

Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties

A Philosophical and Fiduciary Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Knowledge

Peter Kahl; published 21 June 2025 on Substack

Abstract

This paper introduces the novel philosophical framework of ‘epistemic transposition’, arguing that fiduciary and ethical duties traditionally viewed as purely moral obligations are fundamentally epistemic, grounded in epistemic humility. By reframing fiduciary duties such as openness, honesty, and loyalty as inherently epistemic responsibilities toward knowledge, the paper significantly advances fiduciary theory and epistemic virtue ethics. It positions epistemic humility as a foundational normative virtue essential to fiduciary accountability and institutional governance, thus redefining how fiduciary obligations and ethical responsibilities are understood and operationalised. This reconceptualisation contributes a groundbreaking theoretical integration, reshaping philosophical discourses around epistemic responsibility, fiduciary openness, and institutional accountability.

Keywords

epistemic humility, epistemic transposition, fiduciary theory, fiduciary duties, epistemic virtue ethics, institutional governance, epistemic accountability, ethical obligations, fiduciary openness, epistemology, ethics

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1. Statement of Originality and Contribution

1.1 Originality and Intellectual Provenance

In this paper, I propose an original philosophical framework bridging epistemology and ethics through the innovative concept I term ‘epistemic transposition’. Epistemic transposition refers to the reframing of obligations traditionally conceived as ethical—such as loyalty, openness, fidelity, and humility—as inherently epistemic duties owed toward knowledge itself. Central to this approach is the novel and provocative assertion that ethics is fundamentally grounded in epistemic humility, a virtue characterised by recognising the limits of one’s knowledge, openness to revision, and responsiveness to epistemic diversity. By reconceiving ethical obligations as intrinsically epistemic, my argument directly challenges conventional philosophical distinctions between moral and epistemic virtues.

Existing fiduciary literature, notably from Lionel Smith {Smith 2014} and Paul B Miller {Miller 2018}, predominantly conceptualises fiduciary obligations as fundamentally ethical, relational duties emphasising trust, fidelity, and loyalty. Concurrently, Ronald Barnett’s influential scholarship {Barnett 2018; Barnett 2020} underscores institutional obligations toward epistemic humility, openness, and critical inquiry, yet does not connect these epistemic responsibilities to fiduciary duties. Similarly, my previous works—particularly ‘Epistemocracy in Higher Education’ {Kahl 2025}, “Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness” {Kahl 2025}, and ‘Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia’ {Kahl 2025}—identified critical epistemic virtues and fiduciary responsibilities within governance frameworks but stopped short of positioning epistemic humility as foundational to ethics itself.

Therefore, this paper uniquely integrates these previously distinct scholarly discourses, not merely by drawing parallels between ethical and epistemic obligations, but by establishing epistemic humility as the fundamental epistemic virtue upon which all ethical duties inherently depend. This conceptual integration marks a clear and substantial departure from existing philosophical and fiduciary scholarship, constituting a significant original contribution to the field.

1.2 Scholarly Context and Positioning

The scholarly context in which my argument emerges is robust but fragmented. Lionel Smith’s fiduciary theory compellingly articulates fiduciary obligations as inherently relational ethical duties {Smith 2014}. Paul B Miller similarly emphasises fiduciary obligations arising from status-based, relational frameworks grounded in loyalty, trust, and fidelity {Miller 2018}. Despite their sophistication, both Smith and Miller overlook the inherently epistemic dimensions underlying fiduciary obligations—particularly transparency, openness to new evidence, and critical intellectual humility.

Ronald Barnett’s scholarship critically advances the discourse on institutional epistemic responsibilities and virtues, particularly highlighting epistemic humility as necessary for knowledge integrity within universities {Barnett 2018}. However, Barnett stops short of framing these epistemic virtues as fiduciary obligations or foundational to ethical responsibility more broadly.

My prior scholarship has begun addressing these intersections, outlining fiduciary epistemic duties within higher education governance (‘Epistemocracy in Higher Education’ {Kahl 2025}), corporate governance (“Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness” {Kahl 2025}), and epistemic justice frameworks

(‘Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia’ {Kahl 2025}). Yet, even this body of work has not previously asserted that epistemic humility is foundational to ethics itself.

Therefore, this paper occupies a unique scholarly position by synthesising and extending these disparate discourses into a unified philosophical theory. My claim that epistemic humility grounds ethical obligations is novel, integrating fiduciary theory, epistemic virtue ethics, and epistemic governance literature into a coherent and original philosophical contribution.

