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Peter Kahl

Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties

A Philosophical and Fiduciary Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Knowledge

Part I of Epistemic Humility as the Architecture of Duty

PETER KAHL



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About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics, integrating legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies across public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This paper advances an original philosophical framework integrating fiduciary theory and epistemic virtue ethics through the concept of **epistemic transposition**—the reformulation of ethical duties as epistemic obligations grounded in **epistemic humility**. It argues that fiduciary and ethical duties such as loyalty, honesty, and openness are not merely moral in nature but *fundamentally epistemic*, expressing virtues of intellectual honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to evidence. Drawing on the fiduciary scholarship of Lionel Smith and Paul B. Miller, the institutional epistemic ethics of Ronald Barnett, and my own prior work on fiduciary openness and epistemic justice, the paper demonstrates that epistemic humility is the foundational virtue underpinning both ethical and fiduciary accountability.

By reconceptualising fiduciary responsibility as epistemic responsibility, this work unifies previously distinct traditions in ethics, epistemology, and governance. The resulting **fiduciary-epistemic theory** positions **epistemic humility** as a *normative virtue* with independent moral authority, essential to institutional integrity, epistemic justice, and trustworthy governance.

This study constitutes Part I of the research series *Epistemic Humility as the Architecture of Duty*. It establishes the theoretical foundations for Part II, *From Epistemic Humility to Fiduciary Cognition: Re-founding Ethical Duty as Epistemic Governance*, which will extend the inquiry by modelling fiduciary cognition as the dynamic architecture of epistemic responsibility.

Keywords

epistemic humility, fiduciary theory, epistemic virtue ethics, fiduciary accountability, epistemic transposition, epistemic justice, institutional governance, epistemic responsibility, fiduciary openness, epistemic normativity, fiduciary cognition, ethical foundations of knowledge



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1. Statement of Originality and Contribution

1.1 Originality and Intellectual Provenance

This paper advances an original philosophical framework that bridges epistemology and ethics through the concept I term epistemic transposition. Epistemic transposition refers to the reframing of obligations traditionally regarded as ethical—such as loyalty, openness, fidelity, and humility—as inherently epistemic duties owed to knowledge itself. Central to this approach is the claim that ethics is fundamentally grounded in epistemic humility: a virtue defined by the recognition of one’s cognitive limits, openness to revision, and responsiveness to epistemic diversity. By reconceiving ethical obligations as intrinsically epistemic, this framework challenges the conventional separation between moral and epistemic virtues.

Existing fiduciary scholarship, notably Lionel Smith’s *The Law of Loyalty* (2014) and Paul B. Miller’s and Andrew Gold’s *Contract, Status, and Fiduciary Law* (2016), conceptualises fiduciary obligations as relational duties rooted in trust, fidelity, and loyalty. Concurrently, Ronald Barnett’s influential writings on higher education (Barnett, 2014, 2018) articulate institutional responsibilities grounded in epistemic humility, openness, and critical inquiry, though without explicitly linking these epistemic responsibilities to fiduciary theory.

My earlier works—particularly *Epistocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl, 2025b), *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), and *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl, 2025f)—identified the presence of epistemic virtues and fiduciary responsibilities within governance frameworks but did not yet position epistemic humility as the normative foundation of ethics itself.

This paper therefore integrates previously distinct discourses by demonstrating that ethical and epistemic obligations are not merely parallel but structurally interdependent. It establishes epistemic humility as the primary epistemic virtue upon which all ethical duties rest. This conceptual synthesis represents a substantive and original contribution, advancing both fiduciary theory and epistemic virtue ethics beyond their traditional disciplinary boundaries.

1.2 Scholarly Context and Positioning

The scholarly context from which this argument emerges is both rich and fragmented. Lionel Smith’s fiduciary theory articulates fiduciary obligations as inherently relational ethical duties (Smith, 2014). Similarly, Paul B. Miller emphasises fiduciary obligations as status-based, relational frameworks grounded in loyalty, trust, and fidelity (Miller & Gold, 2016). Despite their sophistication, both theorists overlook the epistemic dimensions that underlie fiduciary relationships—particularly duties of transparency, openness to new evidence, and critical intellectual humility.

Ronald Barnett’s work significantly advances discourse on institutional epistemic responsibilities and virtues, highlighting epistemic humility as essential to the integrity of knowledge within universities (Barnett, 2014, 2018). Yet Barnett does not frame these epistemic virtues as fiduciary obligations, nor as foundational to ethical responsibility more broadly.

