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STEREOTYPE THREAT AND ALIENATION

Ana Barandalla

IN THIS ARTICLE, I expand our understanding of the normative weight of stereotype threat and point where next to further that inquiry. My focus is the *realization* of the threat of stereotype threat, a phenomenon that I call *succumbing to stereotype threat*. I show that in a common type of stereotype threat, succumbing to stereotype threat is characterized by a corrupt relation of the individual to herself. That baneful relation is, I argue, what stereotype threat is a threat of. We also learn that that relation is facilitated by the individual's social environment, in which the individual is an active participant. The individual, then, contributes to the forces that set her against herself. That social dimension is the area that stands in need of further investigation. The analytic resources that help me to that point are not, on their own, well equipped to explore that social terrain, but they do suggest an apt tool for it: the notion of *alienation* as understood by Karl Marx. I argue that the corrupt relation of the individual to herself at the heart of succumbing to stereotype threat, complete with the role that the individual's social environment—including the individual's own input—plays in that relation, is captured in the notion of alienation. That notion is part of a tradition well honed in the ways in which one's social environment mediates one's relation to oneself; hence, it is suitably placed to examine the social dimension of stereotype threat. The notion of alienation, then, lends a name to the wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat and thus to the threat of stereotype threat, and it has the credentials to further enhance our understanding of those phenomena.

Stereotype threat is the threat you experience at the prospect of confirming a negative stereotype that applies to you and that is widely held in your community.[1] The threatening prospect might be that of confirming the stereotype to yourself, to others, or both.[2] The experience of stereotype threat is characterized by a range of cognitive and emotional upheavals, including fear and

1 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 120–21; Nguyen and Ryan, "Does Stereotype Threat Affect Test Performance of Minorities and Women?" 1314–34. Steele's book is the *locus classicus* on stereotype threat for lay readers.

2 Shapiro et al., "Stereotype Threat," 87–105. See also Blum, "The Too Minimal Political, Moral, and Civic Dimension of Claude Steele's 'Stereotype Threat' Paradigm."

anxiety, preoccupation to defeat the stereotype, pressure on your self-worth and sense of self, decreased self-confidence, and self-doubt.[3] The outcome is often a performance well below your best.[4]

Stereotype threat was first identified by psychologists, notably Claude Steele and colleagues, but its normative import has attracted the interest of philosophers.[5] The bulk of philosophers' concern has been the consequences of stereotype threat, such as the role of stereotype threat in shaping the demographics in different spheres of social life, not least professional philosophy.[6] More recently, some authors have called for attention to be directed to additional normative strands. Ron Mallon emphasizes the importance of discussing stereotype threat in terms that resonate with individuals' own experiences of stereotype threat.[7] Stacy Goguen urges us to acknowledge the ways in which stereotype threat might compromise one's own sense of worth as a human being.[8] And Lawrence Blum advocates conceiving of stereotype threat in ways that acknowledge the social structures in which stereotypes are maintained.[9]

My own interest lies in yet another normative aspect of stereotype threat, but it is an offshoot of my study that Mallon's, Goguen's, and Blum's requests go some way to being met. My interest is in the inner normative structure of stereotype threat itself, quite apart from its consequences. I take on a specific and commonplace type of stereotype threat—one comprising cases in which (1) the threat pertains to the prospect of confirming the stereotype at least to yourself; and (2) the stereotype at play asserts that your epistemic competence is poor—that people belonging to your group are simple or stupid. These two features combine to form a first-person iteration of Sally Haslanger's "epistemic objectification," and so we might say that the threat in those cases of stereotype threat is the threat of epistemic *self*-objectification.[10] My specific concern is the

3 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 118–21, 124.

4 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 124.

5 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*.

6 Alfano, "Stereotype Threat and Intellectual Virtue"; Antony, "Different Voices or Perfect Storm"; Beebee, "Women and Deviance in Philosophy"; McKinnon, "Stereotype Threat and Attributional Ambiguity for Trans Women"; Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy"; and Schouten, "The Stereotype Threat Hypothesis."

7 Mallon, "Stereotype Threat and Persons."

8 Goguen, "Stereotype Threat, Epistemic Injustice, and Rationality" and "Expanding Our Picture of Stereotype Threat." Goguen, in particular, is interested in some of the same issues I pursue here.

9 Blum, "The Too Minimal Political, Moral, and Civic Dimension of Claude Steele's 'Stereotype Threat' Paradigm."

10 Haslanger, "Objectivity, Epistemic Objectification, and Oppression, 280."

realization of that threat—being overpowered by stereotype threat and coming to accept that the stereotype is true of you.[11] I call that phenomenon *succumbing to stereotype threat*. So if in Steele's terms, stereotype threat involves "arguing against the stereotype," succumbing to stereotype threat is the phenomenon of losing that argument, of being defeated by the stereotype and thus coming to accept that in virtue of belonging to the group to which the stereotype is attached, you do indeed possess the negative traits assigned to you.[12]

Viewed this way, succumbing to stereotype threat is the *formal* threat of stereotype threat. To arrive at a *substantive* picture of the threat of stereotype threat, I seek to make sense of the dense normative scene there presented. Because I treat succumbing to stereotype threat as fundamentally an epistemic phenomenon, I look to accounts of epistemic normativity for help. I find that none of the mainstream accounts—the norm truth of belief, the rationality norm of belief, virtue epistemology—can give us the understanding we seek because none can produce an integrated picture of the phenomenon's normative features. A constructivist account, in contrast, can. It produces a picture in which succumbing to stereotype threat is an instance of a perverse relation of the individual to herself, set in an environment in which the individual is herself participant. This relation, with those features, is, I argue, an instance of alienation as understood by Marx. At least in the commonplace type of cases under consideration, then, the substantive threat of stereotype threat is alienation.

My discussion makes some strides towards answering Goguen's, Blum's, and Mallon's calls: it lays bare the way in which stereotype threat can wreck one's sense of self; it pays heed to the complicated relationship between the individual and the forces that maintain the stereotypes that assail her; and because it recognizes the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat as integral to it, much of the description of the phenomenon is couched in terms recognizable to the individual. But my discussion also adds to Blum's plead in particular. Our foray into the social dimension of succumbing to stereotype threat opens up a broad view of the social structures that maintain stereotypes and of the role of individuals, including stereotyped individuals, in those structures. It is clear that no full understanding of the normative profile of stereotype threat is possible without a finer-grain grasp of that setting. I end this article with a proposal that the notion of alienation is apposite to lead us into that further research. I begin with a fuller presentation both of stereotype threat and of succumbing to stereotype threat.

11 I use 'accept' in a nonfactive sense.

12 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 123.

I

The conditions in which stereotype threat occurs vary to some extent, but the archetypal setting is this: you are performing or are about to perform a testing activity; you are aware of belonging to a social group stereotyped as being bad at that activity; performing well in that activity is important to you.[13] It helps our discussion to have an example at hand. Suppose that your society draws a stark line between those born in March and those born in any other month of the year. Having a birthday in March or not is considered one of an individual's most important features, and from cradle to grave, people's lives are profoundly shaped by whether they are thought to have been born in March or not. Those born in March are known as "Marchers." There is a well-developed, well-entrenched stereotype attached to Marchers. It includes the notion that, unlike non-Marchers, Marchers are not good thinkers. They are thought to be weak creatures who at the slightest cognitive strain, collapse into a heap of emotions and cannot string a thought together.