1.3 Contribution and Impact

My assertion that epistemic humility constitutes the foundational virtue of ethics profoundly reshapes existing philosophical discourses on epistemic virtue, fiduciary accountability, and governance. By framing ethical obligations as inherently epistemic, I provide a robust philosophical foundation for rethinking moral duties in terms of epistemic responsibility. This reconceptualisation contributes significantly to ongoing philosophical discussions around epistemic justice, fiduciary openness, and the normative foundations of ethics itself.

The impact of this argument extends well beyond academic philosophy. Practically, institutions in education, governance, and fiduciary law stand to benefit from adopting epistemic humility as a foundational governance principle. Such a conceptual shift encourages policies of greater transparency, intellectual openness, responsiveness to criticism, and accountability—virtues essential for addressing epistemic injustices and fostering healthier epistemic cultures.

In sum, this paper contributes a groundbreaking philosophical argument with substantial implications for both scholarly debate and institutional practice, positioning epistemic humility as the essential normative foundation for ethical and fiduciary responsibility.

2. Contextualising Ethics and Epistemology

2.1 Normative Foundations of Ethics and Epistemology

In asserting epistemic humility as foundational to ethical responsibility, it is crucial to clarify the conceptual overlap between the normative structures underpinning both ethics and epistemology. Traditionally, ethics has addressed normative obligations as duties owed primarily to others—grounded in relationships of trust, reciprocity, and responsibility. In contrast, epistemology has conventionally framed its normative dimension as duties owed towards knowledge itself—such as the pursuit of truth, intellectual honesty, and openness to evidence. However, upon closer analysis, these disciplinary boundaries blur significantly. Indeed, normative epistemic obligations—such as openness to alternative viewpoints, responsiveness to evidence, and awareness of one’s epistemic limits—mirror ethical virtues and responsibilities, suggesting that ethics and epistemology share a deeper, unified normative foundation.

Ronald Barnett’s analysis of epistemic responsibilities in institutions powerfully illustrates this normative convergence. Barnett argues persuasively that universities and similar institutions hold duties not only towards individuals or groups but fundamentally towards knowledge itself {Barnett 2018}. Institutional epistemic responsibilities, for Barnett, include cultivating openness to criticism, intellectual humility, and

transparency in knowledge production—virtues traditionally recognised within ethical frameworks. By framing these epistemic virtues as normative obligations central to institutional accountability, Barnett implicitly acknowledges a crucial overlap between ethical and epistemic duties, albeit without integrating these duties as fiduciary in character.

Building upon and extending Barnett’s insights, in my previous work—particularly ‘Epistemocracy in Higher Education’ {Kahl 2025} and ‘Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia’ {Kahl 2025}—I have argued for a governance model based on fiduciary accountability to epistemic responsibilities. Epistemocracy proposes that institutions must uphold fiduciary duties toward knowledge as rigorously as traditional fiduciary duties towards persons. Under this model, ethical duties, such as honesty, fairness, and accountability, seamlessly translate into epistemic virtues—intellectual honesty, epistemic openness, and epistemic humility—thus underscoring an inherent normative unity. Here, the conceptual distinction between ethics and epistemology dissolves into a shared normative structure, wherein duties toward others necessarily embody epistemic responsibilities, and epistemic duties reciprocally presuppose ethical commitments to honesty, respect, and humility.

Further theoretical grounding for this normative unity can be found in broader virtue epistemology scholarship. Miranda Fricker’s influential concept of epistemic injustice illustrates how epistemic failures—such as ignoring or dismissing marginalised epistemic perspectives—constitute normative breaches with profound ethical consequences {Fricker 2007}. Similarly, José Medina emphasises epistemic virtues such as openness, responsiveness, and resistance to epistemic arrogance, arguing they are essential for overcoming structural ignorance and injustice {Medina 2013}. Both scholars compellingly demonstrate that epistemic virtues possess inherent normative significance, reinforcing the argument that epistemic responsibilities underpin and enable ethical practices. This theoretical alignment is further supported by scholarship on epistemic trust and normativity, such as Catherine Elgin’s account of intellectual humility within epistemic communities (*True Enough*, 2017) and Ernest Sosa’s framework of epistemic normativity through virtue epistemology (*Epistemic Explanations*, 2021), both underscoring how epistemic virtues fundamentally guide responsible knowledge practices.

In short, my prior scholarship, together with Barnett’s institutional analyses and virtue epistemology perspectives from Fricker and Medina, demonstrates clearly that ethical obligations and epistemic virtues share a foundational normative structure. This normative unity provides robust philosophical justification for my claim that epistemic humility serves as the fundamental virtue underpinning ethical responsibility itself.