My own earlier research begins to address these intersections by identifying fiduciary-epistemic duties within higher-education governance (*Epistocracy in Higher Education*, Kahl, 2025b), corporate governance (*Directors’*

Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness, Kahl, 2025d), and frameworks of epistemic justice (*Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia*, Kahl, 2025f). However, that body of work did not yet contend that epistemic humility constitutes the foundation of ethics itself.

Accordingly, this paper occupies a distinctive scholarly position. It synthesises and extends these previously separate discourses into a unified philosophical theory, arguing that epistemic humility grounds all ethical obligations. In doing so, it integrates fiduciary theory, epistemic virtue ethics, and epistemic governance into a coherent and original contribution to contemporary philosophical thought.

1.3 Contribution and Impact

The central claim that epistemic humility constitutes the foundational virtue of ethics fundamentally reshapes existing philosophical discussions on epistemic virtue, fiduciary accountability, and governance. By reframing ethical obligations as inherently epistemic, this paper establishes a robust philosophical basis for reinterpreting moral duty through the lens of epistemic responsibility. This reconceptualisation extends current debates on epistemic justice, fiduciary openness, and the normative architecture of ethics itself (Fricker, 2007; Kahl, 2025d; Kahl, 2025f).

The implications of this argument reach beyond theoretical philosophy. Institutions in education, governance, and fiduciary law stand to benefit from adopting epistemic humility as a core principle of good governance. Such a shift would cultivate cultures of transparency, intellectual openness, receptivity to critique, and accountability—virtues essential for mitigating epistemic injustice and strengthening the integrity of epistemic communities (Barnett, 2018; Miller & Gold, 2016).

In sum, this paper offers a substantive philosophical contribution with practical relevance. It positions epistemic humility as the essential normative foundation of ethical and fiduciary responsibility, providing a conceptual framework capable of informing both scholarly discourse and institutional reform.

2. Contextualising Ethics and Epistemology

2.1 Normative Foundations of Ethics and Epistemology

In asserting that epistemic humility forms the foundation of ethical responsibility, it is essential to clarify the conceptual overlap between the normative architectures underpinning ethics and epistemology. Traditionally, ethics has been understood as addressing obligations owed primarily to others—duties grounded in trust, reciprocity, and responsibility. Epistemology, by contrast, has treated its normative dimension as consisting of obligations owed toward knowledge itself, such as the pursuit of truth, intellectual honesty, and openness to evidence. Yet, upon closer examination, these disciplinary boundaries blur considerably. Normative epistemic obligations—openness to alternative perspectives, responsiveness to evidence, and awareness of one’s epistemic limits—closely mirror ethical virtues and responsibilities. This convergence suggests that ethics and epistemology share a deeper, unified normative foundation.

Ronald Barnett’s analysis of epistemic responsibility in universities vividly illustrates this convergence. He argues that institutions such as universities bear duties not only toward individuals or communities but

fundamentally toward knowledge itself (Barnett, 2014, 2018). For Barnett, institutional epistemic responsibilities include fostering openness to critique, practising intellectual humility, and ensuring transparency in the production of knowledge—virtues long recognised within ethical traditions. By articulating these epistemic virtues as normative duties central to institutional accountability, Barnett implicitly acknowledges the overlap between ethical and epistemic responsibility, even if he stops short of framing such duties as fiduciary in nature.

Building on and extending Barnett’s insight, my previous work—particularly *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl, 2025b) and *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl, 2025f)—has argued for a model of governance grounded in fiduciary accountability to epistemic responsibilities. Epistemocracy proposes that institutions must uphold fiduciary duties toward knowledge with the same rigour as fiduciary duties toward persons. Within this model, ethical duties such as honesty, fairness, and accountability translate seamlessly into epistemic virtues—intellectual honesty, epistemic openness, and epistemic humility—demonstrating an inherent normative unity. Understood thus, the conceptual distinction between ethics and epistemology dissolves into a shared normative structure: duties to others inherently entail epistemic responsibilities, while epistemic duties presuppose ethical commitments to candour, respect, and humility.

Further theoretical grounding for this unity emerges from virtue epistemology. Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* (2007) demonstrates that epistemic failures—such as dismissing or devaluing marginalised perspectives—constitute normative breaches with profound ethical implications. Similarly, José Medina (2013) emphasises epistemic virtues such as openness, responsiveness, and resistance to epistemic arrogance as essential to overcoming structural ignorance and injustice. Both scholars highlight that epistemic virtues possess intrinsic moral weight, reinforcing the view that epistemic responsibility underpins ethical practice. This alignment is supported by Catherine Elgin’s account of intellectual humility as a condition for responsible participation in epistemic communities (*True Enough*, 2017) and Ernest Sosa’s virtue-theoretic framework for epistemic normativity (*Epistemic Explanations*, 2021), each underscoring the normative primacy of epistemic virtue.