You are a Marcher and are about to give a lecture. Doing a good job of it is important to you: you are presenting a cherished project, and setting your ideas forth publicly is indispensable for establishing yourself in your profession. As you are introduced to your audience, your being a Marcher is variously salient: you are spoken to and about in a manner reserved for Marchers, you display the demeanor expected of Marchers, and you are groomed and garbed as standards for Marchers demand. You look, behave, and are treated like a Marcher and are acutely aware of it. With it, the idea that Marchers are thought not to be good thinkers looms large in your mind and, you expect, in your audience's. As these thoughts gain shape, pressure in your self-confidence builds up. Soon, cracks begin to appear: What if you have been kidding yourself about your capacity to do this and are now about to expose yourself as a phony, with all these eyes on you? A surge of anxiety attends, and the besieging thoughts gather potency: Maybe there is a good reason why Marchers are thought not to be made for this kind of thing? Your blood pressure and heart rate rise sharply, making it harder to stay focused and composed.[14] Instead of readying yourself for your talk—rehearsing your main points, owning your space, acknowledging your audience—you strain every sinew to defeat the thought that the stereotype might be true and to assuage the creeping anxiety.[15] You are experiencing stereotype threat.

13 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 126; and Nguyen and Ryan, "Does Stereotype Threat Affect Test Performance of Minorities and Women?" 1315.

14 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 119, 121.

15 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 111, 123, 126.

II

The situation might then unfold broadly in one of three different ways. In the first, you somehow succeed in defeating the stereotype: you regain your confidence, establish a good rapport with your audience, and do great. In the second, you wrestle with the stereotype for the duration of your talk: you neither get on top of it nor are quite beaten by it. Your performance is hampered, but you are not left thinking that you are a failure. In the third, you succumb to stereotype threat: you are crushed by the force of stereotype threat and resign yourself to the thought that you cannot do this because you are a Marcher. This last is the outcome that stereotype threat is geared to bringing about. Let us see how.

The specific threat in our example is that, in virtue of being a Marcher, you are not a good thinker, that you are intellectually weak and easily overcome by emotion. Now, in suffering from stereotype threat, you are experiencing strong emotions—fear and anxiety—and they are interfering with your thinking. *We* know that these are manifestations of stereotype threat, but they are also what the stereotype anticipates. Of course, the stereotype anticipates those upheavals as part and parcel of your being a Marcher, while under stereotype threat, you experience them regardless of whether the category of Marchers even exists in its presumed ontological footing. But your experience of those disruptions is not sensitive to their provenance. And even if you are schooled about the phenomenon of stereotype threat, and you are also aware that you are currently under its spell, you might well remain only too sensitive to the possibility that these symptoms are overdetermined, that they are manifestations both of stereotype threat and of your being a Marcher.[16]

Furthermore, because you are eager to defeat the stereotype, your sensitivity to pertinent evidence heightens.[17] You look around and find your environment saturated with evidence in alignment with the stereotype: by far the majority of your audience are non-Marchers, as are most of the authors whose work you engage with; the walls of the hosting room are decorated with portraits of non-Marchers—their non-Marchness and sage gazes all of a piece; the room itself is named after a non-Marcher, and so is the building that houses it. The thinking prowess of non-Marchers is everywhere hailed and displayed, whereas, if only by dint of omission, the opposite is promulgated about Marchers.

In the midst of all that, support for the stereotype piles up, and the possibility of defeating it recedes. Intensely alive to that fact, your anxiety takes another jump, further interfering with your cognitive activity and consuming

16 Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Women in Philosophy," 46–47.

17 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 124.

its resources. Your performance is suffering badly now; you are stumbling upon your thoughts and your delivery. Things are increasingly turning out just as the stereotype predicts, and your resistance is ever more futile. There comes a point when the evidence seems overwhelming, and there is only one reasonable conclusion: the stereotype is right—you are a lousy thinker and an emotional mess.[18] You lose the argument. You succumb to stereotype threat.

The force of stereotype threat, then, is epistemically self-fulfilling: it threatens you with the prospect that the stereotype is right, and it primes you to collect all and any evidence for it while generating a steady supply of that evidence. In that light, succumbing to stereotype threat is the natural terminus of stereotype threat. And the struggle in stereotype threat—the struggle against the prospect that the stereotype is true—is a struggle against succumbing to stereotype threat. In this sense, then, succumbing to stereotype threat is the *formal* threat of stereotype threat.

Let us now turn to analyzing the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat. This tells us what the substantive threat of stereotype threat is, as well as what it amounts to.

III

Succumbing to stereotype threat is marked by the acceptance of a belief—in our case, the belief that in virtue of being a Marcher, your epistemic competence is poor. For ease, let us refer to it as the *core belief* of succumbing to stereotype threat. Given the pivotal role of this belief, I approach succumbing to stereotype threat as an epistemic phenomenon. And because our concern is normative, to help make sense of that phenomenon, I look to accounts of epistemic normativity.

In addition to the core belief, succumbing to stereotype threat exhibits a range of other normative features. One of them is your own role in it. The process leading up to and of finally succumbing to stereotype threat involves agential input if any epistemic activity does. You *guide* your deliberation this way and that, you *try* to refute the stereotype, you *persist* in that effort, you finally *give in*—you *accept* the proposition that the stereotype is right and your epistemic competence is poor. Another normative feature is a sense—vague for now—that you are somehow a victim, that in succumbing to stereotype threat, you are in some way wronged or that a harm has been done to you that you neither deserve nor consent to. Finally, there is the phenomenology of

18 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 125–26.

succumbing to stereotype threat.[19] This has not been part of my exposition, so let me fill that gap now. To do so, I draw both on psychological studies and on the relation between stereotype threat and succumbing to stereotype threat.

Social psychologist Gordon Allport finds that coming to accept negative stereotypes about oneself provokes "low self-esteem, low expectations, low motivation, self-doubt, and the like."[20] Victoria Valian, another psychologist, remarks that "being told that the group to which we belong is deficient in some area … is a threat to self-esteem."[21] Succumbing to stereotype threat involves both those things: through the stereotype of Marchers, your society tells you that the group to which you belong is deficient in epistemic competence; the stereotype of Marchers is therefore a negative stereotype, and it is one that, in succumbing to stereotype threat, you come to accept. We would expect, then, that succumbing to stereotype threat is accompanied by low self-esteem, low expectations, low motivation, and self-doubt.[22]

Reflection on the relation between stereotype threat and succumbing to stereotype threat delivers a similar view. We have seen that the lead-up to succumbing to stereotype threat just is the struggle that is the hallmark of stereotype threat. We have also seen that this struggle is driven by your feeling threatened at the prospect of the stereotype being correct: you are fearful and anxious about it because your self-value is at stake. This is why stereotype threat bites harder the more you care.[23] Given that in succumbing to stereotype threat you take the object of those fears and anxieties to be confirmed, we would expect the feelings of stereotype threat to crystalize into feelings of dejection, low self-esteem, and self-doubt—just as the psychologists tell us.

The nature of those ills—particularly low self-esteem—deserves attention. Anna Bortolan, following Matthew Ratcliffe, explicates self-esteem as an all-enveloping sense of one's place in one's environment, a sense that underpins one's meaningful engagement with the world.[24] *Lack* of self-esteem, then, must involve a sense of *not* having a place in the world, of your interactions with the world

19 Throughout, what I mean by 'phenomenology' and its cognates is the character of experience rather than the philosophical discipline. My thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to make this explicit.

