, focusing on the right kinds of desirable qualities can only help us in this endeavor.

Concluding Remarks

An educator's beliefs, habits of believing, and general epistemic character are all important factors of relevance to their teaching practice. In particular, epistemic virtues and vices may collectively either elevate or impair this. Of course, the extent of the influence of epistemic dimensions of character on teaching will depend on what is being taught and to whom, but any educator will only be helped in fulfilling the epistemic duties tied to their role if they maintain a good level of epistemic fitness in their general conduct, both inside and outside of the classroom. Just as educators are expected to display a reasonable standard of moral character beyond the school doors, their role demands the same of their epistemic character.

Of course, reliably recruiting and developing educators of good epistemic, or even moral, character is not straightforward. There will always be those deficient in these respects who slip through the net, whether that be in the form of cowardly police officers or dishonest politicians. However, by focusing more on the kinds of epistemic qualities outlined in this paper throughout the recruitment process, we increase our chances of hiring suitable educators who are well-equipped to support students in fulfilling the epistemic aims of education. This may all sound somewhat idealistic, especially at a time when it is proving hard to recruit enough teachers to meet demand in some countries. Making further demands on what we expect from them seems unlikely to help. But this argument could be applied to any particular skill or attribute that we desire in educators. We cannot consequently give up trying to find the most suitable candidates just because it is challenging, though we must at least be modest in our efforts. This is why aiming for educators of *good enough*, rather than *ideal*, epistemic character is an apt approach.

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