

Evidential Preemption

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Abstract

As a general rule, whenever a hearer is justified in forming the belief that p on the basis of a speaker's testimony, she will also be justified in assuming that the speaker has formed her belief appropriately in light of a relevantly large and representative sample of the evidence that bears on p . In simpler terms, a justification for taking someone's testimony entails a justification for trusting her assessment of the evidence. This introduces the possibility of what I will call "evidential preemption." Evidential preemption occurs when a speaker, in addition to offering testimony that p , also warns the hearer of the likelihood that she will subsequently be confronted with apparently contrary evidence: this is done, however, not so as to encourage the hearer to temper her confidence in p in anticipation of that evidence, but rather to suggest that the (apparently) contrary evidence is in fact misleading evidence or evidence that has already been taken into account. Either way, the speaker is signaling to the hearer that the subsequent disclosure of this evidence will not require her to significantly revise her belief that p . Such preemption can effectively inoculate an audience against future contrary evidence, and thereby creates an opening for a form of exploitative manipulation that I will call "epistemic grooming." Nonetheless, I argue, not all uses of evidential preemption are nefarious; it can also serve as an important tool for guiding epistemically limited agents through complex evidential scenarios.

1 | INTRODUCTORY

This paper aims to cast light on a commonplace but understudied sort of argumentative maneuver which I will call *evidential preemption*. Evidential preemption is not uniquely identifiable by any particular type of linguistic expression, but is perhaps most easily recognizable in sentential constructions such as

(i) “My opponents will tell you that *q*; but I say *p*.”¹

While certainly not new, variations on this maneuver appear to have entrenched themselves in recent politics and public life. For a representative example, consider Bill O’Reilly commenting on the 2015 State of the Union Address:

Wages have fallen significantly during President Obama’s tenure. He will tell you that’s because he inherited a terrible recession but I’ll tell you the wage situation is due to the expansion of high-tech in the marketplace when machines replace people and the high cost of doing business in the U.S.A.

In a similar vein, here is Newt Gingrich, writing for the American Enterprise Institute in 2010:

Washington is developing plans for your retirement savings They will tell you that you are ‘investing’ your money in U.S. Treasury bonds. But they will use your money immediately to pay for their unprecedented trillion-dollar budget deficits, leaving nothing to back up their political promises.

We can ask: what is the purpose of these moves? In particular, why would a speaker spend valuable airtime not just broadcasting their own take on how things are, but also advertising others’ conflicting points of view?

I am interested in determining what role these sorts of utterances play in communication, in particular in testimonial exchange. As such, it might be helpful to begin by contrasting (i) with the following sort of case

(ii) “*p*, although some folks think that *q*.”

Here, readers familiar with the work of H.P. Grice might be tempted by an analysis which foregrounds the *cooperative character of communication*:² in uttering (ii), I might be signalling to my hearer that though I believe that *p*, this is not a widely shared view, and that the hearer would do well to adjust his credence accordingly. This is a familiar enough phenomenon, and there are standard templates in epistemology and philosophy of language that can help us make sense of it. For instance, following the so-called “assurance view” of testimony,³ we might think of it in terms of the speaker asserting that *p*, but then immediately

¹Typically, we may take it that *p* and *q* are in some kind of apparent tension, so that the speaker can rely on the hearer to recognize that rational commitment to one proposition would *prima facie* exclude rational commitment to the other (e.g., “My opponents will tell you that I am too young and inexperienced to be a leader, but I say, this country is ready for change.”).

²See Grice, 1989.

³See, e.g., Moran, 2005; Faulkner, 2007.

moving to cancel out the “assurance” that usually travels along with it – i.e., the invitation to believe p based simply on the speaker’s testimony which is the normal concomitant of assertion.⁴ In less theoretically laden terms, then, uttering (ii) would essentially amount to saying something like “ p , but don’t take my word for it.”

I have no doubt that this analysis is appropriate for a number of cases which share surface properties with the ones that I am bringing to attention here. But there is an *antagonistic* element to (i) which this rather optimistic analysis seems unfit to account for.⁵ For notice that neither O’Reilly nor Gingrich are seeking to temper the confidence that their audiences might take in their claims, by pointing out that apparently reasonable people hold opposing views: to the contrary, they are seeking to undercut these opposing views, but apparently without having to resort to offering additional argument, evidence, or proof.⁶

How might this maneuver help them achieve this end? I will argue that in certain cases, evidential preemption can actually succeed in materially affecting the epistemic situation that the audience find themselves in – or more precisely, the situation that they *will* find themselves in – once the future evidence is disclosed. In this way, evidential preemption can affect not just how people will be *psychologically disposed* to respond to future evidence, but also how it will be *epistemically rational* for them to respond.

In what follows, I will analyze the epistemological consequences of evidential preemption under two distinct modes, which I will call, respectively, preemption by neutralization (section 2) and preemption by source discrediting (section 3). I will also connect the analysis to issues of current public concern, such as echo chambers, the propagation of conspiracy theories, and the “fake news” phenomenon. In section 4, I will set aside these more strictly epistemological matters, and draw attention to some ethical questions that arise in their wake: evidential preemption can provide an extremely effective tool for moulding people’s future epistemic situation, and as such, can be seen to raise concerns about manipulation and autonomy. Accordingly, we can ask, are there any intrinsic moral constraints on its deployment? Could evidential preemption ever form part of the discourse repertoires of well-intentioned agents?

