

EPISTEMIC NORMATIVITY WITHOUT EPISTEMIC TELEOLOGY

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THE UNITY THESIS

The unity thesis

Practical and epistemic reasons are subclasses of a more general class of reasons: the class of normative reasons.

A powerful explanation of various analogies

- Epistemic reasons provide a (partial) justification for beliefs, while practical reasons provide a (partial) justification for actions.
- Epistemic reasons are (or provide) premises of good theoretical reasoning, while practical reasons are (or provide) premises of good practical reasoning.
- Epistemic reasons are good bases (or motivating reasons) for beliefs, while practical reasons are good bases (or motivating reasons) for actions.

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A CHALLENGE

Unity thesis → Normativism about epistemic reasons
 Epistemic reasons are normative.
 ↓
 Conformity with epistemic reasons is good (in some respect).

A challenge for unity proponents

- Epistemic reasons are content-independent.
- It's difficult to see why conforming to epistemic reasons is good in case one's evidence supports trivial or uninteresting beliefs.

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BACKGROUND

The reason/value-link (RVL)

Reasons are normative only if conformity with such reasons is (in some respect and to some extent) good.

An argument for RVL

It is paradoxical to deny that one has reason to care whether one conforms with normative reasons. But if one has reason to care about X, then X is (in some respect and to some extent) good.

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BACKGROUND

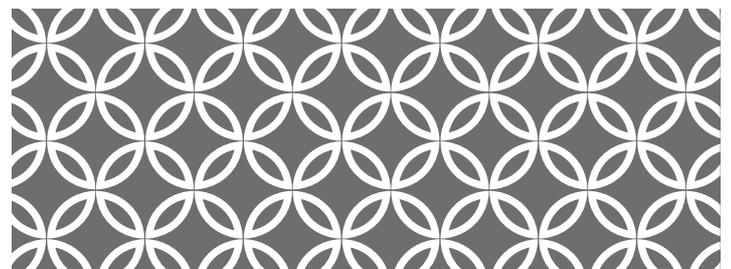
Epistemic teleology

Epistemic reasons are based on the value of having epistemically supported beliefs.
 ➤ Supports normativism's implication that conforming with epistemic reasons is good.
 ➤ But faces pressing objections.

My aim

Outlining a form of normativism that accommodates RVL without appealing to epistemic teleology.

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- I. Introduction
- II. Epistemic Teleology
- III. The Normative Value Approach
- IV. Conclusion

OVERVIEW

EPISTEMIC TELEOLOGY

The teleological conception of epistemic reasons

A has epistemic reason to believe p iff and because believing p has (a certain kind of) value.

The universal means conception

A has epistemic reason to believe p iff and because believing p is conducive to believing the truth, and believing the truth is instrumentally valuable for all sorts of goals (cf. Nozick 1993).

The epistemic value conception

A has epistemic reason to believe p iff and because believing p is conducive to or instantiates a specific epistemic value, such as truth (Alston 1988; Goldman 2001; Lynch 2004; Wedgwood 2017), knowledge (Littlejohn 2018), justification (Feldman 2000), or understanding (Kvanvig 2003).

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PROBLEMS

The triviality problem

Epistemic reasons can support any trivial truth, but believing such truths is neither finally valuable, nor necessarily instrumentally valuable (Grimm 2009, Côté-Bouchard 2017).

The trade-off problem

Beliefs can promote the end of having true beliefs without being supported by any evidence (Berker 2013, Talbot 2014).

The direction-of-fit problem

To assume that having true beliefs is intrinsically valuable absurdly implies that we have instrumental practical reasons to change the world in ways that make our beliefs true (Raz 2011).

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PROBLEMS

Responses

- Overgeneration problems (trade-off and direction-of-fit) can be avoided if one assumes that the value in question does not call for promotion, but only for respect (cf. Sylvan 2020).
- But: Non-promoting teleologists need to explain why the relevant value does not call for promotion – and they still need to deal with the triviality problem.
- Proposal: The relevant value is “standpoint-relative” or “attributive” value (Sosa 2007, Littlejohn 2018, Sylvan 2020).
- But: Such standpoint-relative values do not (as such) ground normative reasons.

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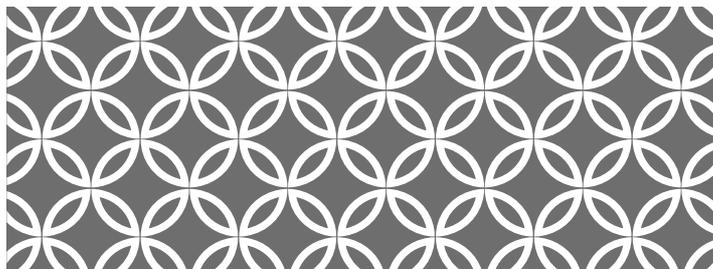
PROBLEMS

The wrong-kind-of-reason problem

Value-based reasons for belief are state-given reasons, while epistemic reasons for belief are object-given.

- Beliefs aren't sensitive to considerations about their own value. Insofar as they are caused by such considerations, this is not due to a competent exercise of theoretical reasoning capacities.
- But an epistemic reason is essentially the kind of thing a belief in which can cause another belief by way of a competent exercise of our capacity of theoretical reasoning.
- Teleologists at best identify a set of state-given reasons that co-extend with epistemic reasons, they do not account for epistemic reasons themselves.

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OVERVIEW

THE NORMATIVE VALUE APPROACH

An Alternative Approach:

- Keeping a trivial promise might have no independent value, but is valuable in virtue of discharging an obligation (it has “deontic value”).
- More generally: Conforming with normative reasons might have no independent value, but is valuable as such (it has “normative” value).
- Recall: It is paradoxical to deny that one has reason to care whether one conforms with normative reasons – even if there is no independent value in conformity.
- This supports the hypothesis that conformity with reasons is itself valuable.
- If epistemic reasons are normative, there is value in conforming to them simply in virtue of the fact that they are normative reasons.

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THE NORMATIVE VALUE APPROACH

Normative Value does not call for promotion

- If normative value called for promotion, we would have reason to break a promise in order to prevent somebody else's breaking two promises.
- If normative value called for promotion, we would have reason to promise actions that we will perform anyhow (cf. Smith 1997).
- Explanation: The normative value of a response already reflects all reasons for and against the response.
- To assume a reason to promote this value would (a) amount to a questionable form of double-counting, and (b) change the overall balance of reasons, thus rendering inconsistent the idea that normative value consists in conforming to the overall balance of reasons.

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THE NORMATIVE VALUE APPROACH

Solving the problems of epistemic teleology

- Since normative value does not call for promotion, it does not face the trade-off and the direction-of-fit problem.
- Since NVA does not base epistemic reasons on value, it does not face the WKR problem.
- Since NVA does not ascribe value to knowledge or true belief as such, it does not face the triviality problem (in the standard form).
- However: NVA still entails that believing trivial contents is valuable if doing so is required by epistemic reasons.
- My reply: It is implausible to ascribe *independent* value to such beliefs, but not to ascribe *normative* value to them provided that they are required by reasons.

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CONCLUSION

- Normativists can reject teleology and still account for RVL.
- The normative value approach to RVL avoids the problems of epistemic teleology.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

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