2.2 Fiduciary Foundations

The fiduciary theories developed notably by Lionel Smith {Smith 2014} and Paul B Miller {Miller 2018} provide a robust conceptual framework for articulating relational duties that arise inherently from trust-based relationships. Smith’s characterisation of fiduciary duties emphasises obligations such as loyalty, good faith, and fidelity, which are not merely contractual but deeply normative, relationally grounded responsibilities. Miller similarly advances this fiduciary conception, highlighting fiduciary duties as status-based relational obligations predicated on trust, vulnerability, and reciprocal expectations of honesty and loyalty. These fiduciary obligations, while typically framed as ethical, implicitly entail significant epistemic responsibilities—particularly transparency, openness, honesty in information-sharing, and recognition of epistemic limits.

Fiduciary relationships, by their very nature, inherently encompass epistemic duties. Directors of companies, trustees, and institutional fiduciaries must exercise epistemic humility, recognising the limits of their knowledge, transparently sharing information, and maintaining openness to alternative perspectives and

contrary evidence. These duties—traditionally seen as ethical obligations—clearly align with epistemic virtues such as intellectual honesty, openness, and humility. In my prior work, “Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness” {Kahl 2025}, I identified these epistemic obligations as fundamental fiduciary duties. There, I argued that directors have an fiduciary duty not only to stakeholders but also to knowledge itself, requiring openness to epistemic critique and responsiveness to new evidence.

Thus, fiduciary theory provides essential conceptual foundations for the epistemic transposition articulated here. My integration of fiduciary duties with epistemic humility builds upon, yet importantly advances beyond, Smith and Miller’s fiduciary theory. While they frame fiduciary obligations primarily as ethical duties toward other parties, my reframing recognises fiduciary duties as intrinsically epistemic obligations grounded in epistemic humility. This conceptualisation represents a significant philosophical innovation, unifying fiduciary and epistemic virtues under the shared normative structure outlined above.

Consequently, fiduciary relationships become paradigmatic examples of how epistemic duties underpin ethical responsibilities, highlighting how epistemic humility forms the normative foundation of fiduciary obligations. This alignment not only confirms the conceptual coherence of epistemic transposition but also reinforces my broader philosophical claim: ethical duties themselves are fundamentally epistemic, grounded in epistemic humility as the core normative virtue.

3. Epistemic Humility as Paradigmatic Transposition

3.1 Epistemic Humility Defined and Defended

Epistemic humility is the virtue that acknowledges the inherent limits of one’s knowledge, encompassing an openness to critical self-reflection, responsiveness to new evidence, and readiness to revise one’s beliefs {‘Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia’, Kahl 2025}. As such, epistemic humility fundamentally rejects epistemic arrogance—the presumption of infallibility or absolute certainty—by emphasising the provisional and fallible nature of human understanding. This virtue demands a continual reassessment of one’s epistemic stance, recognising that knowledge claims must be subjected to critical scrutiny and open to correction and refinement.

In my previous scholarship, notably in ‘Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia’ {Kahl 2025}, I have argued that epistemic humility represents not merely an intellectual virtue but an inherently normative virtue, one essential to fair and equitable epistemic relationships. Ronald Barnett similarly foregrounds epistemic humility within institutional epistemic virtues, framing humility as critical to ensuring epistemic integrity within educational institutions {Barnett 2020}. Barnett argues that epistemic humility underpins the ethical and intellectual commitments of institutions by cultivating an environment receptive to dialogue, critique, and continual self-reflection. Here, epistemic humility directly mirrors moral humility within ethical contexts—the virtue characterised by openness, modesty, and the recognition of one’s fallibility in moral judgement.

Epistemic humility’s inherently normative character thus parallels moral humility’s role in ethical theory, as both virtues emphasise a fundamental respect for the perspectives and knowledge claims of others. Just as moral humility fosters ethical relationships grounded in mutual respect and openness, epistemic humility ensures healthy epistemic relationships characterised by openness to alternative viewpoints, respect for

intellectual diversity, and commitment to epistemic justice. Consequently, epistemic humility is not merely desirable but normative—an obligatory virtue essential to responsible epistemic conduct, particularly within fiduciary and institutional contexts.