Taken together, these perspectives—Barnett’s institutional analyses, the virtue-epistemological arguments of Fricker and Medina, and my own fiduciary-epistemic framework—demonstrate that ethical obligations and epistemic virtues rest upon a shared normative foundation. This unity provides strong philosophical justification for the central claim of this paper: that epistemic humility is the fundamental virtue from which ethical responsibility derives.

2.2 Fiduciary Foundations

Fiduciary theories developed notably by Lionel Smith (2014) and Paul B. Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016) provide a robust conceptual framework for articulating the relational duties that arise inherently within trust-based relationships. Smith characterises fiduciary duties as encompassing loyalty, good faith, and fidelity—obligations that are not merely contractual but profoundly normative, grounded in the relational ethics of trust. Miller similarly advances a fiduciary conception in which such duties are status-based and relational, predicated upon vulnerability, trust, and reciprocal expectations of honesty and loyalty. Although traditionally framed as ethical in nature, these fiduciary obligations implicitly entail significant epistemic responsibilities—transparency, openness, honesty in communication, and an awareness of one’s epistemic limits.

By their very nature, fiduciary relationships encompass epistemic duties. Directors, trustees, and other institutional fiduciaries must exercise epistemic humility: recognising the limits of their knowledge, sharing

information transparently, and remaining open to alternative perspectives and contrary evidence. These obligations—conventionally viewed as ethical—align closely with epistemic virtues such as intellectual honesty, openness, and humility. In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), I identified these epistemic dimensions as integral to fiduciary duty, arguing that directors owe a fiduciary responsibility not only to stakeholders but also to knowledge itself. This responsibility demands responsiveness to new evidence and receptivity to epistemic critique as conditions of trustworthy governance.

Fiduciary theory therefore provides an essential conceptual foundation for the epistemic transposition proposed here. My integration of fiduciary duty with epistemic humility builds upon, yet substantively extends, the frameworks developed by Smith (2014) and Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016). While they conceive fiduciary obligations primarily as ethical duties toward others, my approach reframes them as intrinsically epistemic obligations grounded in the virtue of epistemic humility. This reconceptualisation represents a philosophical advancement, unifying fiduciary and epistemic virtues within a shared normative structure.

Accordingly, fiduciary relationships exemplify how epistemic duties underpin ethical responsibility, demonstrating that epistemic humility forms the normative foundation of fiduciary obligation itself. This alignment reinforces the conceptual coherence of epistemic transposition and supports the broader philosophical claim that ethical duties are, at their core, epistemic—rooted in the humble stewardship of knowledge.

3. Epistemic Humility as Paradigmatic Transposition

3.1 Epistemic Humility Defined and Defended

Epistemic humility is the virtue that recognises the inherent limits of one's knowledge and entails openness to critical self-reflection, responsiveness to new evidence, and willingness to revise one's beliefs (*Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia*, Kahl, 2025f). It stands in direct opposition to epistemic arrogance—the presumption of infallibility or absolute certainty—by affirming the provisional and fallible nature of human understanding. This virtue requires a continual reassessment of one's epistemic stance, acknowledging that all knowledge claims must remain open to scrutiny, correction, and refinement.

In my previous work, particularly *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl, 2025f), I have argued that epistemic humility is not merely an intellectual virtue but an inherently normative one, indispensable to fair and equitable epistemic relations. Ronald Barnett similarly foregrounds epistemic humility as central to institutional epistemic virtue, identifying it as vital to maintaining epistemic integrity within universities (Barnett, 2014). For Barnett, humility underpins the ethical and intellectual commitments of institutions by cultivating an environment receptive to dialogue, critique, and continuous self-examination.

Within the broader framework of my fiduciary-epistemic theory (Kahl, 2025d; 2025f), epistemic humility also assumes fiduciary significance. It functions as the moral regulator of epistemic trust, ensuring that those entrusted with knowledge—whether individuals or institutions—exercise their epistemic authority with candour, care, and openness. In this sense, epistemic humility bridges epistemic and fiduciary ethics, transforming the pursuit of knowledge into a fiduciary relationship grounded in responsibility toward truth and others.

Epistemic humility's normative character thus parallels that of moral humility in ethical theory, as both emphasise respect for the perspectives and limitations of others. Just as moral humility fosters ethical relations grounded in openness and mutual regard, epistemic humility sustains healthy epistemic relationships characterised by attentiveness to alternative viewpoints, respect for intellectual diversity, and commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007). Consequently, epistemic humility is not merely an aspirational ideal but a normative obligation—an essential virtue for responsible epistemic conduct, particularly within fiduciary and institutional contexts.