2 | PREEMPTION BY NEUTRALIZATION

In introducing evidential preemption, it will be helpful to note that assertions, at least of the sort that is typically of interest to epistemologists, are typically “motivated,” in the simple sense that the speaker is not just looking to fill the airwaves, but is aiming to redirect an inquiry, persuade an audience, disseminate a significant truth, and so forth. Recognizing this motivation is presumably key to explaining why speakers would ever be moved to make assertions at all, in light of its associated risks: as epistemologists have recently pointed out, assertions are governed by norms, such that if one’s

⁴See, e.g., Goldberg, 2015.

⁵The antagonism here is distinct from, though perhaps ultimately related to, the kind so perceptively analyzed in Elisabeth Camp, 2018.

⁶This antagonistic element may also help shed some light on when evidential preemption is likely to be a viable strategy and when it is not. For instance, if someone were to say “others will tell you that one should start buttoning one’s shirts from the top, but I say it’s best to start in the middle,” the utterance might, at best, be understood merely as expressing the speaker’s idiosyncratic preference. Similarly, if someone said “others will tell you that Elvis was born in Tupelo, but I say he was born in Jackson,” the attempt to persuade might well backfire, causing the hearer to be *less* inclined to accept the testimony than he might otherwise be, simply because of the added rider about what others will say. What such examples would lack, in my view, is some plausible back story about why others would be wrong about such a trivial fact, or why it should be in their interest that I be misinformed about it. By contrast, when we deal with ethically or politically charged content, this back story is often not far to seek. Indeed, in our highly polarized and politicized information economy, such antagonistic interactions are legion, and in many places, are virtually assumed by default. Evidential preemption, I believe, can be expected to work best in contexts where such antagonism is part of our common understanding of what is at stake.

assertion were shown to be wrong or unfounded, one would thereby have rendered oneself subject to possibly significant social sanction.⁷

This observation brings to salience to a point that, so far as I can tell, has not received a lot of attention in the relevant literature: in standard cases of testimonial transaction, it is clearly not a matter of indifference to the speaker which belief the hearer ends up endorsing as a result. Rather, the speaker asserts that *p* because he wants us to believe that *p*.⁸ In particular, the world being what it is, testifiers will often recognize a distinctive interest in “safeguarding” their testimonial contribution against future contrary testimony from other parties. For instance, my testifier might understand that I am subsequently likely to meet with other apparently equally knowledgeable and sincere people who will gladly testify that not-*p* (or testify to some further proposition *q*, which is clearly in conflict with *p*). He understands that I will then be in a predicament broadly akin to that recently described in terms of the epistemology of expert disagreement: at that point, I will be in possession of two bits of contrary evidence in the form of testimony from apparently equally knowledgeable sources.⁹ In the absence of an independent reason to favor one expert over the other, my only rational recourse might be to cancel my belief in *p* and retreat to a position of suspended belief.¹⁰

Given my (original) testifier’s interest that I maintain my belief in *p*, what options are open to him? Assuming that he is not in a position to simply prevent my exposure to the contrary testimony in the first place, he can instead try a different strategy, for instance by saying “my opponents will tell you that *q*; but I say *p*.”

It is my thesis that this rather innocent-looking move can actually succeed in shaping the hearer’s future epistemic situation in a rather dramatic way. If so, this is clearly troubling, and we would do well to develop an understanding of how it might work. I have introduced the topic by highlighting the speaker’s motivation for resorting to evidential preemption. By contrast, most discussions of the epistemology of testimony are focused on the recipient’s perspective, on his or her reasons for accepting or declining the information that is offered through another’s testimony. As we move on, it is worth noting that our appreciation of the problems raised by evidential preemption does not seem to depend on whether we favor one or another of the standard approaches to the epistemology of testimony. As virtually anyone working in this area will agree, I can, in favorable circumstances, be epistemically justified in forming my beliefs based on what other people tell me. Where philosophers disagree is on the question of how exactly to specify these circumstances. On non-reductionist views, I can be justified, at least in some situations, in forming beliefs *simply* on another’s say-so. On the contrasting reductionist view, I can only ever be justified in light of some previous bit of epistemic legwork, for instance in reasonably assigning a relatively high degree of confidence in the speaker’s competence and sincerity.¹¹ Both accounts can be satisfied in the cases I am interested in, for typically, reductionist

⁷For contrasting perspectives on the substance and consequence of the “norm of assertion,” see, e.g., Lackey, 2007; Weiner, 2007; Brown and Cappelen (Eds.), 2011; McKinnon, 2015; Goldberg, 2015.

⁸Whether he wants us to believe that *p* because he sincerely has our epistemic well-being in mind, or because he wants to manipulate us is not relevant at this point: as I will argue later, evidential preemption can occur in both kinds of cases, to similar effect.

⁹See Goldman, 2001, and Coady, 2012, ch. 2, for discussions of these issues.

¹⁰See Elga, 2007, and Christensen, 2007, for articulations of this sort of view.

¹¹The broad distinction between reductionist and non-reductionist approaches to the epistemology of testimony goes all the way back to Hume (1748) and Reid (1764) and (1785). Few today would endorse a strongly reductionist approach to testimony: see Coady (1973), (1992) for a powerful case against. But see, e.g., Fricker (1994) and Lackey (2006) for sophisticated attempts to incorporate some of the motivations for reductionist approaches into a viable, critical account of testimony. The examples I give in the following satisfy the constraints stipulated also in these more demanding approaches.

accounts concede that the epistemic processing in question can be quite minimal: in order for me to form the belief that p on the basis of another's say-so, I must have reasonably determined that the speaker seems knowledgeable and sincere, and I must have considered p in light of other things I presume to know about the situation.¹² But the evidence to support those assessments can be overall quite weak, so long as there are no apparent defeaters.