3.2 Transposing Ethical to Epistemic Duties

At the core of my argument is the assertion that fiduciary duties, traditionally understood as ethical obligations—such as loyalty, fidelity, openness, and honesty—intrinsically embody epistemic virtues. Fiduciary duties, grounded in relational trust and accountability, necessitate openness to critical scrutiny, honesty in information disclosure, and humility regarding one’s epistemic capacities. These ethical duties inevitably entail epistemic responsibilities: transparency requires openness to evidence, honesty demands intellectual integrity, and fidelity presupposes humility in recognising epistemic limitations.

Lionel Smith’s fiduciary theory {Smith 2014} articulates fiduciary duties primarily in ethical terms, emphasising obligations of loyalty and good faith. Paul B Miller similarly identifies fiduciary obligations as inherently relational, grounded in trust and vulnerability {Miller 2018}. However, each of these ethical duties implicitly presupposes epistemic virtues. Loyalty and good faith require honesty in information-sharing and openness to epistemic challenges. Fidelity implicitly demands recognition of potential epistemic fallibility and thus openness to corrective evidence and alternative epistemic perspectives.

Similarly, Ronald Barnett’s conceptualisation of epistemic virtue within higher education governance highlights institutional duties of epistemic openness, humility, and integrity {Barnett 2020}. Educational fiduciaries—such as university administrators or academic leaders—possess ethical obligations toward fairness, transparency, and accountability that are fundamentally epistemic in nature. Institutional openness to critical evaluation, accountability for knowledge dissemination, and responsiveness to epistemic diversity reflect fiduciary openness and humility. As I have argued in my earlier work, particularly in *Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* {Kahl 2025}, fiduciary roles inherently demand openness to new knowledge, honest reflection on epistemic practices, and humility in recognising epistemic limits.

Concrete examples clearly illustrate this epistemic transposition. Corporate directors who disclose accurate financial information to stakeholders fulfil ethical duties of honesty and openness. However, underlying these ethical duties are epistemic obligations: honesty entails epistemic accountability regarding knowledge claims, and openness requires responsiveness to epistemic criticism and alternative evidence. Likewise, academic leaders responsible for institutional policies embody ethical fiduciary duties of fairness and integrity by ensuring robust and open knowledge practices—duties epistemic in nature, grounded in epistemic humility.

In sum, fiduciary duties traditionally framed ethically—loyalty, fidelity, openness—are inherently epistemic, grounded in epistemic humility. This transposition does not merely draw analogies between ethical and epistemic virtues; rather, it recognises that ethical duties fundamentally presuppose epistemic virtues, rendering epistemic humility foundational to both fiduciary and ethical responsibility.

3.3 Clarifying the Conceptual Priority of Epistemic Virtues

One potential philosophical resistance to my argument might arise from the provocative claim that epistemic virtues, specifically epistemic humility, serve as foundational to ethics. Traditionally, philosophical scholarship has privileged ethical norms as foundational to other normative systems, assuming epistemic virtues to be

derivative or secondary. However, my position intentionally inverts this hierarchy, not to diminish ethical duties, but rather to clarify their deeper epistemic underpinnings.

My claim of epistemic priority does not imply ethical duties lack normative significance; rather, it acknowledges that ethical conduct presupposes certain epistemic commitments. Ethical obligations such as honesty, fairness, and openness inherently depend on epistemic responsibilities—acknowledging one’s epistemic limits, openness to criticism, and responsiveness to evidence. Without epistemic humility, ethical virtues risk deteriorating into dogmatic or arbitrary dictates disconnected from reality or evidence. Thus, my assertion of epistemic priority recognises epistemic virtues as preconditions enabling authentic ethical practice, not as competitors to ethical norms.

To critics who fear this priority might reduce ethics to mere intellectual obligations, I respond that this misunderstands the deeply normative nature of epistemic virtues themselves. Epistemic humility is not simply an intellectual preference, but a binding normative duty essential for any meaningful ethical relationship. Hence, rather than diminishing ethical norms, my positioning of epistemic virtues as foundational enriches ethical theory, offering a clearer and more coherent philosophical grounding of both epistemic and ethical responsibilities.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that epistemic humility alone may not directly resolve all ethical dilemmas or fully guide ethical practice in every context. Complex moral situations often require the interplay of multiple virtues—including courage, compassion, and justice—alongside epistemic humility. Thus, while epistemic humility underpins ethical responsibility and fiduciary openness, it is not exhaustive, but rather one critical element within a broader normative framework.