20 Quoted in Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 46.

21 Valian, *Why So Slow?* 152.

22 The claims in this paragraph allow for the possibility of exceptions. Where that is the case, the unfolding discussion would not apply. My thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

23 Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*, 126.

24 Bortolan, "Self-Esteem and Ethics." See Ratcliffe, "Existential Feeling and Narrative."

being devoid of meaning.[25] If we assume that integral to your sense of self is a sense of how you relate to your environment and that the exercise of your agency is a matter of engaging with the world in ways that are meaningful to you, Bortolan's analysis indicates that lack of self-esteem flattens your sense of self and thus diminishes your agency.[26]

The phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat, then, presents a rich normative terrain: it features a core belief that bears your agential input, yet you are also a victim, and it burdens you with a crippling phenomenology. The attempt to make sense of succumbing to stereotype threat is an attempt to better understand that terrain, to illuminate those normative features, and to see why they should cluster together. To this end, let us summon the mainstream accounts of epistemic normativity, beginning with the truth norm of belief.

IV

The truth norm of belief maintains that the fundamental epistemic norm is that beliefs be true.[27] Accordingly, the pressing normative question concerning the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat is: Is it or is it not the case that in virtue of being a Marcher, your epistemic competence is poor? I am going to stipulate that the answer is that it is not.[28] On that basis, the truth norm of belief tells us that the fundamental wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat is that the core belief is false. From this it follows that since you are agentially involved in coming to accept the core belief, the wrong in succumbing to stereotype threat is *your* wrong, for you have brought it about. And that too is what you are a victim of: your own epistemic turpitude.

As regards the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, the truth norm of belief does not have much to say. That is because the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat arises in a relation between the individual and her beliefs, while the main concern of the truth norm of belief is the relation between the content of a belief and its truth conditions—a relation that is phenomenologically inert. The phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, then, must be regarded as a psychological matter, not an epistemological one. Any epistemological interest must be limited to whether it helps or hinders meeting the norm of truth going forward. But this is a matter

25 Bortolan, "Self-Esteem and Ethics," 6.

26 Bagnoli, "Moral Constructivism"; and Velleman, *How We Get Along*.

27 McHugh, "The Truth Norm of Belief."

28 It would be harsh to regard this stipulation as creating a paradox: one false belief a poor epistemic agent doest not make. See also Blum, "The Too Minimal Political, Moral, and Civic Dimension of Claude Steele's 'Stereotype Threat' Paradigm," 153.

of the consequences of the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, so not germane to our brief, which is confined to the nature of succumbing to stereotype threat as part of the inner normative structure of stereotype threat.

I conclude that the truth norm of belief does a poor job of making sense of the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat. It overlooks the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, and it passes a troubling indictment on you, rendering you blamable for succumbing to stereotype threat and thus for the situation in which you are a victim. To be sure, this account might well elicit our agreement on finding the falsehood of the core belief an important normative feature. But we might shrink from regarding it as the fundamental wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat. Were we to witness someone succumb to stereotype threat, I doubt our main concern for her would be that she has acquired a false belief. I expect we would think there is something more at play. But this account of epistemic normativity is devoid of resources to tell us what.

V

Let us next look to the reason norm of belief. This norm commands that beliefs stand in rational relations to other beliefs, regardless of their truth value.[29] On this view, the foremost normative question about succumbing to stereotype threat is whether the core belief stands in a rational relation to the beliefs upon which it is based.

As presented in our example, it does. You pick up facts that you take to have a bearing on the truth of the stereotype, you strive for consistency, and finally you accept the fateful belief precisely because of its rational pull—because that is where the weight of the evidence and of the relevant considerations fall. Granted that much of what you take as evidence for the truth of the stereotype are in fact manifestations of stereotype threat. But we can have no rational quarrel with that because as far as your experience of those manifestations of stereotype threat is concerned, and hence as far as your epistemic grasp of them goes, they are indistinguishable from manifestations of the stereotype. And the contextual considerations and additional evidence lean heavily on interpreting those manifestations of stereotype threat as manifestations of the stereotype. Under the rationality norm of belief, then, the core belief of succumbing to stereotype threat is unblemished. There is nothing fundamentally wrong in succumbing to stereotype threat.

This renders your agential involvement as nothing but praiseworthy. No danger of blaming the victim here. Indeed, since this framework does not pick

29 See, e.g., Zangwill, "The Normativity of the Mental."

up any wrong, the idea that you are somehow a victim seems confused. The phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat too is puzzling. Not that we would learn much about it if it were not thus seen anyway. Since the rationality norm of belief is concerned with relations between the content of different beliefs rather than between beliefs and the individual whose beliefs they are, it too would be silent on why succumbing to stereotype threat should have the phenomenology it has. Once again, that phenomenology is seen as a psychological issue, and any epistemological interest rests on its consequences (e.g., whether it reduces your ability to subsequently strike a rational balance between beliefs), but that, again, strays from our remit—namely, finding out how and why the normative features of succumbing to stereotype threat fit together.

I conclude that the rationality norm of belief is ill equipped to deliver the understanding of succumbing to stereotype threat we seek. We might sympathize with its verdict that in succumbing to stereotype threat (in accepting the core belief), you do nothing wrong, that your conduct there is justified. But the overall assessment that nothing fundamental is wrong in succumbing to stereotype threat surely jars. Furthermore, rather than illuminating any sense in which in succumbing to stereotype threat you might be said to be a victim, this view renders it a mystery, as it does the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, about which it would be quiet anyway. Let us move on.

VI

Next up is virtue epistemology. Virtue epistemology focuses on the relation between an agent, on the one hand, and her beliefs and general epistemic activity, on the other. Here, the fundamental normative epistemic standard is the expression of intellectual virtues.[30] Beliefs and epistemic activity generally are right to the extent that they express epistemic virtues and wrong to the extent that they express epistemic vices. As for what counts as epistemic virtue, virtue epistemology is divided into two contrasting camps: *reliabilists* and *responsibilists*. Reliabilists hold that the central characteristic of epistemic virtues is their connection to truth, while responsibilists maintain that epistemic virtues are distinctive for being constitutive, or expressive, of epistemic flourishing. Both camps characterize epistemic vices as epistemic attitudes that inhibit the virtues. For both reliabilists and responsibilists, typical examples of epistemic virtues include open-mindedness, fairness, humility, and attentiveness. Examples of epistemic vices include stubbornness, arrogance, and narrow-mindedness.

30 Battaly, "Virtue Epistemology," 640.

In this framework, the key question for us is whether your coming to accept the core belief of succumbing to stereotype threat is expressive of epistemic virtues or of epistemic vices. On the face of it, it looks like the virtues are in charge. You initially respond to the dreaded proposition with resistance—that is, the proposition that the stereotype is right and your epistemic competence is poor. But that resistance is born out of judiciousness, not obstinacy: it would be reckless not to demand high levels of certainty for a proposition that carries such dire implications. Throughout, you are resolute in following the evidence, you diligently take it on board, and when you deem it incontestable, you have the courage and humility to admit defeat and accept the conclusion, even as it comes as a body blow.

