

# Institutional Epistemic Duties and Epistemic Violations in Public Health Decision-Making

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# Culling of Animals

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## Denmark's Covid mass mink cull had no legal justification, says report

The extermination of 15 million animals and unnecessary shutdown of an entire industry has cost taxpayers billions

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## African swine fever outbreak alarms wildlife biologists and veterinarians

Deadly virus threatens European pigs and boar

20 DEC 2017 • BY ERIK STOKSTAD

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News > UK > Home News

## 'Devastating': Bird flu forces farmer to cull 10,000 Christmas turkeys

'Even the big people are getting absolutely hammered by this,' says Steve Childerhouse

Douglas Whitbread • Monday 31 October 2022 09:32 GMT • [Comments](#)



# Overview of Today

- Case-study culling of animals
- Epistemic Obligations
  - formal
  - role-bound
  - situational
  - group-based
- Shared and Collective Epistemic Obligations
- Institutional epistemic obligations

# Case Study

## 2020 Danish mink cull

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From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **2020 Danish mink cull**, commonly known as the **Mink Case** ([Danish](#): *Minksagen*) or the **Mink Scandal** (*Minkskandalen*), was the government-mandated [slaughter](#) of all roughly 17 million [mink](#)



AIM:

Denmark's political institutions violated their epistemic obligations by mandating this culling

# Definition



epistemic obligation

/,ɛpɪ'sti:mɪk/

/,ɒblɪ'geɪʃn/

an obligation that the agent must fulfil in pursuit of some kind of epistemic success (i.e. truth, knowledge, inquiry, wisdom).

# Kinds of Epistemic Obligations

- I) Formal Epistemic Obligations
- II) Role-Bound Epistemic Obligations
- III) Situational Epistemic Obligations

# Formal Epistemic Obligations

Applies to any individual in her capacity as an epistemic agent

Example:

To be critical of one's beliefs, and to abandon beliefs only when good evidence is brought to light

# Role-Bound Epistemic Obligations

Applies to agents whose role implies special epistemic responsibilities

Example:

Veterinarian's knowledge about animal welfare, to advice pet-owners and farmers.



# Situational Epistemic Obligations

Applies to a situation that influences how high the stakes of ones actions are

Given higher stakes that are attached to a given action, one gains additional epistemic obligations, or the severity of ones epistemic obligations increase

Example:

Having a campfire at your party raises the stakes: i.e., a fire.

I must inquire how to safely light a fire and what to do in case of accidents.

# Group-based Epistemic Obligations

## Group ontology accounts

- **Summative**  
accounts of group agency hold that a group's actions are constituted by the aggregate of its members
- **Non-summative**  
accounts hold that a group's actions supersede the agency of its individual members. the group possesses emergent properties that cannot be derived from individual components.

# Group-based Epistemic Obligations

## Group ontology accounts

- Summative → shared epistemic obligations
  
- Non-summative → collective epistemic obligations

# Shared Epistemic Obligations & Blame

Example

Every member equally contributes to the group's joint action.

If ONE member fails to contribute, the group action fails.

All members share equal obligations to contribute to the joint action.



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(The contribution to the group action need not be equal. E.g. lifting a tree off a person with four people who differ in strength, but nonetheless need to contribute to the group action equally.)

# Collective Epistemic Obligations & Blame


example

A community which, over time, is characterized by favoritism and nepotism. Although individuals may have contributed to this culture, blame falls on the whole collective.

Pinpointing fault in one or several individuals is too difficult due to complex interrelatedness of individuals' actions.



# Institutional Epistemic Obligations

 **institution**  
/ˌɪnstɪˈtjuːʃn/

a structure of interrelated, rule-governed, embodied roles, to which power is entrusted to perform specific functions  
(Ceva & Ferretti, 2021, p.47)

Therefore, the epistemic obligations of an institution are attributed to its members

# Case Study & Institutional Epistemic Obligations

2020 Danish mink cull

- I) Formal: e.g. justify decision -making based on good and reliable evidence
- II) Role-bound: e.g. Make parliamentary debates openly accessible to citizens
- III) Situational: upon considering mandated culling; seek information into alternative procedures.