4. Institutional Fiduciary Duties as Epistemic Duties

4.1 The Fiduciary-Epistemic Nexus

Institutional fiduciaries, such as corporate directors, trustees, and university administrators, hold fiduciary obligations traditionally understood as ethical duties rooted in relationships of trust, fidelity, and accountability. However, these fiduciary responsibilities necessarily extend beyond purely ethical obligations, encompassing epistemic duties grounded in epistemic humility. Fiduciary relationships inherently require openness, honesty, transparency, and responsiveness to epistemic criticism—duties that are intrinsically epistemic, as they directly concern how fiduciaries handle, share, and validate knowledge claims.

Lionel Smith emphasises fiduciary duties as ethical obligations stemming from relationships characterised by trust and good faith, highlighting openness and loyalty as central fiduciary virtues (Smith 2014). Paul B Miller similarly characterises fiduciary relationships as fundamentally relational obligations defined by the expectation of trustworthiness and fidelity, particularly emphasising openness as essential to fiduciary accountability (Miller 2018). Yet, these obligations implicitly carry substantial epistemic dimensions. Fiduciary openness and honesty entail epistemic duties, such as transparent disclosure of relevant knowledge, intellectual honesty in representing facts and circumstances, and openness to contrary or critical evidence.

In my previous work, “Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness” (Kahl 2025), I articulated how fiduciary roles inherently embody epistemic obligations. Corporate directors, for example, possess fiduciary

responsibilities toward shareholders and stakeholders, requiring not only ethical fidelity and loyalty but also epistemic transparency. Directors' fiduciary duties include epistemic responsibilities to validate and communicate information honestly, respond critically to challenges regarding corporate knowledge claims, and demonstrate epistemic humility by acknowledging uncertainties and limitations.

Similarly, within higher education governance, university administrators and academic leaders hold fiduciary responsibilities toward faculty, students, and institutional stakeholders—responsibilities that include epistemic duties. Institutional fiduciaries must transparently manage knowledge creation, dissemination, and critique. These epistemic obligations are necessarily founded upon epistemic humility, as institutional fiduciaries must remain open to diverse intellectual perspectives, willing to revise institutional knowledge claims when confronted by contrary evidence or critique. Here again, epistemic humility underpins fiduciary openness, aligning with fiduciary theory outlined by Smith and Miller, while extending their ethical fiduciary conceptions into epistemic territory.

Thus, institutional fiduciaries' obligations, while traditionally viewed as ethical duties toward others, inherently constitute epistemic obligations toward knowledge itself. Fiduciary openness, honesty, and transparency embody epistemic virtues, establishing epistemic humility as foundational to fiduciary accountability.

4.2 Institutional Failures as Epistemic Failures

Institutional fiduciary breaches often reflect epistemic arrogance or a fundamental neglect of epistemic humility. Failures traditionally categorised as ethical—such as breaches of trust, loyalty, or transparency—in fact represent significant epistemic failings rooted in an unwillingness to recognise epistemic limits, revise beliefs, or engage critically with alternative perspectives. Consequently, institutional accountability failures illustrate epistemic irresponsibility, as fiduciaries demonstrate insufficient openness to critical inquiry or epistemic diversity.

Within higher education, institutional breaches frequently exemplify epistemic arrogance, particularly when administrators or academic leaders dismiss legitimate epistemic critique, refuse transparency in institutional decision-making, or resist the revision of entrenched institutional knowledge claims. In *Epistemocracy in Higher Education* {Kahl 2025}, I documented specific cases where universities failed in their fiduciary responsibilities precisely by ignoring epistemic humility, resisting accountability, and thereby undermining institutional epistemic integrity. For example, university administrators have sometimes suppressed critical research findings to protect institutional reputations, representing epistemic arrogance—refusal to accept valid criticism or evidence contrary to preferred institutional narratives. Such epistemic failures, while ethically problematic, fundamentally reflect fiduciary epistemic irresponsibility grounded in a lack of epistemic humility.

Similarly, in corporate governance, fiduciary breaches such as inaccurate financial disclosures or deliberate concealment of relevant information represent epistemic failures. Directors who misrepresent corporate knowledge or refuse transparency in corporate decision-making not only breach ethical fiduciary obligations but fail epistemically—demonstrating epistemic arrogance through refusal to acknowledge evidentiary limitations, revise corporate narratives, or respond to critical epistemic challenges. In my prior analysis, “Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness” (Kahl 2025), I identified such epistemic failures as breaches of fiduciary openness—failures to acknowledge the inherently epistemic dimension of fiduciary accountability.