To align our inquiry with these well-known approaches, then, assume that the hearer is in a recognizable and common epistemic predicament, i.e., he has an interest in knowing whether p , but lacks either the intellectual capacities or the worldly wherewithal to determine whether p for himself. Now here is an apparently knowledgeable and sincere person who is keen to offer testimony on the matter. Assume that appropriate epistemic conditions are satisfied, and that it is reasonable for hearer to form the belief that p in light of the testifier's say-so: that is, hearer has determined that the speaker is well-positioned to offer testimony regarding p ; in the absence of defeaters, the testimony furnishes him with an epistemic justification for believing that p .

But here's the trouble: the speaker does not *just* offer testimony that p , but also issues a warning that others will try to persuade him of an opposing viewpoint. What is the hearer to do with this extra information? It is one thing to observe that the speaker might be working on him psychologically to be disposed to maintaining a belief in p even after being confronted with contrary testimony, hoping, perhaps, to exploit well-known mechanisms of familiarity bias.¹³ But if our analysis were to stop with this observation, we would be missing sight of an epistemically significant dimension of the transaction. For the speaker may also have succeeded in materially changing the evidential situation the hearer will be in once the contrary testimony is offered to him. As I will argue, it does so by giving the hearer reason to believe that whatever information would be gained through that subsequent disclosure has already been taken into account in forming the belief that p .

Here is how: the testifier has a reasonable grasp of hearer's epistemic situation, and understands that by uttering p , he will put the hearer in an epistemic position where he is justified in forming the belief that p . Nonetheless, he also knows that contrary testimony will tend to erode that justification. In moving to preempt evidence from subsequent contrary testimony, the speaker is signalling to the hearer that even though the balance of evidence strongly favors p , the evidential situation relating to p is complex, with numerous factors counting both for and against. Others, who may appear knowledgeable and sincere, may believe differently, but they will be wrong. Evidential preemption, then, highlights one part of the total evidence – namely, apparently conflicting testimony from other sources – which will likely be made available to me at a later point, evidence which, if it were considered in isolation, would seem to indicate not- p . If that evidence were subsequently made available to me without forewarning, I would be rationally required to see it as cancelling out my reasons for believing that p . But now that the evidence has been preempted, the subsequent disclosure is neutralized and thereby rendered epistemically moot. I call this preemption by neutralization because it relieves the speaker of the pressure to provide further evidence against q , or even to go on record as denying that q is the case. The neutralization can be achieved simply by acknowledging that others believe that q , at the same time as one asserts that p .

Preemption by neutralization exploits an underlying general principle: in standard cases, whatever it is that justifies my epistemic trust in my testifier's assertion that p also justifies my epistemic trust in my testifier's assessment of the total evidence that bears on p . Variations of this principle can be given for any similarly structured epistemological product-process relation – be it testimony,

¹²See, e.g., Fricker, 1994, 2006; Lackey, 2006.

¹³See Heath and Tversky, 1991.

perception, reasoning, or memory –, where one's belief-formation is reliant on a particular information channel. Consider, for instance, Crispin Wright's development of the idea of a non-evidential epistemic entitlement, in forming an ordinary perceptual belief, to trust that one's sensory apparatus is working well. He writes (2004, p.193): "I cannot *rationally* form the belief that it is currently blowing a gale and snowing outside on the basis of my present visual and auditory experience while being simultaneously agnostic, let alone sceptical, about the credentials of that experience."¹⁴

Building on this, we can argue that maintaining one's epistemic right to believe that p based on another's testimony requires a positive epistemic commitment (i.e., not indifference) to the proposition that one's source is well-positioned to provide testimony that p . This commitment need not, of course, be particularly salient in one's reasoning leading up to the decision to accept the testimony. Nor do we need to model this commitment in terms of a separate belief, with its own proprietary body of evidence bearing on it.¹⁵ But the commitment would show itself nonetheless if, say, I were presented with a forced-choice bet on whether my testifier, whose testimony I have just accepted, is relevantly well-informed (Y/N). In such a case, I should clearly be more inclined to put my money on Y than N.¹⁶ Conversely, if it were brought to my attention that I have reason *not* to trust my testifier's assessment of the total evidence that bears on p , then I should immediately recognize a reason to modify my confidence in my testimonially acquired belief that p .¹⁷

If this is right, then I cannot generally be epistemically positioned so that I can accept my testifier's assertion that p , but remain free to decline the accompanying evidential preemption: the same conditions that would justify me in taking the assertion will also, in the absence of countervailing reasons, justify me in accepting the evidential preemption, insofar as it is essentially just presented to me as an articulation of my testifier's assessment of one specific part of the total evidence that bears on p . That is, the evidential preemption serves to signal to me that one particular bit of evidence bearing on p , which if taken in isolation would seem to render p problematic, has already been taken into account. If I were merely offered testimony that p , I would be bound to take subsequent testimony that q as throwing p into doubt. But if I am offered testimony that p plus a warning that others will say q , then I can be entitled to believe that q is consistent with p . (Why else would my apparently rational and well-meaning testifier nonetheless maintain that p ?) I now have reason to believe that anyone who

¹⁴Wright explores this principle as a way of providing a response to skepticism. But note that similar themes are played out also in other areas of contemporary epistemology, such as debates about epistemic closure (e.g., Sherman and Harman, 2010), the KK-principle (e.g., Greco, 2014), and the rational import of higher-order evidence (e.g., Sliwa and Horowitz, 2015).