3.2 Transposing Ethical to Epistemic Duties

At the core of this argument lies the claim that fiduciary duties—traditionally understood as ethical obligations such as loyalty, fidelity, openness, and honesty—intrinsically embody epistemic virtues. Because fiduciary duties are grounded in relational trust and accountability, they necessarily entail openness to critical scrutiny, honesty in the disclosure of information, and humility regarding one's epistemic limits. These ethical duties thus presuppose epistemic responsibilities: transparency requires openness to evidence, honesty demands intellectual integrity, and fidelity presupposes epistemic humility in recognising fallibility.

Lionel Smith (2014) defines fiduciary duties primarily in ethical terms, emphasising loyalty and good faith, while Paul B. Miller situates fiduciary obligations within relational frameworks grounded in trust and vulnerability (Miller & Gold, 2016). Yet each of these ethical duties implicitly depends upon epistemic virtues. Loyalty and good faith require candour in communication and openness to epistemic challenge. Fidelity, likewise, assumes recognition of epistemic fallibility and a willingness to engage with corrective evidence and alternative perspectives.

Ronald Barnett's analysis of epistemic virtue in higher education governance further illuminates this convergence. He highlights institutional duties of epistemic openness, humility, and integrity as essential to the responsible stewardship of knowledge (Barnett, 2014). Educational fiduciaries—such as university leaders and administrators—hold ethical obligations of fairness, transparency, and accountability that are, in substance, epistemic. Institutional openness to critique, accountability in knowledge production, and responsiveness to epistemic diversity all exemplify fiduciary humility and epistemic candour. As I have argued in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), fiduciary roles inherently require receptivity to new knowledge, reflexivity regarding epistemic practice, and humility before epistemic uncertainty.

Concrete examples further demonstrate this epistemic transposition. Corporate directors who disclose accurate information to shareholders fulfil ethical duties of honesty and openness, yet these duties rest upon epistemic obligations: honesty entails epistemic accountability for truth claims, and openness demands responsiveness to evidence and critique. Similarly, academic leaders who uphold fairness and integrity in institutional decision-making exercise fiduciary ethics by ensuring transparency and intellectual honesty—practices grounded in epistemic humility.

In sum, fiduciary duties conventionally framed as ethical—loyalty, fidelity, openness, honesty—are intrinsically epistemic. This transposition is not merely analogical but structural: ethical duties presuppose epistemic virtues, revealing epistemic humility as the foundational condition of both fiduciary and ethical responsibility.

3.3 Clarifying the Conceptual Priority of Epistemic Virtues

A potential source of philosophical resistance to this argument lies in the claim that epistemic virtues—particularly epistemic humility—are foundational to ethics. Traditional moral philosophy has typically privileged ethical norms as the primary locus of normativity, regarding epistemic virtues as derivative or instrumental. My position deliberately inverts this hierarchy, not to diminish the moral weight of ethical duties, but to illuminate their epistemic preconditions.

This assertion of epistemic priority does not deny the independent significance of ethical obligation; rather, it recognises that ethical conduct presupposes certain epistemic commitments. Ethical duties such as honesty, fairness, and openness depend upon epistemic virtues—acknowledging one’s cognitive limits, remaining open to criticism, and responding to evidence with integrity (Fricker, 2007; Elgin, 2017). Without epistemic humility, ethical norms risk collapsing into dogma—assertions unanchored in evidence or mutual understanding. Accordingly, epistemic humility functions as a *condition of possibility* for moral practice, the virtue that sustains ethics within the bounds of truth, evidence, and intelligibility.

To critics who might fear that granting epistemic virtues conceptual priority reduces ethics to a form of intellectualism, I respond that this view mischaracterises the normative depth of epistemic virtue itself. Epistemic humility, as developed in my fiduciary-epistemic theory (Kahl, 2025d; 2025f), is not a merely intellectual disposition but a binding normative duty. It regulates relationships of trust, responsibility, and truthfulness—the same relationships upon which ethical life depends. Far from displacing ethics, this prioritisation enriches it by grounding ethical obligations in the epistemic conditions that make moral discernment possible.

It must nevertheless be acknowledged that epistemic humility alone cannot resolve all moral dilemmas or dictate action in every context. Ethical deliberation often requires the interplay of multiple virtues—courage, compassion, and justice among them—alongside epistemic humility. Thus, while epistemic humility provides the foundational grounding for fiduciary openness and ethical responsibility, it remains one indispensable element within a broader constellation of normative virtues that collectively sustain moral life.