Alternative:

- quarantining and treating infected farmed animals,
- temporarily/permanently re-housing (research) animals
- A temporary/permanent ban on farming mink--i.e. a phase-out method

# Case Study & Institutional Epistemic Obligations

## 2020 Danish mink cull

- Transmission between minks & humans first documented in NL --> ban  
from March 2021 to 2024
- June 2020: first Danish mink -covid infection. No evidence of spillover to  
humans
- Oct 2020: mink -variant COVID found in Danish milk --> 7.8 km radius
- 3 Nov 2020, private meeting with prime minister & central ministers (held  
without summary)

Advisory committee mentions two alternatives: 1) hibernation scheme for mink  
breeding or 2) permanent ban on mink breeding in Denmark

No info on legal authority, not discussed in meeting & annexes 6 min  
before meeting --> decision to cull all mink in Denmark



# Epistemic Violations & Accountability

Institutions X which violate epistemic responsibilities can and should  
be held accountable

Shared epistemic obligations: each member is accountable

Collective epistemic obligations: the group is accountable

# Normative Tool for One-Health Decision Making

- animal ethics committees when approving research ethics applications
- political institutions discussing bills to decrease livestock in order to reduce nitrogen and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions



# Thank you & Q&A

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## Publications

van den Brandeler, E. (forthcoming) Towards an Epistemology of Speciesist Ignorance. *Res Publica*.

van den Brandeler, E. (2021). The political turn of the animal ethical discourse—the need for a virtue ethical approach. In *Justice and food security in a changing climate* (p. 9). Wageningen Academic Publishers.



# Some points raised during the discussion

**Q:** What is the relationship between moral and epistemic responsibility? For instance, how does this overlap in the case of medical professionals? **A:** I argue that one can only be held morally responsible for wrongdoings when one either i) knows their action is wrong at the time of acting, or ii) insofar as the moral wrongdoing is based on a culpable epistemic violation. We need to pinpoint a moment where the person knowingly failed to meet her epistemic obligation, which resulted in her moral wrongdoing later on. Only then, can we attribute moral blameworthiness.

**Q:** How are epistemic obligations different from procedural obligations? **A:** Epistemic obligations are demands to improve one's knowledge or epistemic behaviour (e.g. to inquire into alternative viewpoints or to deliberate transparently), and to undertake preparatory epistemic -steps to be able to act morally when a certain action occurs. They do not imply that one must follow a certain procedural obligation.

**Discussion point** : The scope and weight of one's epistemic obligations differ on a case by case basis. At the same time, a physician is attributed individual epistemic obligations (i.e., private ethics), and (shared or collective) institutional epistemic obligations in her capacity as an institutional member (i.e. public ethics).

**Discussion point:** Epistemic obligations roughly apply for three categories: i) *production* of knowledge, ii) *dissemination* of knowledge, and iii) *education* . Depending on the type of institution at hand, these overlap or not, and apply to a smaller or larger extent. For instance, research institutions are primarily concerned with the production of knowledge, whereas dissemination of knowledge to a smaller extent and not with the education of the larger public. The latter is taken up by other institutions, such as, media and journalism and educational facilities.

**Discussion point:** By going further than the Mink -Cull example, I could show that this is not a one time occurrence where an institution violated (One -Health related) epistemic obligations. Rather, political institutions repeat this pattern in response to other zoonotic outbreaks, such as BSE & foot -and -mouth disease.

**Discussion point** : At what point do overlapping epistemic obligations become overdemanding ? For instance, what happens if we have fulfilled our epistemic obligations in one area (e.g. our professional life). It will depend on what is reasonable to demand from an average epistemic agent under those circumstances. We should be mindful of aggregating epistemic obligations, and that being epistemically virtuous in one area, does not excuse one's epistemic vices in another area.

**Q:** do individual citizens have epistemic obligations to inquire, e.g. into vaccines? **A:** Arguably, both formal obligations would apply, as well as, situational obligations, whenever the moral risks of the agent's actions are increased. If I do not want to inquire into COVID -vaccines and keep my anti -vaxx beliefs without re -considering them, I will not be blameworthy for that —as long as my ignorance does not cause any moral wrongdoings. If I *do* commit an ignorant moral wrongdoing because of these epistemic violations, this would render one morally blameworthy (granted that we can trace this back to an instance where the agent knowingly failed to meet her epistemic obligations).

**Discussion point** : After the Danish Mink cull political scandal, several ministers were forced to leave their office. From the point of view of gaining or improving public trust in the political institution, it makes sense that something need to happen to show that the institution took accountability.

However, if it was the case that a *collective* epistemic obligation was violated, we have to hold the whole collective institution accountable.

Alternatively, if it was the case that a *shared* epistemic obligation was violated, this blame is equally shared by all institutional members. From this perspective, it remains a debate whether it is fair or required to blame individual ministers.