On the strength of that description, we might be tempted to rate your coming to accept the core belief as a model exercise of intellectual virtues. However, that appraisal would satisfy neither reliablists nor responsibilists. Reliabilists would point out that you arrive not at a true belief but at a false one. Responsibilists would decry that far from epistemic flourishing, succumbing to stereotype threat presents us with a constellation of pathologies, most notably those comprised in its phenomenology. Your coming to accept the core belief therefore cannot be approved by either camp of virtue epistemology. Presumably, their verdict would be that even if what we see in your accepting the core belief is a virtuous process, it is not virtuous *enough*. In this case, the fundamental wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat is wanting in epistemic virtue.

This returns us to some of the issues we encountered with the truth norm of belief. Since you are agentially involved in coming to accept the core belief, any failure to exercise the virtues is *your* failure. The fundamental wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat is therefore *your* wrong. And, again, you are a victim of your own virtue deficiency, and you are to blame for it.

As for the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, virtue epistemology might seem to have the edge over the truth and the rationality norms of belief. This is due to two key tenets held by responsibilists in particular. The first is that you are responsible for your epistemic virtues.[31] The second is that epistemic virtues are profoundly important for the individual: they are "properties of the soul"—that is, properties that are "most deeply constitutive of herself," thus "vitally connected with a person's identity."[32] Suppose you believe in those two tenets. Suppose too that you regard your epistemic competence as reflective of your epistemic virtues. Accepting the core belief is tantamount to accepting that you have failed to develop your virtues and thus that you have

31 Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 125.

32 Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, 104, 135, 125.

failed to cultivate deep and important aspects of yourself. This kind of self-directed blame about something so critical as the kind of person you are might well carry the phenomenology we observe in succumbing to stereotype threat: low expectations, low motivation, self-doubt, low self-esteem.

However, this attempt to account for the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat levels yet another charge at you. The core belief makes a claim about your nature in being a Marcher. That is not a claim about you in any sense for which you are responsible. You cannot do anything about being a Marcher, and you cannot do anything about the nature of Marchers. Any self-directed blame about your epistemic competence in virtue of your being a Marcher is therefore misplaced. This would be denounced by both reliabilists and responsibilists: the former would point out that the belief that you are responsible for your epistemic status is false, the latter that the engendered phenomenology is far from an instance of flourishing.

All in all, virtue epistemology still falls short of providing a unified account of the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat. It rules—improbably, I suggest—that your succumbing to stereotype threat is a manifestation of insufficient virtue on your part and that you are a victim of that virtue deficiency; it can explain the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat only by imputing a further failing to you; and you are to blame for it all.

VII

I next consider constructivism. There is not a full-fledged constructivist account of epistemic normativity per se, so I shall develop one as we go along, drawing mostly on Christine Korsgaard's work. On constructivism, normativity arises in a relation in which the individual stands to herself. As such, this relation sets the standards of correctness for what you do. On Korsgaard's constructivism, that relation is one of authority.[33] Thus, what you do is right or wrong depending on whether it is an exercise of your authority to yourself or not. The critical question for us, then, is: Do you, in coming to accept the core belief and thereby succumbing to stereotype threat, exercise your own authority to yourself, or not?

Before we can address that question, we need to see what your exercise of your authority to yourself looks like; and before we can do that, we need a clearer picture of the sense in which you are an authority to yourself. So let us start there. You are an authority to yourself in the sense that only you can decide what to do. This springs from the dichotomous structure of the self, comprising a passive part and an active part. Very roughly, the passive part is where

33 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* and *Self-Constitution*.

phenomena are visited upon you, while the active part encompasses what you do—that is, it encompasses the phenomena with which you identify.[34] The passive part presents you with impulses to do or to believe something or other; the active part decides whether to do as per those impulses.[35]

For example, a scene in front of you might prompt you to believe that a tree has been felled; or, another example, you may find yourself pining for a chocolate truffle in the kitchen. Upon becoming aware of the impulse to believe that a tree has been felled or of the impulse to have the chocolate truffle, you face the question of whether to do as per those impulses or not: whether to settle on the belief that the tree has been felled, whether to have the truffle. Let us call this *the question of what to do*. On this view, the posing of the question of what to do is something with which you identify; it is something where you are active. This question could not be answered by the passive part of you. Any answer proposed by the passive part would be met with a corresponding question of whether to do as per *that* proposal.[36] Only what counts as you, only where you are active, can answer the question of what to do.[37]

According to Korsgaard, the necessity that your question of what to do be answered only by you *is just what normativity is*.[38] Any other normative commitment, any other normative claim on you, is but an elaboration of this relation. That renders that need—the need that you answer your question of what to do—as the fundamental requirement to which you are subject. It thus sets the standards of correctness for what you do: whatever you do, your answer to the question of what to do must be authored by yourself. That, then, is the sense in which you are an authority to yourself. Let us now see what the exercise of that authority looks like—what it is for you to be the author of the answer to your question of what to do.[39]

We have seen that what counts as *you* is that with which you identify, the active part of you. Korsgaard tells us both (1) that the active part of you is reflection and (2) that you identify with what you find "expressive, or representative, of yourself"—that is, what reflects your values, including their ordering.[40] (Henceforth, when I talk about values, I include their ordering, unless

34 Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason," 23.

35 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93.

36 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 93.

37 Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 72, and *The Sources of Normativity*, 100.

38 Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 2–4, and *The Sources of Normativity*, 103–4.

39 This is a compressed interpretation of Korsgaard's discussion about practical identities. See Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 100–107, 236, *Self-Constitution*, 20–26, and "The Activity of Reason," 23.

40 Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution*, 75, and *The Sources of Normativity*, 100.

otherwise stated.) Taken together, those statements tell us that you are the author of the answer to the question of what to do when you reach that answer through a deliberative process that reflects your values.

The exercise of your authority to yourself, then, depends on what your values are; and what your values are is a contingent matter but for one: your value of yourself as the author of the answer to the question of what to do. On Korsgaard's account, that value is both necessary and fundamental.[41] It is *necessary* for your agency because it is the value that sets you off in deliberation. And it is *fundamental* because it is what bestows your other, contingent values their practical status: you are required to reflect your values in your answers to the question of what to do *because* you are required to be the author of that answer. Whatever contingent values you have, your answer to the question of what to do counts as expressing your authority to yourself only if it reflects the primacy of your self-value as the author of the answer to that question—in other words, only if it reflects the primacy of your authority to yourself.

This picture invites a reformulation of our central question. Initially we asked whether in coming to accept the core belief and thus succumbing to stereotype threat, you express your authority to yourself. We can now see that that amounts to asking whether in coming to accept the core belief and thus succumbing to stereotype threat, you reflect the supreme value of your authority to yourself.

To address that question, we need a fuller picture of your self-value as the author of the answer to the *epistemic* question of what to do—the question of what to believe. Its roots, according to Korsgaard, are in your self-value as the author of the answer to the *practical* question of what to do.[42] Let us begin there. In conceiving of yourself as the author of the answer to your practical question of what to do, you take yourself to be able to guide your practical engagement with the world by that answer.[43] That requires that your conception of the world be unified—that it present the various things in the world and their relations in a way that you can trace and establish, particularly their logical, spatiotemporal, and causal relations.[44] For example, if you decide to cross the road, you must presuppose a grasp of how things like the breadth of the road, the width and pace of your gait, the speed of the oncoming traffic, relate to each other.

41 Cf. Street, "Coming to Terms with Contingency."

42 Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason."

43 Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason," 34. See also Taylor, "Rationality."

44 Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason," 34.