4. Institutional Fiduciary Duties as Epistemic Duties

4.1 The Fiduciary-Epistemic Nexus

Institutional fiduciaries—corporate directors, trustees, and university administrators—traditionally hold fiduciary obligations understood as ethical duties rooted in trust, fidelity, and accountability. Yet these responsibilities extend beyond purely ethical concerns: they also encompass epistemic duties grounded in epistemic humility. Fiduciary relationships require openness, honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to critique—obligations that are inherently epistemic, as they govern how fiduciaries acquire, handle, and communicate knowledge.

Lionel Smith (2014) defines fiduciary duties as ethical obligations emerging from relationships of trust and good faith, emphasising openness and loyalty as central virtues. Likewise, Paul B. Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016) conceptualises fiduciary relationships as fundamentally relational, grounded in expectations of trustworthiness and fidelity. Both accounts, however, carry implicit epistemic dimensions. Fiduciary openness and honesty

necessarily entail epistemic responsibilities: transparent disclosure of relevant information, intellectual honesty in representing facts and risks, and receptivity to critical or corrective evidence.

In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), I argued that fiduciary roles inherently embody epistemic obligations. Corporate directors, for instance, bear fiduciary responsibilities not only of ethical loyalty and care but also of epistemic transparency. Their duties require the validation and honest communication of knowledge, critical responsiveness to challenges, and epistemic humility in acknowledging uncertainty and informational limits.

The same fiduciary–epistemic dynamic applies in higher education governance. University leaders and administrators hold fiduciary duties toward students, faculty, and institutional stakeholders—duties that necessarily include epistemic obligations. Institutional fiduciaries must manage the creation, dissemination, and evaluation of knowledge with transparency and openness. These obligations presuppose epistemic humility: the readiness to engage diverse perspectives and to revise institutional knowledge when confronted with credible critique or new evidence (Barnett, 2014; Kahl, 2025b).

Accordingly, fiduciary duties, though traditionally conceived as ethical responsibilities toward others, inherently constitute epistemic obligations toward knowledge itself. Fiduciary openness, honesty, and transparency thus manifest epistemic virtues, positioning epistemic humility as the normative foundation of fiduciary accountability and the defining virtue of epistemic governance.

4.2 Institutional Failures as Epistemic Failures

Institutional fiduciary breaches often originate in epistemic arrogance or a fundamental neglect of epistemic humility. Failures traditionally classified as ethical—such as breaches of trust, loyalty, or transparency—are, at their core, epistemic failings. They stem from an unwillingness to recognise cognitive limits, to revise beliefs, or to engage critically with alternative perspectives. Institutional accountability failures thus reveal epistemic irresponsibility: a lack of openness to inquiry, critique, or epistemic diversity.

In higher education, such breaches frequently manifest as epistemic arrogance, particularly when university leaders dismiss legitimate criticism, obscure decision-making processes, or resist the revision of institutional knowledge claims. In *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl, 2025b), I documented instances in which universities failed in their fiduciary responsibilities precisely by disregarding epistemic humility. In several cases, administrators suppressed critical research or discouraged transparency to protect institutional reputation—actions that exemplify epistemic arrogance through the refusal to acknowledge valid evidence or countervailing perspectives. These are not merely ethical lapses but fiduciary-epistemic failures that compromise the institution's integrity as a steward of knowledge.

The same pattern appears in corporate governance. Fiduciary breaches such as misleading financial disclosures or the concealment of material information represent epistemic, as well as ethical, failures. Directors who distort or withhold knowledge demonstrate epistemic arrogance: the refusal to acknowledge evidentiary uncertainty, revise corporate narratives, or respond to critical scrutiny. In *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), I identified such conduct as violations of fiduciary openness—the failure to recognise that fiduciary accountability is inherently epistemic, requiring intellectual honesty and humility.

Accordingly, institutional fiduciary breaches must be understood as failures of epistemic responsibility grounded in the absence of epistemic humility. Breaches of loyalty, trust, or transparency reveal not only moral but epistemic negligence. Recognising this epistemic dimension reframes fiduciary accountability: it positions

humility, openness, and intellectual honesty as the defining virtues through which fiduciaries sustain both ethical integrity and the epistemic legitimacy of the institutions they serve.

5. Scholarly and Institutional Implications

5.1 Epistemic Fiduciary Duties: Scholarly Implications

Reconceptualising fiduciary duties as inherently epistemic and grounded in epistemic humility substantially reorients traditional fiduciary theory, reshaping contemporary debates around fiduciary openness and epistemic accountability. Classical fiduciary scholarship, particularly that of Lionel Smith (2014) and Paul B. Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016), has framed fiduciary obligations primarily as ethical responsibilities rooted in trust, relational fidelity, and good faith. While conceptually robust, this body of work has largely overlooked the epistemic dimension that underpins fiduciary relationships. My contribution addresses this omission by demonstrating that fiduciary obligations inherently embody epistemic virtues—most notably epistemic humility—thereby expanding fiduciary theory beyond its conventional ethical framing.