¹⁵Wright spends considerable time arguing that one's commitment to the "credentials" of one's sensory experience need not take the form a belief. Following van Fraassen (1980), he proposes instead to model it in terms of "acceptance": rational acceptance of P obtains when "one is warranted in acting on the assumption that P or taking it for granted that P or trusting that P for reasons that do not bear on the likely truth of P" (Wright, 2004, p.177). For a more broadly motivated account of the distinction between belief and acceptance, see Cohen, 1989.

¹⁶Which is not to say that I should put *all* my money on Y. I might, after all, have varying degrees of confidence in different testifiers, even if we restrict our consideration to those whose testimony I would be broadly inclined to accept.

¹⁷Denying this would amount to affirming something very much like a Moorean paradox: that is, it would amount to asserting that it is generally OK for me to hold that I am justified in believing that p on the basis of information provided through a particular channel while purporting to remain neutral (or even skeptical) on the question of whether information travelling along that channel is generally worth trusting. True, some philosophers (e.g., Williamson, 2011; Lasonen-Aarnio, 2014) have argued that in certain cases, there need be nothing intrinsically irrational about believing that p while simultaneously conceding that one's evidence does not support p . Let us agree that such cases of genuine "epistemic akrasia" are possible. But the basic cases of perception and testimony under consideration here don't fit the mould of any of the examples that have taken centre-stage in these debates, such as improbable knowing or misleading higher-order evidence. (See Horowitz (2014) for critical discussion of these examples.)

highlights q as a way to cast doubt on p is simply wrong or misinformed. Accordingly, when that bit of evidence is subsequently disclosed, its epistemic effect has already been neutralized.

This intuitive account of what evidential preemption can accomplish can usefully be supplemented with a somewhat more technical rendering in terms inspired by Bayesian confirmation theory.

Bayesian confirmation theory builds on the important insight that the significance of new evidence can only be determined against the background of the information that we already have in our possession, as reflected in our prior probabilities. In particular, conditionalization requires determining the unconditional probability of new evidence (i.e., (“ $P(E)$ ”). All else being equal, the lower the probability of the evidence (given parameters $\{p, q \dots n\}$), the greater its potential impact on what we should believe (or, to be more precise, the greater its potential impact on our posterior probabilities, i.e., our prior probabilities adjusted in light of the new evidence).¹⁸ By contrast, high-probability evidence is evidence that is predicted by, and therefore compatible with, what we already presume to know, and will therefore not require us to revise our beliefs to any significant degree.¹⁹

Stated in this framework, evidential preemption can be seen as an attempt to adjust an audience’s assignments of probabilities to specific bits of future evidence in such a way as to neutralize their potential significance. If I were merely offered testimony that p , then subsequent testimony that q would constitute low-probability evidence, which would have a potentially significant impact on my confidence in p . By contrast, if I am offered testimony that p plus a warning that others will say q , then subsequent testimony that q constitutes high-probability evidence, which will have minimal (if any) impact on my confidence in p . In effect, I am not learning anything new – not acquiring significant new information – when others say that q . But new information is, essentially, the currency on which beliefs are to be updated. The preempted evidence has thereby been rendered epistemically neutral, insofar as it was fully predicted by my previous probability assignments. It is a moot point that the same evidence, given different probability assignments, would have a very different epistemic impact, counting strongly in favor of not- p . In our case, q ’s compatibility with p is secured by the justification for accepting p in the first place. If I were justified in accepting p on the evidence I had at the time, then I am, all else equal, justified in continuing to maintain p even after the later testimony has been offered. That others will say that q is now, in effect, information that I have already conditionalized on. In this sense, evidential preemption can succeed in altering the audience’s evidential situation in such a way as to materially affect what it will be rational for them to believe at some future time, not just what they will be psychologically disposed to believe.²⁰

¹⁸I am here setting aside the difficult cases where my rational confidence in the original hypothesis is so high that I would have better reasons to dismiss the apparently contrary evidence than I have to dismiss the hypothesis.

¹⁹See, e.g., Bovens and Hartmann, 2003.

²⁰Finally, one might wonder whether this jeopardizes the “commutativity of evidence,” i.e., the idea that, with respect to some body of evidence E , the order in which the individual elements of E was acquired or processed should make no difference to what it is rational to believe on the basis of E (see, e.g., Skyrms, 1986; van Fraassen, 1989; Kelly, 2008; Gardiner, 2014). This raises exceedingly complex issues which have yet to be fully settled in the literature. Commutativity is certainly a feature of “classical” Bayesian conditionalization. But Bayesian conditionalization involves a number of significant idealizations, most importantly, for our present purposes, the idealization that one’s evidence be “certain,” i.e., assigned probability 1. “Jeffrey conditionalization” is the leading framework for rendering Bayesian epistemology relevant to situations where that idealization fails to hold. It remains a matter of dispute whether we should also expect commutativity in situations involving such *uncertain* evidence, as would be the case for testimony (and perception, etc.). One important strand of this discussion turns on whether *apparent* commutativity violations in Jeffrey conditionalization should ultimately be construed as such, or are better understood as situations in which one’s total evidence would be different if the temporal ordering of the evidence were different. For contrasting perspectives on this, see, *inter alia*, Lange, 2000; Wagner, 2002; Weisberg, 2009; Pryor, 2013; Bradley, 2017, ch. 10.4).

3 | PREEMPTION BY SOURCE DISCREDITING

So far, the analysis has focused on cases where the speaker aims to undercut the force of future evidence by (partially) conceding the facts while preemptively *neutralizing* their epistemic significance. These are perhaps the most common cases, and also provide a clear and convenient platform for exploring the epistemological underpinnings of evidential preemption.