But this conception of the world does not come to you already formed. As we saw earlier, you experience impulses to believe this or that, and you then have to decide whether or not to do as those impulses prompt you to. Korsgaard sees this space between the potential ground for a belief and the belief itself as one that "presents us with both the possibility and the necessity of exerting a kind of control over our beliefs. . . . We can actively participate in giving shape . . . to the conception of the world in light of which we act."[45] In other words, when we ask the epistemic variant of the question of what to do, we set ourselves the task of producing a conception of the world "in light of which we can act," and a conception of the world in light of which we can act is a unified conception of the world.

Viewed that way, the function of epistemic deliberation is to build a unified conception of the world. And so when presented with the impulse to believe that *p*, your decision of whether to believe that *p* or not must come down to whether your picture of the things in the world and their relations makes more sense to you—i.e., is more unified—with the belief that *p* than without it.[46] Finding that unity is a matter of striking a reflective epistemic equilibrium amongst the relevant items of your epistemic economy.[47] Those items include, crucially, though not exclusively, the belief that *p* or its absence or negation, the considerations that lead you to countenance whether *p* in the first place, your preexisting beliefs, and any new beliefs you garner along the way.

Your self-conception as the author of the answer to the epistemic question of what to do is, then, more specifically a self-conception as the author of your unified conception of the world. Therefore, you exercise your authority to yourself in your answer to the epistemic question of what to do when that answer manifests the primacy of your self-value as the author of your unified conception of the world.

A familiar type of example serves to illustrate that claim. Suppose you have been informed by the police that your daughter's fingerprints have been found all over a crime scene, and she alone has access to the site. They put it to you that she is guilty, but you resist that idea. In one version of this story, you are sure

45 Korsgaard, "The Activity of Reason," 32.

46 'Without the belief that *p*' is meant to encompass both the explicit rejection of the proposition in question (as when one believes that it is not the case that January is a rainy month in Baghdad) and the absence of a belief—either positive or negative—about that proposition altogether (as when one's conception the world does not include a belief about whether January is a rainy month in Baghdad).

47 See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls uses the notion of *reflective equilibrium* in relation to moral judgments, but it describes aptly the give and take involved in the acceptance or rejection of a proposition too.

that you heard your daughter's footsteps in her bedroom at around the time of the crime, and you remember that she left her handbag (where the keys to the site would have been) on the train a couple of weeks ago. These thoughts are not in equilibrium with the proposition that your daughter is guilty. Your stance is that for as long as that lack of balance remains, you withhold acceptance of the proposition that your daughter is guilty. In another version of the story, you have always passionately and defiantly maintained that your daughter is an ace young woman, a testament to your excellent parenting skills, and you will be damned if a bunch of uniformed nobodies were to challenge that. You *dismiss* the information conveyed to you by the police and reject the belief that your daughter is guilty.[48]

In the first version, you reach your conclusion in pursuit of a unified conception of the world, while in the second, you do it in pursuit of certain comforts. In the first version, your deliberation reflects your values and their ordering; you identify with it. In the second version, it does not, and so you cannot identify with it, not fully anyway.[49] That, then, is what it looks like to produce an answer to the epistemic question of what to do that reflects the supremacy of your self-value as the author of your unified conception of the world. We are now ready to look at whether in coming to accept the core belief of succumbing to stereotype threat, you do reflect that value.

VIII

When looking to see whether in coming to accept the core belief you might reflect the supreme value of yourself as the author of your unified conception of the world, we look to see whether you might come to accept the core belief on the basis that doing so best produces a unified conception of the world.

We have seen that your pursuit of unity in your conception of the world involves striving for equilibrium in your epistemic economy, with the most salient elements including: the proposition in question (or its absence or negation); the considerations that led you to entertain it as a possible proposition to believe; your preexisting beliefs; and the new beliefs you beget along the way. Among your preexisting beliefs, some exert greater gravitational pull than others. Some of the factors contributing to that extra pull might be spurious

48 Bagnoli uses a similar example to discuss self-deception, where the agent is also understood to be an authority to herself ("Self-Deception and Agential Authority").

49 This of course touches upon the question of the extent to which a decision must reflect your values for it to count as yours and the extent to which it must not for it to count as a wrong decision. I cannot enter this debate here. For Korsgaard's own position, see *Self-Constitution*, ch. 8.

(comfort, seduction), but others might be lawful—that is, they might spring from your commitment to author a unified conception of the world. Among the possible lawful factors are (1) how reliable you take the sources of the given beliefs to be and (2) the degree of integration of those beliefs within your epistemic landscape—that is, how much support those beliefs lend to and receive from your conception of the world at large.

Stereotypes with the ubiquity and significance of the stereotype of Marchers score high on those two fronts. Those who introduce, reiterate, and enforce those stereotypes to you are bound to include people of authority to you, such as your parents and wider family, their social milieu, your teachers, and persons of high social standing. Almost by definition, you will have regarded these sources as reliable. And those stereotypes are reflected explicitly and implicitly in local mores, received wisdom, hermeneutic resources, social practices, cultural expressions, and so on, all of which come to form and furnish your epistemic landscape just in the process of growing up and becoming a member of your community. By the time you reach epistemic maturity, those stereotypes are well rooted in your conception of the world, supporting and being supported by extensive networks of beliefs and ways of going about in your surroundings. Stereotypes such as that of Marchers, then, come with a layer of credibility that might lawfully wield considerable force when calibrating reflective epistemic equilibrium.

Consider too the beliefs that you collect as you strive for that equilibrium. Many of them ensue from the epistemically self-fulfilling tendency of stereotype threat (see section 1 above)—beliefs resulting from your being primed to taking evidence generated by stereotype threat as evidence for the truth of the stereotype. These beliefs, we can now see, are not only fueled by stereotype threat; they fit hand in glove with the stereotypes that populate your existing epistemic landscape. That, in turn, reinforces those stereotypes, thus increasing their weight in the attainment of any epistemic equilibrium.

All in all, your epistemic economy is configured towards accepting propositions that aver the truth of the stereotype. And so it is perfectly possible that the idea comprised in the core belief—that in being a Marcher your epistemic competence is poor—better contributes to a unified conception of the world than its absence or negation. If it is on this basis that you come to accept the core belief, then you succumb to stereotype threat in a manner that reflects the preeminence of your self-value as the author of the answer to the epistemic question of what to do. Since that is how you exercise of your authority to yourself, and exercising your authority to yourself is the standard of correctness for what you do, it follows that you might succumb to stereotype threat while doing the right thing.

IX

That is not to say that on the constructivist picture, there is nothing wrong in succumbing to stereotype threat. We have seen that what renders your acceptance of the core belief right is that that acceptance reflects the primacy of your self-value as the author of the answer to the question of what to do. But the proposition that you are epistemically incompetent implies that you are *not* good at providing the answer to the question of what to do. The content of the core belief, then, undermines the belief's own authority. In other words, your coming to believe that your epistemic competence is poor undermines the authority behind your coming to believe that proposition. Coming to accept the core belief and hence succumbing to stereotype threat, then, sets you up in a paradoxical relation to yourself: you employ your authority to yourself to undermine that very authority. On our constructivist framework, that is the fundamental problem with succumbing to stereotype threat.