Smith (2014) defines fiduciary duties of loyalty, good faith, and openness as core relational ethics, while Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016) characterises them as status-based obligations founded on trust and vulnerability. Yet neither account recognises the epistemic undercurrents that sustain these duties—epistemic openness, honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to critique. My argument foregrounds these epistemic elements, revising the fiduciary framework to reveal that fiduciary obligations are not merely ethical commitments toward persons but also epistemic duties toward truth and knowledge.

This epistemic reframing constitutes a distinctive conceptual innovation. By defining fiduciary openness and honesty as epistemic virtues grounded in epistemic humility, I extend fiduciary theory beyond its ethical boundaries and integrate it into a unified fiduciary–epistemic paradigm. In this model, ethical and epistemic virtues converge under a single normative architecture in which epistemic humility operates as the foundational virtue of fiduciary accountability.

Consequently, fiduciary scholarship must now engage directly with epistemic concepts—humility, critical openness, intellectual honesty, and responsiveness to evidence—as integral to its theoretical vocabulary. My work thus advances the field beyond the frameworks developed by Smith and Miller, transforming fiduciary theory into a more comprehensive model of epistemic responsibility. This shift represents a significant philosophical innovation: it situates fiduciary accountability within the broader ethics of knowing, redefining fiduciary duty as a commitment not only to trust and loyalty but to the integrity of knowledge itself.

5.2 Institutional and Practical Implications

Recognising fiduciary duties as epistemic responsibilities carries profound institutional implications, reshaping governance practices across higher education, corporate boards, and broader accountability frameworks. By integrating epistemic humility into fiduciary obligations, institutions can cultivate policies that promote transparency, openness, critical responsiveness, and accountability—virtues essential to epistemic justice and institutional integrity (Barnett, 2014, 2018; Kahl, 2025b, 2025d, 2025f).

Within higher education governance, Ronald Barnett’s analysis of institutional epistemic responsibility provides a crucial foundation. Barnett (2018) identifies universities as fiduciaries of knowledge, entrusted with obligations of openness, humility, and responsiveness to critique. My conceptual development extends his framework into concrete policy proposals by reframing these epistemic responsibilities as fiduciary duties owed both to institutional stakeholders and to the wider epistemic community.

Policy Example 1: Institutional Epistemic Accountability Committees

Universities should establish formal *Institutional Epistemic Accountability Committees* comprising faculty, students, and independent experts, charged with reviewing decisions affecting knowledge production and dissemination. Guided by the principle of epistemic humility, these committees would ensure transparency through the critical evaluation of institutional claims, oversight of suppressed or contested research, and accountability for responsiveness to legitimate epistemic critique. Such committees operationalise fiduciary openness by embedding epistemic humility directly into institutional governance processes.

Policy Example 2: Corporate Fiduciary Transparency Protocol

Corporate boards should adopt a *Fiduciary Transparency Protocol* requiring directors to disclose epistemic uncertainties, conflicting evidence, and alternative scenarios when reporting to stakeholders. Directors must explicitly acknowledge the limits of their knowledge, invite independent scrutiny, and respond publicly to credible epistemic challenges. This protocol operationalises epistemic humility in corporate governance, ensuring that fiduciary decisions demonstrate not only ethical fidelity but also intellectual honesty, critical openness, and epistemic accountability.

More broadly, institutional accountability frameworks across sectors would benefit from adopting epistemic fiduciary principles. Institutions that embed epistemic humility and openness into their governance structures align fiduciary practice with epistemic integrity, thereby fostering healthier epistemic cultures. Policy adoption of these principles mitigates epistemic injustice, promotes intellectual transparency, and supports organisational environments committed to rigorous critical inquiry and trustworthiness.

In summary, this conceptual development extends Barnett’s notion of institutional epistemic responsibility into the domain of fiduciary governance. By recognising fiduciary duties as epistemic responsibilities grounded in epistemic humility, institutions can strengthen transparency, accountability, and justice—enhancing both the ethical and epistemic legitimacy of governance across educational, corporate, and public domains.

6. Counterarguments and Assertive Responses

6.1 Addressing Potential Objections

In advancing the claim that fiduciary duties are inherently epistemic and grounded in epistemic humility, it is necessary to anticipate and systematically address two principal objections.