But I also believe that evidential preemption can do similar work in a more blunt way, by *discrediting the source* of the future evidence outright. I believe this can shed light on the epistemic situation of people who are blamelessly caught in extremely unfortunate evidential circumstances. In particular, I do not think we can make an honest assessment of the epistemological dimensions of phenomena such as prejudice, conspiracy theories, and echo chambers until we have understood the power of this sort of move.²¹

For an important hint, we can return to the examples from Newt Gingrich and Bill O'Reilly. Both are concerned to preempt claims likely to emerge from the White House. They do so by providing an alternative hypothesis which undermines the credibility of the claims in question. But notice that neither Gingrich nor O'Reilly are particularly concerned to provide evidence for these alternative hypotheses. Nor need they, given the epistemic situation they are in: they know their audiences well, and they know that their audience combines an enormous confidence in them as political authorities with an extreme skepticism toward any pronouncement from the sitting Democratic President.²² Indeed, the mere fact that their alternative accounts purport to unmask the Democratic White House as liars and manipulators is itself sufficient to boost the audience's confidence in their testimony.²³ Crucially, when the White House then subsequently goes on to make those very statements, their testimony is rendered epistemically inert: if anything, the utterance can create an ironic backlash, insofar as the statement can only confirm my original testifier's prediction. That is, the only new information I would gain at that point is that my original testifier was right, as I already had reason to believe he would be.²⁴

It will be tempting to think that this can work only because the audience is suffering from severe epistemic pathologies: they are willing to accept statements offered even by manifest charlatans so long as these statements confirm their bigoted opinion of others. This may be true of these particular cases. But I believe that in other cases, the overall epistemic situation of a hearer may be such as render it quite reasonable for them to accept even a form of evidential preemption which works only by undermining the credibility of the source of the evidence.

For instance, I have argued elsewhere that many instances of prejudiced belief can be well supported by the available evidence, and, to that extent be epistemically justified.²⁵ This is in sharp contrast with more common views which hold that prejudiced belief is always or necessarily the

²¹See Keeley, 1999; Coady, 2007; Begby, 2013; and Nguyen, 2018, for attempts to grapple with these sorts of issues.

²²Consider Barack Obama's humorous quip: "And look, if I watched Fox News, I wouldn't vote for me. I understand. If I were listening to Rush Limbaugh, I'd say 'man ... that's terrible.' Fortunately, I have more diverse sources of information."

²³Donald Trump's "Crooked Hillary" epithet could obviously be seen to follow along these lines.

²⁴It is a good question whether the effects of evidential preemption could be "undone" after the fact. The answer must surely be "yes," but only if the later testifier succeeds in establishing a setting of significant epistemic trust, and is able to tell a sufficiently detailed story supporting her view, explaining why the original testifier would have held (or advocated) the opposing view. But, of course, in attempting this, the later testifier must reckon with the fact that the hearer will be significantly biased against her competence or sincerity. Such bias is arguably never strictly insurmountable. Nonetheless, it should be clear that evidential preemption serves to "up the ante," in the sense that it requires significantly more resources for the later speaker to undo the preemption than it did for the initial speaker to enter it in the first place.

²⁵Begby, 2013, 2018, forthcoming.

result of some sort of epistemic pathology or malfunction: the evidence to counter their prejudiced beliefs is readily available, but is either neglected, discounted, or inappropriately weighted.²⁶ I believe this view fails to take into account the degree to which testimony – in particular, testimony acquired during early childhood and adolescence – can reasonably come to shape people’s cognitive outlooks and to render them essentially impervious to certain kinds of counterevidence. That is to say, in sufficiently warped socio-epistemic environments, people can reasonably come to form depraved beliefs in light of the testimony that is offered to them through education and peer networks. Once these beliefs are lodged in the mind, they can justifiably be maintained even in light of many kinds of counterevidence.

Consider, then, the epistemic situation of someone who has grown up in an enclosed cult-like community deeply committed to a variety of whacky conspiracy theories. While we may have a hard time seeing how anyone could justifiably acquire such beliefs in mature age, the situation is quite different for those who are exposed in a systematic fashion to such theories in early years. After all, it is not hard to find evidence for Chemtrails, for the fabrication of the Moon landing, and so on: one need only look to the skies on a clear day or consult the relevant websites.²⁷ For most of us, of course, such evidence carries very little weight in our overall epistemic assessment of the situation, or it is easily defeated by contrary evidence. But for someone to whom this is the only evidence, moreover evidence imprinted with the authority of peers and teachers in their community, the epistemic situation is significantly different. I take it to be quite clear that they can be justified in forming beliefs that are obviously false – indeed completely outrageous – to the rest of us.

Evidential preemption can play a crucial role in explaining the resilience of such views. For I take it to be a characteristic part of how such views are maintained in social settings that they not only provide the audience with a range of evidence relating directly to p , but that they also seek to preempt contrary evidence that the audience is likely to be confronted with at some point. Here, though, evidential preemption works not by indicating that the evidence is already taken into account, as in the cases we examined above. Instead, it works by directly discrediting the source. We know that we cannot insulate you from contrary evidence forever, so we preempt the future evidence by warning you, for instance, that the liberal media or university professors will tell you that q . But obviously, they will tell you that because they are part of the conspiracy, and so have no credibility on the matter. It is a blunter tool, to be sure, but the effect can be even more sweeping: if I am in an epistemic situation where the testimony of my peers and teachers rationally compels me to believe that p virtually no matter how outrageous p is (which I believe can happen quite easily), then it is hard to say why I should not also at the same time be rationally justified in taking on board their assessment of the credibility of various other sources. When that is done, then any evidence these sources will subsequently offer to me is rendered moot by preemptive discrediting: in fact, when the “liberal media” subsequently confirm the preemption by telling me just that, they are strengthening rather than weakening the evidential support for my belief that p . They are strengthening it, of course, not by providing direct evidence for p , but rather by providing evidence for the credibility of my testimonial source for believing p .²⁸

We may put the point in terms of a distinction between first-order and higher-order evidence, which has recently come to the fore in the epistemology of disagreement: the *epistemic grooming* (as I will

²⁶See, e.g., Fricker, 2007; Arpaly, 2003.