Thus, institutional fiduciary breaches fundamentally reflect epistemic irresponsibility grounded in epistemic arrogance. Institutional failures traditionally categorised as ethical breaches—violations of loyalty, trust, transparency, or accountability—are fundamentally epistemic, arising from fiduciaries’ neglect of epistemic humility. Recognising this epistemic dimension significantly strengthens fiduciary accountability frameworks by clearly defining fiduciary obligations as epistemically grounded in humility, openness, and intellectual honesty.

5. Scholarly and Institutional Implications

5.1 Epistemic Fiduciary Duties: Scholarly Implications

My reconceptualisation of fiduciary duties as inherently epistemic, grounded in epistemic humility, significantly revises traditional fiduciary theory, reshaping ongoing scholarly debates regarding fiduciary openness and epistemic accountability. Traditional fiduciary scholarship, notably by Lionel Smith (Smith 2014) and Paul B Miller (Miller 2018), has predominantly framed fiduciary obligations as ethical responsibilities rooted in trust, relational fidelity, and good faith. While foundationally robust, their scholarship has consistently overlooked the epistemic dimension underpinning fiduciary relationships. My conceptual innovation fills this scholarly gap by asserting that fiduciary obligations inherently embody epistemic virtues, particularly epistemic humility, thereby expanding fiduciary theory beyond its traditional ethical framing.

Smith emphasises fiduciary duties of loyalty, good faith, and openness as fundamentally relational ethical obligations (Smith 2014). Miller similarly characterises fiduciary duties as status-based relational obligations defined by trustworthiness and fidelity (Miller 2018). However, neither recognises the epistemic dimensions underlying these fiduciary duties—dimensions such as epistemic openness, honesty, transparency, and critical responsiveness. My foregrounding of epistemic responsibilities significantly revises their fiduciary framework, compelling scholars to reconsider fiduciary obligations as duties toward knowledge itself.

My unique conceptual contribution lies precisely in this epistemic reframing. By clearly defining fiduciary openness and honesty as epistemic virtues grounded in epistemic humility, I significantly extend fiduciary theory beyond traditional ethical boundaries. Consequently, fiduciary scholars must now account for epistemic responsibilities as central, not peripheral, to fiduciary obligations. This revision fundamentally reshapes fiduciary theory by unifying ethical and epistemic virtues under a coherent normative framework.

In doing so, my work transforms scholarly debates on fiduciary openness, accountability, and relational duties. Fiduciary theory must now engage epistemic concepts such as humility, critical openness, intellectual honesty, and responsiveness to epistemic critique. Thus, my reconceptualisation broadens fiduciary scholarship, establishing epistemic humility as foundational to fiduciary accountability itself, marking a significant philosophical innovation and advancement beyond Smith’s and Miller’s earlier contributions.

5.2 Institutional and Practical Implications

The practical and institutional implications of recognising fiduciary duties as epistemic responsibilities are substantial, reshaping policy frameworks across higher education governance, corporate fiduciary governance, and broader institutional epistemic accountability frameworks. By integrating epistemic humility into fiduciary

obligations, institutions can establish more robust policies ensuring greater transparency, openness, critical responsiveness, and accountability—virtues foundational to epistemic justice and institutional integrity.

Within higher education governance, Ronald Barnett’s analysis of institutional epistemic responsibilities [Barnett 2018] serves as a foundational starting point. Barnett articulates institutional obligations toward knowledge production, dissemination, and integrity, emphasising virtues such as openness, intellectual humility, and responsiveness to critique. My conceptual development extends Barnett’s foundational ideas into concrete policy recommendations, framing these epistemic responsibilities as fiduciary duties owed to institutional stakeholders and the broader epistemic community.

Policy Example 1: Institutional Epistemic Accountability Committees

Universities should establish formal Institutional Epistemic Accountability Committees composed of faculty, students, and external experts, specifically tasked with reviewing institutional decisions affecting knowledge production and dissemination. These committees, guided by epistemic humility principles, would ensure transparency by critically assessing institutional claims, reviewing suppressed or contested research, and holding administrators accountable for responsiveness to legitimate epistemic critique. Such committees operationalise fiduciary openness by recognising epistemic humility in institutional governance processes.

Policy Example 2: Corporate Fiduciary Transparency Protocol

Corporate boards should adopt a formal Fiduciary Transparency Protocol requiring directors to disclose epistemic uncertainties, conflicting evidence, and alternative scenarios when reporting to stakeholders. Directors must openly acknowledge limits to their knowledge, invite external critique, and respond and publicly to credible epistemic challenges. This protocol operationalises epistemic humility, ensuring fiduciary decisions reflect not only ethical fidelity but intellectual honesty, critical openness, and accountability to stakeholders.

