Conceptual Ethics, Meta-Epistemology and The Foundations of Epistemic Normativity

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Introduction

The wide variety of conceptions of the epistemic project

We claim: these are not merely substantively different understandings of a shared project, but (in some cases) reflect importantly different philosophical projects

Our aim in this paper: to distinguish three such projects - *Systematic Normative Epistemology, Metaepistemology,* and the *Conceptual Ethics of Epistemology* - and to illustrate the value of these distinctions via two brief examples

Three Projects Distinguished

- General strategy: distinguish project by their *aims*
- Why we think this sort of strategy is fruitful

Systematic Normative Epistemology is that inquiry that aims to identify and explain, in general terms, what it takes to satisfy an epistemic condition, and why

Simple reliabilism as an exemplar
More modest version of the project

Two points about all of the projects:
- We understand them primarily as *collective* projects
- Whether a specific argument or claim counts is a matter of context

Metaepistemology is that inquiry that aims to explain how actual epistemic thought and talk – and what (if anything) that thought and talk is distinctively about – fits into reality

- Expressivism, error theory, various forms of realism as exemplars
- Crucial: focus on *explanation*, and on *actual thought and talk*

Conceptual Ethics of Epistemology
- What a conceptual ethics project is
- The range of possible evaluative standards
- Two aspects:
  - Evaluation of existing epistemic thought and talk
  - Identification and evaluation of alternatives

- Exemplars: Haslangerian *amelioration*; Scharpian *replacement*

The contrast between the projects:
- Metaepistemology as explanatory rather than normative
- Contrasting range of normative questions, and their objects, between Systematic Normative Epistemology and the Conceptual Ethics of Epistemology
- Contrasting targets: actually implemented vs. possibly implemented epistemic(-ish) concepts

First application: Epistemic Normativity

What is the relationship between epistemic and authoritative norms? One proposal:

Authority Entailment *If X epistemically ought to believe that P, then X ought to believe that P simpliciter*

- We can think about Authority Entailment as a contribution to each of the three projects
- Contrasting significance of the thesis understood in each way
- Contrasts in the sorts of *evidence* relevant to supporting each version of Authority Entailment

- How attending to the different projects illuminates interesting options in epistemology
- So even with respect to just AE, *three* interesting questions for epistemologists

Second Application: Encroachment

A common (controversial) theme in contemporary epistemology:

Encroachment Facts about a person's *non-epistemic normative circumstances* (e.g. practical stakes, etc.) can affect (e.g.) how much evidence is required for them to count as having knowledge or epistemically rational belief

- Encroachment as a contribution to each project
- Again contrasting significance

Here, focus on contrasting *arguments*
- Contrasting readings of the standard argument:
  If S knows that P, then S can rationally proceed as if p

- Recent arguments suggest that encroachment is made true by facts about the *function* of epistemic discourse (a la Craig). (Metaepistemic vs. conceptual ethics versions)

- Recent arguments that denying encroachment can commit us to the rationality of a sort of akrasia (e.g. Fritz) (Again, contrasting readings)

Conclusions

- Some philosophers explicitly understand themselves as engaged in one of these projects, and not the others. In many other cases, how to locate a project is quite unclear

- One reason focusing on these distinctions is important: clarifying the landscape of interesting options
- Value in making arguments: defects arise if these interpretations are not clearly distinguished
- Value in interpretation: enhances both understanding and critical engagement