²⁷See Feldman 2009 for an articulation of such a low-threshold view of the nature of evidence.

²⁸See Keeley (1999) for a perceptive analysis of the epistemology of conspiracy theories, one key point of which is their distinctive ability to convert prima facie contrary evidence into corroborating evidence.

call it) that occurs in these contexts provides me not only with first-order evidence to believe a number of propositions; it also preemptively provides me with higher-order evidence about the credibility of a range of sources that would seek to contradict those propositions.²⁹ Transposed into this vocabulary, my thesis is that if I am in an epistemic position where I am rationally compelled to believe the first-order evidence, then I am also in a position where I am epistemically justified in believing the higher-order evidence that travels with it (i.e., these other sources are unreliable because they are beneficiaries of the conspiracy and therefore motivated on non-epistemic grounds to deny these propositions).

These reflections have clear application to a socio-epistemic phenomenon prominently on display in contemporary US public discourse. In a recent and lucid analysis, C. Thi Nguyen has pointed out the difference between “epistemic bubbles” and “echo chambers.” Epistemic bubbles arise from the simple exclusion – inadvertently or no – of certain voices from a discussion. While we don’t ordinarily choose our social circles with a view toward maximizing expected epistemic utility, we nonetheless rely on them for a number of important epistemic functions, such as providing information, confirmation, etc. An epistemic bubble is the non-intended byproduct of this process. As a result, there is relevant information that is not being taken into account, simply because those who are in possession of the information are not given an opportunity to share it. Nonetheless, epistemic bubbles are fragile and can quite easily be “popped.” By contrast, echo chambers are much more resilient structures, where active measures are taken to ensure that the excluded voices remain excluded (Nguyen, 2018, p.6). And as Nguyen goes on to show, evidential preemption, in both forms that I have surveyed here, is a crucial mechanism for echo chamber construction and maintenance.

Echo chambers are rife in US public life today. I doubt that anything I have said provides an epistemic justification (or even excuse) for this fact. There is enough publicly verifiable information available to ensure that the American public at large really *should know better* than to place any significant credence on statements emanating from Donald Trump’s Twitter account. Nonetheless, I maintain that my argument can help shed new light on how we came to be in this position.

Admittedly, my analysis of the epistemic significance of evidential preemption has a whiff of rational reconstruction, and it is important not to lean too much on its explanatory potential as a psychological mechanism by which people form their political beliefs or broader epistemic dispositions “in the wild.” But consider the phenomenon of “fake news.” Drawing on Regina Rini’s recent analysis (Rini, 2017), one might well wonder whether much of what goes on in contemporary US public discourse is better explained by a kind of “epistemic partisanship.” Epistemic partisanship is a matter of assigning “greater credibility to a testifier *because* you know you share a political affiliation with her” (Rini, 2017, p.50). Notably, Rini argues that epistemic partisanship, like evidential preemption, is not intrinsically irrational. But everything has its limits, and our current susceptibility to fake news can be explained by our irrationally assigning too much credibility on such grounds.³⁰ I fully agree that many participants in US public discourse today are probably *so* set in their partisan ways that any rationalizing explanation will ring hollow. Nonetheless, I maintain that evidential preemption can play an

²⁹See, e.g., Feldman, 2009; Kelly, 2010, and Christensen, 2010, for analyses of the interactions between first-order and higher-order evidence. In less favorable contexts, this sort of move might of course backfire spectacularly: if I say, “Roger Penrose will tell you that *p*, but I say *q*,” in the context of a discussion of quantum gravity, a reasonable audience might instantly downgrade the credibility of my testimony, simply because I am signalling my disagreement with a manifestly superior epistemic source.

³⁰Worsnip (2019) objects to Rini’s analysis, citing a general epistemic obligation to “diversify one’s sources.” But arguably, merely exposing oneself to a greater variety of sources is unlikely to serve any epistemic benefit, unless there were also an added rider to remain “openminded” with respect to the likely accuracy of these various sources. But it’s hard to see how this added rider could be consistent with the overarching epistemic requirement of total evidence. For clearly, I *have* reason to trust some sources more than others, even if those reasons, ultimately, turn out to correlate with my partisan affiliations.

important role in the explanation of how this state of affairs might have come about. Consider, specifically, the secondary sense of “fake news” which Rini registers in an addendum (Rini, 2017, p.59fn3): not, that is, the fake news of clickbait stories specifically manufactured for our credulous consumption (e.g., the infamous “pizzagate”), but rather the Trumpian manner of branding wholesale various news organizations as peddlers of fake news. At this point in time, of course, the temporal advantage provided by evidential preemption may no longer be particularly relevant; “fake news” serves as much as a ritual incantation, a call to arms, as an espousal of a superior epistemic vantage.³¹ But at the same time, we may wonder how this situation came about. And here, it does not seem far-fetched to propose that endlessly iterated preemptions by source discrediting has played a significant role. After being subjected to repeated incantations of “the Democrats will tell you this” and “the mainstream media will tell you that,” it is but a short inductive step to conclude that the next statement to come from those quarters will also be fake news.