More broadly, institutional epistemic accountability frameworks will similarly benefit from adoption of epistemic fiduciary principles. Institutions embracing epistemic humility, openness, and accountability policies align fiduciary governance with epistemic integrity, fostering healthier epistemic cultures. Policy adoption of epistemic fiduciary principles mitigates epistemic injustice, encourages intellectual openness, and supports institutions committed to rigorous, critical epistemic standards.

In sum, my conceptual development extends Barnett’s foundational institutional epistemic responsibilities into concrete fiduciary governance policies. By recognising fiduciary duties as epistemic responsibilities grounded in epistemic humility, these clearly defined governance policies significantly strengthen institutional governance, enhancing transparency, accountability, intellectual openness, and epistemic justice across educational, corporate, and broader institutional contexts.

6. Counterarguments and Assertive Responses

6.1 Addressing Potential Objections

In advancing my claim that fiduciary duties are inherently epistemic and grounded in epistemic humility, it is necessary to anticipate and assertively dismantle potential counterarguments. Two primary objections must be confronted:

First, critics might argue that epistemic duties are merely intellectual obligations without genuine normative force. According to this objection, epistemic virtues like humility, openness, or intellectual honesty could be viewed as desirable intellectual attributes, lacking the binding normative character traditionally ascribed to ethical duties. However, this position fundamentally misconstrues the normative dimensions inherent in epistemic virtues. Epistemic humility, as I have argued in prior scholarship ('Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia', Kahl 2025), entails normative responsibilities that directly impact epistemic relationships, institutional integrity, and fiduciary accountability. Institutions and fiduciaries failing epistemically—through arrogance, dishonesty, or lack of transparency—not only undermine knowledge practices but breach normative obligations toward stakeholders dependent upon trustworthy epistemic commitments.

Concrete examples, supported by authoritative external inquiries, clearly illustrate how epistemic failures translate into normative breaches. Consider the collapse of Enron: directors' systematic misrepresentation of financial data—exhibiting epistemic dishonesty and refusal to acknowledge contradictory evidence—was not merely an intellectual lapse; it represented a fundamental violation of fiduciary duties grounded in epistemic humility. The authoritative report by the US Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs ('The Role of the Board of Directors in Enron's Collapse', 2002) thoroughly documented how epistemic arrogance at the board level precipitated severe ethical and fiduciary breaches, underscoring the normative force of epistemic virtues.

Similarly, in higher education, documented cases detailed in my work, 'Epistocracy in Higher Education — A Proposal for Fiduciary and Epistemic Accountability in the University' (Kahl 2025), highlight institutional fiduciaries suppressing critical research findings related to systemic racism or discrimination. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission's authoritative inquiry ('Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged', 2019) substantiates this claim, confirming that institutional refusal to transparently engage with evidence and criticism constitutes clear breaches of fiduciary responsibility arising from epistemic arrogance. Such authoritative evidence confirms that epistemic virtues are essential normative requirements foundational to institutional accountability.

Thus, epistemic duties carry normative weight equivalent to ethical duties, grounded in fiduciary theory articulated by Smith (*The Law of Loyalty*, 2014) and Miller ('The Fiduciary Relationship', 2014), as well as in my prior analyses ('Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness', Kahl 2025).

Second, critics might assert ethical primacy as necessary for epistemic duties, suggesting epistemic virtues depend inherently upon ethical foundations rather than existing independently. According to this critique, ethical commitments—such as honesty, loyalty, and openness—necessarily precede and underpin epistemic responsibilities. However, this objection incorrectly assumes a hierarchical normative structure that privileges ethics over epistemology, neglecting the epistemic foundations upon which ethical duties depend. As my analysis demonstrates, ethical duties like honesty, openness, and fidelity implicitly require epistemic virtues of intellectual humility, openness to revision, and responsiveness to epistemic criticism. Ethical openness

presupposes epistemic openness, ethical honesty requires epistemic accountability, and ethical fidelity depends upon humility regarding epistemic limits. Therefore, epistemic virtues underpin ethical responsibilities, challenging the assumption of ethical primacy and establishing epistemic duties as independently normative foundations of fiduciary obligations.

By grounding fiduciary duties in epistemic humility, I demonstrate that epistemic duties possess inherent normative authority equivalent to ethical obligations. Epistemic humility provides a foundational normative virtue upon which ethical duties necessarily depend, thus rebutting these objections by clearly illustrating the intrinsic normativity of epistemic virtues.