Objection 1: Epistemic Duties Lack Normative Force

Critics may argue that epistemic duties are merely intellectual obligations rather than genuinely normative ones. From this perspective, epistemic virtues such as humility, openness, and intellectual honesty might

appear as desirable cognitive dispositions without the binding moral authority typically associated with ethical duties. This objection, however, misconstrues the normative dimension intrinsic to epistemic virtue. As I have argued in *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (Kahl, 2025f), epistemic humility entails obligations that directly affect epistemic relationships, institutional integrity, and fiduciary accountability. When institutions or fiduciaries fail epistemically—through arrogance, dishonesty, or opacity—they violate not only intellectual ideals but normative responsibilities owed to those who rely on their epistemic trustworthiness.

Concrete evidence underscores how epistemic failures translate into normative breaches. The collapse of Enron provides a paradigmatic example: the company's directors engaged in systematic misrepresentation of financial data, demonstrating epistemic dishonesty and refusal to acknowledge contrary evidence. This was not a mere intellectual lapse but a breach of fiduciary duty grounded in epistemic arrogance. The United States Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs (2002) report, *The Role of the Board of Directors in Enron's Collapse*, documents how the board's epistemic irresponsibility directly precipitated severe ethical and fiduciary violations, thereby illustrating the normative force of epistemic virtue.

Similarly, within higher education, my analysis in *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* (Kahl, 2025b) details cases in which institutional fiduciaries suppressed critical research findings concerning systemic discrimination—acts substantiated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) inquiry, *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged*. The EHRC found that university administrators' refusal to engage transparently with evidence and criticism constituted not only procedural failings but breaches of fiduciary responsibility rooted in epistemic arrogance. These examples confirm that epistemic virtues possess genuine normative weight: they are essential conditions for institutional trust, transparency, and justice.

Thus, epistemic duties carry normative authority equivalent to ethical duties. This conclusion is consistent with fiduciary theory as articulated by Smith (2014) and Miller (Miller & Gold, 2016), as well as with my own framework in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl, 2025d), all of which affirm that epistemic humility is a fiduciary necessity, not a mere intellectual preference.

Objection 2: Ethical Primacy over Epistemic Virtue

A second objection contends that epistemic virtues depend upon ethical foundations—that epistemic responsibilities are derivative of pre-existing moral commitments such as honesty, loyalty, and openness. This argument assumes a hierarchical structure that privileges ethics over epistemology. However, this hierarchy fails to recognise that these very ethical commitments presuppose epistemic virtues. Ethical honesty requires epistemic accountability; ethical openness depends on epistemic openness; and ethical fidelity rests upon humility regarding epistemic limits. In each case, the ethical obligation derives its coherence and legitimacy from epistemic virtue.

As my analysis throughout this paper demonstrates, epistemic virtues are not subordinate to ethical ones but constitute their necessary conditions. Ethical practice is sustainable only when informed by epistemic humility—the recognition of fallibility, receptivity to critique, and commitment to truth. Far from diminishing ethical normativity, this perspective grounds it more securely by situating it within the epistemic conditions that render moral judgement possible.

Accordingly, by grounding fiduciary duties in epistemic humility, I demonstrate that epistemic duties possess independent normative authority equivalent to ethical obligations. Epistemic humility functions as the foundational virtue upon which ethical duties necessarily depend, thereby rebutting both objections and affirming the intrinsic normativity of epistemic virtues.

6.2 Epistemic Duties as Intrinsically Normative

My final position maintains that epistemic duties are intrinsically normative, capable of existing independently from traditional ethical frameworks. Epistemic humility—defined by openness to critique, recognition of cognitive limits, and responsiveness to evidence—embodies this intrinsic normativity. Fiduciaries who acknowledge epistemic limits, practise transparency, and critically engage with alternative evidence do not merely meet intellectual expectations; they fulfil binding normative obligations essential to fiduciary accountability, institutional integrity, and epistemic justice (Kahl, 2025d; 2025f).

Epistemic duties derive their normative force from their direct influence on trust, accountability, and relational responsibility. Fiduciaries who fail epistemically—through arrogance, dishonesty, or deliberate opacity—undermine the fiduciary relationship itself, which depends on trust and epistemic credibility. Such failures constitute normative breaches as grave as ethical violations of loyalty or honesty. The normative dimension articulated through epistemic humility therefore establishes epistemic duties as genuinely moral in character rather than merely intellectual or auxiliary to ethical norms.