Admittedly, it is hard to shake the feeling that something has gone wrong here. There’s clearly a sense in which our current predicament is pathological when seen in the context of a larger picture of human flourishing: these people are obviously not leading healthy and prosperous cognitive lives.³² This is certainly a perspective worth considering. But let us return to the question of epistemic justification. It seems clear that from the more circumscribed point of view of an evidence-centered normative epistemology, the question is really only one of how people could non-culpably get themselves into positions where this is a rational stance to take. Once we take into account the fact that they may well grow up in epistemically enclosed (or extremely polarized) communities, where they have been subjected to extensive epistemic grooming, it should be clear how they might.³³ Here, evidential preemption provides an important part of the analysis of how such beliefs might entrench themselves in cognitive systems and come to acquire their distinctive resilience against counterevidence. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that in a suitably warped socio-epistemic environment, evidential preemption can virtually inoculate an audience against future contrary evidence, insofar as any sources that would seek to disclose such evidence would thereby only show themselves to confirm my original beliefs.

4 | ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the cases I have analyzed have a clear flavor of nefarious manipulation, for which the term “epistemic grooming” seems appropriate. As such, it could be thought that though it might, given sub-optimal socio-epistemic circumstances, be rational for us to accept evidential preemption, the move itself is inherently manipulative, and should never form part of the communicative repertoires of well-intentioned people. In this section, I want to draw this thought into doubt.

³¹For a similar perspective, see so far Hannon, 2019.

³²See, e.g., Battaly, 2018, for such a perspective.

³³By contrast, consider Cassam (2016), who purports to offer a virtue-epistemological account of adherence to conspiracy-theories in terms of intellectual character flaws. (E.g., “Because he is gullible, dogmatic, closed-minded, cynical, prejudiced, and so on, he ignores important evidence which bears on his questions, relies on unreliable sources, jumps to conclusions and generally can’t see the wood for the trees. The fact that this is how he goes about his business is a reflection of his intellectual character” (Cassam, 2016, 165). Needless to say, it is the contention of this paper that such an analysis pays insufficient attention to the insidious epistemic mechanisms by which such beliefs often disseminate. In cases where dominant voices in the epistemic community can efficiently leverage resources such as evidential preemption, there may be nothing wrong, *per se*, with the intellectual character of the people who end up as believers. They are responding rationally to the highly constrained epistemic context that they happen to find themselves in.

It is a well-known fact that we are all, in different ways, less than perfectly rational, and that we all suffer a range of epistemic blindspots and weaknesses.³⁴ Where these facts are known, it can be a perfectly reasonable strategy for concerned friends of mine to attempt to mitigate the effects of such vulnerabilities by preempting evidence that I will likely be confronted with at some later point. I take it that this is common in any learning situation. There is nothing nefarious, for instance, about an experienced cardiologist warning a colleague-in-training that relying too much on evidence from echocardiograms in diagnosing heart valve problems is likely to generate a large number of false positives, because varying degrees of backflow of blood can be noted even in perfectly healthy hearts.

More telling, perhaps, are cases where I aim to protect someone against the manipulative strategies of others. For instance, say I have a friend who I know to be epistemically impressionable and prone to conspiracy theories and other forms of quackery. I know that he travels in circles where ill-founded claims about the connection between vaccines and autism are trumpeted as scientific facts. It is perfectly reasonable for me to attempt to preempt that evidence by saying that it all stems from a falsified study. I may not provide further evidence for the claim that the study is bogus, either because I myself am unsure of the details, or because I doubt that such further evidence will be absorbed by my impressionable friend, who may lack basic training in statistics and experimental design. But even so, I rationally trust that the preemption will impact how he eventually approaches the inevitable disclosures, and I feel myself morally justified in deploying this strategy: I am, after all, only trying protect a vulnerable friend from the manipulative epistemic agency of others.

In fact, it seems that both modes of evidential preemption that I have examined in this paper can form part of reasonable people's discourse repertoires. That is, I can opt to concede certain facts while aiming to preemptively neutralize their epistemic significance: "Climate change deniers have begun pointing out that we may be entering a period of increased solar activity, and that this may have something to do with global warming. This is true, but these data are already taken into account in all standard models." Or I could seek to preempt the evidence by discrediting the source outright: "Websites like truthseeker.org will say that the US Government orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. But these guys are just crazy: look, they also argue that Elvis is still alive." Such counter-manipulative strategies, I think, can be in perfectly good ethical order. They show that there is nothing inherently nefarious about the resort to evidential preemption in ordinary human communication.

What may seem true, nonetheless, is that evidential preemption can make for a limited sort of "epistemic paternalism," where a speaker does not simply "offer counsel" to the hearer about what to believe, but takes affirmative steps toward rationally foreclosing certain future epistemic opportunities for him. As such, it might be thought that evidential preemption, even in the best of cases, should raise concerns

³⁴Insights into one's own epistemic limitations is an important motivating ground for many current approaches to social epistemology. In the literature on testimony, for instance, would-be recipients clearly understand that there are a number of things they have a need to know, but which they will never be in a position to know unless they are willing to accept the testimony of others (e.g., facts about history, or facts about one's own childhood). One's appreciation of this predicament must go some way toward explaining why it is ever rational for people to accept testimony as a reason to believe, even though it is in a sense a weaker form of evidence that one might hope to possess in other domains of inquiry (see, e.g., Fricker (2006) for a nice articulation of these points). Similarly, Christensen (e.g., 2007; 2010) shapes his whole approach to the epistemology of disagreement in terms of insights into one's own epistemic limitations, along two distinct dimensions: the fact that one has limited access to evidence, and the fact that one may be unwittingly biased in one's assessment of such evidence as one has. (That there should be this overlap between the literatures on testimony and disagreement really should not be a surprise, insofar as the epistemological problem of disagreement is essentially just the problem of how one should take into account testimony in cases where one already has a reasonably strongly entrenched belief whether *p*.)

about epistemic autonomy. This is certainly not a concern that we should dismiss lightly.³⁵ But I think a number of perspectives coalesce to suggest that it is less of a problem than it might seem initially.