That paradox is unlike familiar ones such as "Don't believe anything I say" or "Always do the opposite of what I say." If I uttered those instructions to you, you would be trapped in a paradox for only as long as you were trying to decide how to do what I ask you to. But you can always "cheat" your way out of it by simply walking away. If doing what I ask you to do involves not doing what I ask you to do, you can jolly well decide to do neither. Life has other things to offer. You can just move on. But in the case of the core belief, you cannot walk away because that belief concerns your capacity to think and thus to decide at all, including to decide to walk away. Any decision to break free from the conclusion that you are not good at reaching decisions will itself be undermined by the conclusion from which you are trying to escape.

This has grievous repercussions. Recall that one of the pillars of our Korsgaardian normative framework is that upon becoming aware of an impulse to do or believe something, you *cannot* but pose the question of what to do, which commits you to deliberating and making a decision about whether to do or believe that thing (see section VII above). For as long as you are self-conscious, then, you are compelled to deliberate and reach conclusions. But for as long as you believe that your epistemic competence is poor and hence that you are poor at deliberating, your deliberations and conclusions are perpetually undermined. Succumbing to stereotype threat—coming to accept its core belief—snares you in a loop of self-sabotage.

That analysis of the core belief also sheds light on the additional normative features of succumbing to stereotype threat, as well as on why they should cluster together. Beginning with your agential input, the constructivist framework shows that that input is intrinsic to the degenerate structure of the core

belief. Your agency consists in the exercise of your authority to yourself, and it is precisely because succumbing to stereotype threat involves your own authority to yourself that the content of the core belief is effective in warping that authority. However, because exercising your authority to yourself is the fundamental requirement to which you are subject (see section VII above), constructivism does not blame you for it.

As for the phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat, I contend that it just is the individual's experience of the pernicious structure of the core belief. That structure has you pitted against yourself at the most fundamental level—the level of your self-value as the author of the answer to the question of what to do. If you are being attacked by the very thing you value most, it is not implausible to think that your self-esteem would be in distress. And if your fundamental self-value is being undermined by itself, your inextricable commitment to expressing that value in what you do will be persistently frustrated, even as you cannot rescind that commitment. This will blight your ability to see yourself reflected in your decisions and, with it, your ability to see yourself as able to engage with the world in ways that are meaningful to you. Self-doubt too will take hold—if you are not good at providing the answer to the question of what to do, can you trust yourself about anything at all, including an answer to this question?

Finally, there is the sense in which you are a victim. We have seen that the wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat lies in the relation between the authority of the core belief, on the one hand, and the belief's content, on the other. We have also seen that of these two elements, the first is beyond reproach: manifesting your authority to yourself is the most fundamental requirement to which you are subject (see section VII above). This cannot be what you are a victim of. What about the content of the belief?

A key feature of the content of the core belief is that it fits so readily into your epistemic landscape. We saw that what makes your epistemic landscape so welcoming to the content of the core belief is the pervasiveness of the stereotypes in question. We also saw that stereotypes are pervasive in your epistemic landscape, both because they are relentlessly reinforced by your surroundings as you are growing up and beyond, and because the individuals that first convey and reiterate these messages to you are, at that time, authoritative to you. In short, it is because of the way your epistemic environment shapes your own epistemic landscape that propositions stating the truth of the stereotypes fit better within it than not. In succumbing to stereotype threat, then, you are a victim of your epistemic environment.

It looks like constructivism delivers the picture of succumbing of stereotype threat we seek—that is, a picture that illuminates its various normative

features and how those features hang together to form a single phenomenon. The wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat is the corrupt relation in which you stand to yourself, a relation contained in the self-subversive structure of the core belief. Your agential input is essential in that structure, but you carry no blame for it, as you abide by the fundamental requirement to which you are subject. The phenomenology of succumbing to stereotype threat is just your experience of that baleful relation to yourself. And in all of this, you are a victim of your epistemic environment, for that environment creates the crucial conditions on the basis of which you are normatively compelled to accept the core belief.

Before we settle on that conclusion, we must address a couple of reservations about the out-and-out acquittal I have passed on any blame of you. We might wonder whether you really could not avoid succumbing to stereotype threat; and we might have questions about your place within the epistemic environment of which you are a victim. The first misgiving can be put to bed easily enough. The second requires a more delicate treatment: it forces us to make certain concessions, and it signals where our research should go next. I take them in turn.

x

We might think that it is in your hands to avoid succumbing to stereotype threat. Could you not simply refuse to accept the core belief? Or steer clear of those considerations that forewarn of the fateful conclusion? The problem with those two options is that they each involve undermining your agency too, for they each constitute a violation of the requirement to provide a unified conception of the world. To violate that requirement is to violate your own epistemic authority over yourself and, with it, the fundamental requirement to which you are subject (see section vii above). It is, on this account, to act wrongly.

Furthermore, purposefully avoiding the conclusion that best unifies your conception of the world precludes the expression of your authority over yourself in its practical guise too. This is because, as we saw earlier (in section vii), your self-conception as the author of your answer to the practical deliberative question presupposes that you be able to govern yourself by your decisions, which itself presupposes that your conception of the world be unified—that it present to you a picture of things in the world and their relations in a way that enables you to act in it. If your conception of the world is willingly disjointed, you undercut your self-conception as being able to govern your actions by your decisions. And so when deliberating about what to do, you cannot reflect in your deliberation the primacy of the value of that self-conception. Since

reflecting the primacy of that self-conception is how you count as the author of your decisions, and being the author of your decisions is how you meet the fundamental requirement to which you are subject, it follows that in adopting this course of action, you would once again be acting wrongly.

Willingly shunning the core belief is not a credible alternative to succumbing to stereotype threat, for it involves violating your authority to yourself, both in its practical and in its epistemic iterations. As far as this objection goes, you remain blameless for succumbing to stereotype threat. Let us look at the next concern, which is to do with your place in your epistemic environment.

XI

The concern here might be put thus: While clearly you are not responsible for the epistemic environment that shaped your early epistemic development, in the time since you attained epistemic maturity, might you not have contributed to the upkeep of that epistemic environment, including the stereotype of Marchers? And if you have, are you blameworthy for it? And if you are, are you not therefore to blame for succumbing to stereotype threat?

That you contribute to the upkeep of your epistemic environment and, with it, to the perpetuation of the stereotype of Marchers is pretty much inevitable. A full and detailed picture of how this happens is beyond the scope of this article, but for our purposes, it suffices to underline that broadly speaking, you contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotype of Marchers simply by conforming to it; and if you are to be a functioning member of your society, you cannot but conform to it, at least to some extent. As Haslanger explains, societies are shaped to accommodate the purported natures of the various groups they tabulate.[50] Stereotypes function, among other things, as shortcuts for the prevailing understandings of the nature of each of those groups. A society's practices, structures, institutions, and general mores are tailored to fit the capabilities and limitations assigned to the chief stereotyped groups in that society. This all but forces individuals to operate within the spaces provided for them. If you transgress, you might be regarded as an abomination or simply not understood. Either way, your ability to go about your business is hampered. But in staying within the spaces assigned to you, you confirm the underlying view that those spaces are right for you, that they provide just what you need given what you are, and that the actions you perform within them reflect those facts.[51] For as

50 Haslanger, "Objectivity, Epistemic Objectification, and Oppression."

51 One of Haslanger's themes in her article "Objectivity, Epistemic Objectification, and Oppression" is the epistemic failings involved in inferring confirmation of the stereotype

long as you are a member of your community, then in all likelihood, you conform to and thus confirm the stereotype of Marchers, if only some of the time.