6.2 Epistemic Duties as Intrinsically Normative

My final position assertively maintains that epistemic duties are intrinsically normative, capable of independent existence from traditional ethical frameworks. Epistemic humility, characterised by openness to epistemic critique, recognition of knowledge limitations, and responsiveness to evidence, exemplifies this intrinsic normativity. Fiduciaries who acknowledge epistemic limits, demonstrate transparency, and respond critically to alternative evidence do not merely fulfil intellectual expectations—they satisfy normative obligations fundamental to fiduciary accountability, institutional integrity, and epistemic justice.

Epistemic duties derive normative force from their direct impact upon relational trust, accountability, and responsibility. Fiduciaries failing epistemically—through epistemic arrogance, dishonesty, or refusal of openness—undermine fiduciary relationships fundamentally based on trust and accountability. Such epistemic failures represent normative breaches, just as serious as ethical violations like dishonesty or disloyalty. This normative dimension, clearly articulated through epistemic humility, establishes epistemic duties as fundamentally normative rather than purely intellectual or ancillary to ethical duties.

Thus, epistemic duties grounded in epistemic humility represent independent normative obligations essential for institutional accountability, fiduciary integrity, and epistemic justice. My demonstration of fiduciary obligations as epistemically grounded, particularly through the paradigmatic virtue of epistemic humility, clearly illustrates epistemic duties' intrinsic normative character. This normative independence significantly strengthens fiduciary theory, unifying epistemic and ethical virtues within a coherent normative framework, thereby affirming epistemic humility as foundational to fiduciary accountability and institutional governance.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Reassertion of Original Contribution

In this paper, I have advanced an original philosophical framework integrating fiduciary theory and epistemic virtue ethics through the novel concept of epistemic transposition. By asserting that ethical duties—traditionally considered purely moral obligations—are fundamentally epistemic, grounded in epistemic humility, my argument constitutes a significant departure from established fiduciary scholarship and epistemological discourse. Reconceptualising fiduciary duties such as openness, honesty, and loyalty as epistemic obligations owed toward knowledge demonstrates that epistemic humility underpins fiduciary responsibility, institutional accountability, and ethical conduct itself.

The originality of my contribution lies in unifying previously separate scholarly traditions—fiduciary theory (Smith, Miller), epistemic governance (Barnett), and epistemic accountability (Kahl)—into a coherent philosophical and practical framework. This reconceptualisation reshapes scholarly understanding of fiduciary accountability, foregrounding epistemic virtues as normative foundations of fiduciary duties. Consequently, epistemic humility emerges as a fundamental normative virtue, essential not only for epistemic integrity but foundational to ethical responsibilities within fiduciary relationships.

Thus, my paper redefines fiduciary and ethical obligations as inherently epistemic duties, affirming epistemic humility's central role in reshaping epistemic responsibility, institutional governance, and fiduciary accountability frameworks. This authoritative reconceptualisation represents a groundbreaking philosophical innovation, significantly challenging and extending current fiduciary scholarship and epistemic virtue ethics.

7.2 Future Directions and Scholarly Trajectory

The philosophical innovations articulated in this paper establish clear foundations for future interdisciplinary research across epistemology, ethics, fiduciary law, and institutional governance. Future philosophical inquiries should explore additional epistemic virtues beyond humility—such as epistemic courage, resilience, and justice—as normative foundations within fiduciary theory, thereby broadening the epistemic transposition concept introduced here.

Additionally, future institutional and policy-oriented research grounded in my framework should systematically investigate applications of epistemic humility within diverse institutional contexts, including government accountability, corporate fiduciary practices, and educational governance. Empirical studies assessing epistemic humility's institutional impact on governance transparency, accountability measures, and epistemic culture will enhance practical implementation, confirming the theoretical innovations' institutional utility.

Moreover, scholarly engagement across disciplines—including law, organisational studies, and political epistemology—is strongly encouraged, providing robust philosophical and practical frameworks informed by my epistemic fiduciary theory. My reconceptualisation thus sets an interdisciplinary research agenda, bridging philosophy, fiduciary law, ethics, and governance studies. Consequently, future scholarship drawing upon my epistemic fiduciary framework will deepen understanding of epistemic accountability, fiduciary responsibility, and institutional governance, realising epistemic humility's potential for institutional reform and philosophical advancement.

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Author Contact Information

Peter Kahl, independent researcher

Email: <peter.kahl@juris.vc>

LinkedIn: <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/>>

Blog: <<https://pkahl.substack.com/>>

Correspondence regarding this paper is welcome.

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