First, we should recognize that whenever we spontaneously offer testimony to anyone, we are in fact “rationally foreclosing certain future epistemic possibilities” for that person. That is, we are presenting them with evidence that will pro-actively shape how they are rationally positioned to respond in future epistemic contexts. Quite simply, testimony provides information that no one is free to simply discard without reason. In other words, evidential preemption is essentially just a starker and more dramatic implementation of what is already going on in any testimonial exchange.

Second, we must recognize that for cognitively finite and highly interdependent creatures such as us, autonomy is a complex notion, and in some cases, the most viable strategies for protecting or enhancing autonomy will see us skirt on the borders of apparent paradox. For instance, it is a well-known fact that although it might seem rational always to keep open as many future possibilities as one can (because one’s desires might change, or because one might come across pertinent information in the meantime), there will be times when rationality does in fact require us to strategically “pre-commit” to a certain course of action, thereby depriving one’s future self of the freedom to make the choice. From the point of view of a certain idealized notion of rationality, such “self-binding” strategies cannot but appear problematic or even paradoxical. But given one’s insight into one’s own cognitive limitations, such strategies can in fact be rationally optimal:³⁶ while it is true that I might be in possession of more information at the later time, I may also foresee that my ability to make correct use of that information will be significantly impaired. A classic example from the practical realm is the person who turns his car keys over to his drinking buddy so as to deprive his future inebriated self of the option of driving home. These reflections transpose readily into the key of epistemic rationality: for instance, there may be sources of political rhetoric that I might rationally refuse to expose myself to, for fear that I might be “swept away.” These are *intra-personal* cases where rationality requires, through insight into one’s cognitive limitations, that one make moves to restrict one’s future options: only a hopelessly idealized theory of rationality that would fail to reflect the significance of such limitations could portray this as in any way undermining our autonomy. What is presently at stake, then, is just whether similar moves applied in *inter-personal* settings are necessarily at odds with autonomy. I think the answer is quite clearly no: in a situation where I am vulnerable to the manipulative agency of others, there is nothing paradoxical about concerned friends of mine initiating protective action precisely with the aim of safeguarding my autonomy.³⁷

But finally, I think it is important to recognize that evidential preemption can be justified, all things considered, even in cases where legitimate concerns about autonomy would remain. It would be justified in the way that impositions on individual autonomy typically are justified, namely by reference to the common good. After all, these people are typically participants in collective decision making processes whose outcomes affect us all. As such, any community has a legitimate interest in exercising a modicum of control over the quality of information available to its constituents. Evidential preemption

³⁵Though see Fricker (2006) for illuminating reflections on the limitations of our ideal of epistemic autonomy.

³⁶For a classic study, see Elster, 1979.

³⁷For these reasons, I believe it is important to distinguish evidential preemption from superficially related phenomena such as “gaslighting” (see, e.g., Abramson, 2014).

provides a means for achieving this, consistent with maintaining due recognition of the right to free speech.³⁸

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has sought to bring philosophical analysis to bear on a widespread but hitherto understudied form of argumentative maneuver which I have dubbed evidential preemption. While evidential preemption may seem like an innocent rhetorical flourish, I have argued that it can actually mask a significant epistemological device: it can materially affect not just how people will be psychologically disposed to respond to your opponent's subsequent assertion that p , but also how it will be epistemically rational for them to respond. In many circumstances, evidential preemption can serve to manipulate an audience's future epistemic situation by neutralizing or altogether undermining evidence that has yet to be disclosed to them. My account does not on its own help distinguish between nefarious and ethically appropriate deployments of evidential preemption. I believe this is as it should be: we expect too much if we expect the norms of epistemology to neatly track the norms of social relations more broadly. Instead, the prevalence of evidential preemption should serve as an important reminder of the degree to which "circumstantial epistemic luck"³⁹ (i.e., the quality of the epistemic situation that one blamelessly happens to find oneself in) plays a crucial role in social epistemology. But meanwhile, getting clear on how evidential preemption works – and why it works – can add an important dimension to ongoing philosophical discussions in social epistemology, in particular to discussions relating to the epistemology of testimony and the ethics of communication.

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³⁸In this way, my analysis may be seen to yield a surprising affinity with Rae Langton's analysis of the phenomenon of illocutionary silencing (see, e.g., Langton, 1993; Hornsby and Langton, 1998). Whereas locutionary silencing corresponds to impositions on free speech more traditionally understood, illocutionary silencing works in a more nefarious manner by manipulating the audience's ability to engage in the proper uptake of the speech act. Nonetheless, our analyses depart on a crucial point: whereas Langton (et al.) appear to believe that illocutionary silencing is inherently problematic, I have argued that evidential preemption can serve a vital and well-justified role in safeguarding an epistemic community against motivated misinformation.

³⁹I borrow the term from Miranda Fricker (2007).

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