But this is not to say that you are to blame for it. Indeed, we might think that you are not even responsible for it—that is, that confirming the stereotype is not an action that can be attributed to you. On our constructivist framework, as on other accounts of action, something you do is not considered an *action* of yours unless a conception of it features in your decision to do what you do. For example, if last night you went to the kitchen to drink some water, and unbeknownst to you, your turning the lights on alerted a prowler to your being home, the alerting of the prowler is not considered an action of yours, while turning the lights on, grabbing the glass, turning the tap on, etc. are considered actions of yours.[52] We might think that your confirming the stereotype as you simply go about your business is akin to your alerting the burglar to your presence: you have no idea that your actions are having those effects.

However, if partaking in actions, activities, and practices that conform to the stereotype serve to confirm the stereotype to members of your community, since you are a member of your community, they must confirm the stereotype to you too. As such, you must have some awareness that that is one of the things you are doing. This is not a glib logical point. If you are a member of a community, you must have a sense that on the whole, you share a conception of the world with it. This sense of a shared understanding feeds into the feeling of kinship inherent in communities, and it also enables us to coordinate our actions. But that we share a conception of the world is something that wants being communicated over and over again, not least because, as we saw earlier, conceptions of the world are constantly in some degree of flux (see section VII above). In our interactions with each other, we tap (tacitly or overtly) into relevant meanings to request and to provide reassurances that we do see the world in broadly the same ways. Conformity to stereotypes is part of this tapestry of meanings: by confirming a shared view of what Marchers are like, you indicate that you share your community's conception of the world. In being a member of your community, you must be alive to these meanings, just like everyone else around you. At some level, then, if only subliminally, you must register the fact that one of the things you do as you interact in your community is conform to the stereotype often *in order to* confirm it.[53]

from conformity to it. I cannot put her insights to work here. Although those insights would enrich my final conclusion, they would not alter it fundamentally.

52 Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," 4–5.

53 Another interesting aspect of this discussion that I must also forgo is how we negotiate and communicate differences between different individuals' conceptions of the world within the same community.

There are more flagrant cases too—cases in which the confirmation of stereotypes is front and center of what we do. Rituals and formal occasions have ostensive functions, e.g., to unite a couple in marriage, to confer an award. But just as obvious if not explicitly stated is their function to reaffirm a community's values. This often comes in the requirement for participants to perform exaggerated versions of some of the stereotypes that apply to them. It would be hard to insist that participants in these rituals are unaware that they are confirming the relevant stereotypes just as they dedicate inordinate amounts of time, effort, expense, and discomfort to making sure they do.

If those considerations are right, you are, at least to some degree, responsible for confirming the stereotype of Marchers. But this still does not tell us whether you are to blame for it.[54] For you to be blameworthy, you have to have acted wrongly. And you act wrongly only if your action does not reflect your values, specifically the primacy of your self-value as the author of your decisions. Does your engagement in activities that confirm the stereotype, such as those outlined above, reflect your values?

To an important degree, they might well do. Being a member of your community might be one of the things you most value about yourself and your life. If so, partaking in the activities that reinforce your community's ties, structures, and mores must be an expression of that self-conception. Similarly, you might value being a good neighbor, friend, or sister. Again, manifesting the commitments integral to those self-conceptions makes use of the communicative resources available—resources that, as we have seen, reflect the prevalent conception of the social world, including the dominant stereotypes in it.[55] Furthermore, those self-conceptions are themselves inflected by the dominant stereotypes. You are not just someone's neighbor, friend, or sister; you are a Marcher neighbor, a Marcher friend, a Marcher sister. Even if you have reservations about some of the values affirmed in the expression of any of those self-conceptions, you might go along with them anyway. You might relish the prospect of staging a protest against Marcher stereotypes at your friend's baby shower, but the thought of what that would do to your friend and to your friendship might make you recoil, so you may very well turn up to the shindig and behave as expected of you. On occasion, you might sacrifice the requirements of those cherished relationships for "the cause," but you cannot do it every time. If you did, not only might you find that requests for your company dry up, thus removing further opportunities to continue your revolt

54 Not, that is, unless we were consequentialists, but that would be anathema to the constructivist framework here advanced.

55 Midgley, *Beast and Man*, 310.

against the given stereotypes, but you would in effect relinquish those treasured self-conceptions—a member of your community, a friend, a sister—because you would cease giving expression to their constitutive commitments.

Confirming a stereotype, then, can quite possibly reflect self-conceptions that you hold dear. But as we saw earlier (see section VII above), that is not enough for your actions to be right. Of even greater value than any of those self-conceptions is your self-conception as your own authority—the self-conception that underpins all others. Therefore, its supremacy must be reflected in your decisions if your decisions are to count as right (see section VII above). If the stereotype of Marchers challenges that value, decisions to participate in activities that knowingly confirm that stereotype meet the conditions of wrong action, and as such, strictly speaking, you are blameworthy for them. After all, then, our constructivist approach does not absolve you of all blame.

We rejected the truth norm of belief and virtue epistemology partly because they blame the victim of succumbing to stereotype threat for succumbing to stereotype threat. Are we to think that constructivism no better? I think not. What blame is assigned to you here is mollified by some of the factors we have just highlighted. Reflecting your fundamental value as your own authority to yourself and thus refusing to confirm the stereotype would be tantamount to renouncing membership of your community and self-conceptions such as a friend, sister, or mother; it would involve parting with the people you love and who love you, and with the world you know. Certainly, the choice is yours: either remain a member of your community and keep the relationships that nourish your life at the cost of denying the full value of your authority to yourself, or stay true to yourself and go it alone. But we all, members of your community, face that choice, and we all opt for the same option, the wrong one: we stay.[56] Therefore, we are all to blame for maintaining our epistemic environment and the stereotypes in it—however they affect us. In that case, blaming *you* for it does not set you apart from anyone else; it does not single you out as *the* culprit of your succumbing to stereotype threat. The blame for

56 Emigrating to another community might not cut it either, at least not if that swapped one set of stereotypes for another. That is because there is a question as to whether one could ever willingly comply to a stereotype without violating one's authority to oneself. On the face of it, if one's actions are selected on the basis that they meet the stereotype's expectations rather than on the basis that they reflect one's values, it seems that one is not abiding by one's principal imperative; hence, one is once more selling oneself short. This needs more exploration than I can embark upon here, but I hope these considerations suffice to show that the options for social creatures like us of staying true to our ultimate authority are slim. My thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this.

your succumbing to stereotype threat is shared with the rest of your community, past and present.[57]

This contrasts starkly with both the truth norm of belief and virtue epistemology, under both of which you are directly blamable for the particular instance of your succumbing to stereotype threat: the blame for succumbing to stereotype threat is yours alone, and had you not failed in the relevant ways (by accepting a false belief under the truth norm of belief or by being insufficiently virtuous under virtue epistemology), other things being equal, you would not have succumbed to stereotype threat. Any degree of blame for the circumstances of which you are a victim is uncomfortable, but I submit that the more nuanced blame assigned to you by constructivism is more tolerable than that apportioned by rival accounts.