Accordingly, epistemic duties grounded in epistemic humility stand as independent normative obligations vital to institutional accountability, fiduciary integrity, and epistemic justice. Demonstrating that fiduciary responsibility is epistemically grounded—particularly through the paradigmatic virtue of epistemic humility—confirms the intrinsic normativity of epistemic duties. This recognition strengthens fiduciary theory by unifying ethical and epistemic virtues within a coherent normative framework, affirming epistemic humility as the foundational virtue of both fiduciary accountability and institutional governance.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Reassertion of Original Contribution

This paper has advanced an original philosophical framework integrating fiduciary theory and epistemic virtue ethics through the concept of epistemic transposition. By demonstrating that ethical duties—traditionally conceived as purely moral obligations—are fundamentally epistemic in nature and grounded in epistemic humility, the argument marks a decisive departure from established fiduciary and epistemological discourse. Reconceptualising fiduciary duties such as openness, honesty, and loyalty as epistemic obligations owed toward knowledge reveals that epistemic humility underlies fiduciary responsibility, institutional accountability, and ethical conduct itself.

The originality of this contribution lies in unifying previously distinct intellectual traditions: fiduciary theory (Smith, 2014; Miller & Gold, 2016), epistemic governance (Barnett, 2014, 2018), and epistemic accountability (Kahl, 2025b, 2025d, 2025f). This synthesis establishes a coherent philosophical and practical framework in which epistemic virtues function as the normative foundations of fiduciary duties. Within this framework, epistemic humility emerges as an intrinsically normative virtue—essential not only for epistemic integrity but also for the ethical responsibilities that define fiduciary relationships.

Accordingly, this paper redefines fiduciary and ethical obligations as inherently epistemic, affirming epistemic humility as the foundational virtue of responsible knowing, institutional governance, and fiduciary accountability. This reconceptualisation constitutes a significant philosophical innovation, extending and

challenging current fiduciary scholarship and virtue epistemology by demonstrating that epistemic duties are intrinsically normative and form the very ground of ethical responsibility.

7.2 Future Directions and Scholarly Trajectory

The philosophical innovations articulated in this paper establish a foundation for sustained interdisciplinary research across epistemology, ethics, fiduciary law, and institutional governance. Future inquiry should extend the epistemic transposition framework by examining additional epistemic virtues—such as epistemic courage, resilience, and justice—as normative foundations within fiduciary theory. Exploring how these virtues interact with epistemic humility will deepen understanding of the normative architecture of fiduciary-epistemic ethics.

Further research should also pursue institutional and policy applications of epistemic humility across domains such as public administration, corporate governance, and higher education. Empirical investigations into the influence of epistemic humility on transparency, accountability, and epistemic culture would validate and extend the theoretical contributions presented here.

Interdisciplinary engagement—drawing from law, organisational theory, and political epistemology—will further advance the field of epistemic fiduciary theory. Collectively, these efforts outline a coherent research agenda uniting ethical, legal, and epistemological approaches to trust and governance.

This paper constitutes Part I of the research series *Epistemic Humility as the Architecture of Duty*. Part II, titled *From Epistemic Humility to Fiduciary Cognition: Re-founding Ethical Duty as Epistemic Governance*, will extend this inquiry by developing a dynamic model of fiduciary cognition that operationalises epistemic humility as the governing principle of ethical and institutional systems. Together, these studies form a unified philosophical project redefining fiduciary responsibility as epistemic governance—demonstrating that the future of ethical duty lies in the governance of knowing itself.



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Version History

Version	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
1	Initial release	None	2025-06-21
2	Added an abstract-style image. Added revision history section.	None/minimal	2025-08-03
3	Version 3 constitutes a comprehensive scholarly and structural refinement. Major updates include: Series Integration: Explicit designation of the paper as Part I of the research series <i>Epistemic Humility as the Architecture of Duty</i> , establishing continuity with the forthcoming Part II: <i>From Epistemic Humility to Fiduciary Cognition</i> . Abstract and Framing Revision: Abstract rewritten to foreground epistemic transposition and fiduciary cognition, clarifying the unification of epistemic virtue ethics and fiduciary theory. Enhanced Scholarly Apparatus: Citations reformatted to full Harvard/APA style, new references integrated (Barnett 2014, 2018; Miller & Gold 2016; etc.), and bibliography reorganised into distinct categories (works by Kahl / books & journals / reports). Stylistic and Structural Modernisation: Section numbering tightened; prose refined for concision and precision; metadata block, DOI citation, and Creative Commons licence formalised. Publisher Attribution: Now published by Lex et Ratio Ltd, with institutional description and author metadata consolidated.	The transition from v2 to v3 transforms the work from a stand-alone essay into the foundational component of a systematic research programme. By formalising the notion that epistemic duties are intrinsically normative, v3 elevates epistemic humility from a moral virtue to the constitutive principle of fiduciary ethics and governance. This repositioning deepens the epistemic architecture of the argument—linking fiduciary accountability, epistemic justice, and institutional trust under a unified normative framework—and establishes the theoretical platform upon which Part II will construct the model of fiduciary cognition.	2025-10-27