XII

I conclude that a constructivist approach provides us with the unified understanding of succumbing to stereotype threat that we seek. Your epistemic environment, persistently and in countless ways, instills in you the message that in being a Marcher, your epistemic competence is poor. On the strength of sustained reinforcement, that message becomes a key plank in your epistemic economy, thus playing a decisive role in the acquisition of new beliefs. When facing the proposition that in being a Marcher, your epistemic competence is poor, you face a proposition that is quite at home within your belief system. Accepting that proposition on the basis that doing so makes for a more unified conception of the world than not is the right thing to do. But that proposition corrupts the very dynamic of belief formation: it negates the authority that underpins your accepting that proposition in the first place. Since that authority is fundamental to you as an agent, its use to undermine itself is tantamount to turning yourself against yourself. You experience that insidious contortion as loss of meaning and of self-esteem, with low expectations and low motivation. You are fully agentially engaged in this episode—that is whence its force comes. The dreaded proposition would not have the reach it has if it were presented by a source for whom you had little regard. Yet you are not to blame for it directly—that is, you are not to blame for the particular event of your succumbing to stereotype threat. Direct blame lies with your epistemic environment, and that environment is what you are a victim of. However, you are part of that environment too, and that means that you are an active participant

57 Of course, the distribution of blame is surely not even, and this is something that requires attention. But our interest here is simply whether you can be blameless for succumbing to stereotype threat, not how much blame you shoulder.

in it. This all but necessarily involves confirming its central ontological commitments, including those codified in the stereotype of Marchers. You do this in a way that accrues blame, but a number of factors mitigate the extent to which that blame translates into blame for succumbing to stereotype threat: the connection between the offending activities and the particular instance of your succumbing to stereotype threat is diffuse; your participation in those activities puts you on a level with the rest of your community; and the cost of refusing participation would be self-imposed ostracism.

However, that conclusion exposes its own limitations. I set out above to examine the internal normative structure of stereotype threat in itself by focusing on the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat. But our study has revealed that the normative structure of succumbing to stereotype threat is not confined to a discrete phenomenon. Rather, one's social environment, critically and unavoidably, seeps into it. You are to blame because you are part of the community that shaped and maintained your epistemic landscape such that it plays a pivotal role in rendering your succumbing to stereotype threat both compelling and correct. I said in section XI that given the scope of this article, I could but dip my toes into that social dimension. But the ensuing discussion has made clear, if it was not already, that further probing into that social grounding—into the extent to which you are complicit or conscript, into the extent to which that grounding makes you or debases you—is indispensable for a full understanding of succumbing to stereotype threat and thus a full understanding of stereotype threat.

I propose that there is a readily available entry point into that further research: the notion of *alienation* as understood by Marx. Marx's notion of alienation is embedded in a rich tradition that pays close attention to the porous relationship between the individual and her environment—a complicated and dynamic relation, both causal and constitutive—without losing sight of the relation the individual has to herself. The notion of alienation is apposite because our picture of succumbing to stereotype threat neatly falls under that notion. To make my case, I look at the broad structure of alienation. This can be only brief at this point, but I hope it suffices to show its promise.

Marx's notion of alienation underwent a range of mutations, but its leitmotif is a kind of "hostile relationship" between things that belong together, including, crucially, the relation in which the individual stands to herself.[58] This hostile relationship in which the individual stands to herself is a corruption of the way in which the individual properly engages with the world.

58 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 3, 4, 6; Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?* 29; and Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 64.

The idea here is that the individual's fundamental values are comprised in her self-conception as a human being.[59] As she interacts with her environment, the individual has a *need* to express those values, a need for *self-actualization*.[60] Proper engagement with the world is the satisfaction of that need. Alienation is its frustration—it is the condition of going about one's life in a way in which one "does not affirm himself . . . but denies himself," in which "the realization of his nature [appears] as the diminution of his life."[61] In this way, "alienated individuals are in some sense separated from, at odds with, or hostile to themselves," their activity turned against them as a kind of "torment."[62] In an alienated condition, the individual suffers lack of self-worth and "experiences life as empty, meaningless and absurd."[63] The background setting for alienation, Marx thought, is "a complex interconnection between . . . various ills and irrationalities" present in society.[64] The alienated individual is participant in maintaining the circumstances of which she is victim, yet altering those circumstances is beyond her power.[65]

The parallels between this broad characterization of alienation and our constructivist diagnosis of succumbing to stereotype threat are plain. The hostile relationship to yourself that is the hallmark of alienation appears in succumbing to stereotype threat in your acceptance of the core belief, in employing your authority to undermine itself. As in alienation, that relationship arises in a corruption of your proper epistemic engagement with the world. Your proper epistemic engagement with the world is one in which you exercise the supreme value of yourself as your own authority. And exercising that value is a need you have in virtue of being the kind of creature you are—it is that need, recall, that is the source of normativity (see section VII above). Again in consonance with alienation, that need is frustrated when you undermine your authority to yourself. The experience of that relationship as lack of self-esteem and associated loss of meaning and of motivation mirrors the experience of alienation as one of meaninglessness, emptiness, and self-worthlessness. The society's ills and irrationalities that foster alienation are found, in relation to succumbing to stereotype threat, in the form of distorted conceptualizations of individuals, together with the social structures that demand compliance with

59 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 19–20.

60 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 22, 26–30.

61 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 23; and Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 61–62, and "Excerpt Notes of 1844," 46.

62 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 8; and Marx, "Excerpt Notes of 1844," 46.

63 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 21, 8.

64 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 7.

65 Wood, *Karl Marx*, 8, 14; and Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts," 66.

them. Also replicating the setting in alienation, so long as you remain in your society, you cannot but contribute to those maladies. Yet you have no power to change them anywhere near the degree where they would no longer facilitate instances of succumbing to stereotype threat. The phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat, I conclude, is a type of alienation.

The notion of alienation names the wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat and thus the substantive threat of stereotype threat.[66] It is already part of our analysis of succumbing to stereotype threat and thus of stereotype threat, and so it is well poised to help us delve deeper into the social dimension of those phenomena.

XIII

My aim in this article has been to expand our understanding of the normative charge of stereotype threat. To do so, I have foregrounded the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat in cases of stereotype threat that present us with the threat of epistemic self-objectification—that is, cases in which (1) the stereotype asserts that in virtue of belonging to the stereotyped group in question, your epistemic competence is poor and (2) the threat pertains to confirming the stereotype at least to yourself.[67] I have shown that succumbing to stereotype threat is the formal threat of stereotype threat. A constructivist approach has exposed the fundamental wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat to be the individual's own subversion of her own authority to herself, and it has elucidated how all other normative strands of succumbing to stereotype threat are attached to that wrong. This has led us to the individual's social environment, where we have gauged a rough overview of some of the involuted and pervasive ways in which the individual and her environment feed into each other. I have argued that this analysis of succumbing to stereotype threat corresponds to Marx's notion of alienation. We are thus afforded the conclusion that the substantive threat of stereotype threat in the cases at hand is alienation.

That analysis has also belied my initial aim of confining my research to the inner normative structure of stereotype threat. We have seen that the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat (and thus of stereotype threat) is not a discrete unit but is rather inexorably tied to a social environment. This discovery forces me to end my study on a pending task: a fuller understanding

66 The advantage of being able to name the wrong of succumbing to stereotype threat and the threat of stereotype threat is hermeneutical. In naming what is a variegated normative phenomenon, we can more easily recognize it, talk about it, and address it. See Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*.

67 Haslanger, "Objectivity, Epistemic Objectification, and Oppression," 280.

of the phenomenon of succumbing to stereotype threat (and thus of stereotype threat) requires a fuller enquiry into the ontological and normative fluctuations of that social terrain. I have briefly argued that the notion of alienation is well placed to help us with that extra task.[68]

Durham University
anabarandalla@me.com

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