

Could Our Epistemic Reasons Be *Collective* Practical Reasons?

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Is **epistemic** normativity merely a species of (instrumental) **practical** normativity? Why think so?

The Pros:

1. Potential for a wholly naturalistic explanation of epistemic norms¹
2. Potential to avoid analogues of the classic meta-ethical objections often raised against moral realism²

The Cons:

This approach just *doesn't seem to work* as an account of the content of epistemic norms. It gets very counterintuitive results about what we have epistemic reason to believe...

I. Kelly's Critique of the 'Instrumentalist Conception' of Epistemic Norms

Thomas Kelly (2003) argues against what he calls *the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality*.

Epistemic rationality: "roughly, the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence" (p. 612)

Instrumental rationality: "the rationality which one displays in taking the means to one's ends" (p. 612)

The **Instrumentalist Conception:** "epistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality, viz. instrumental rationality in the service of one's cognitive or epistemic goals" (p. 612)

What a person has [epistemic] reason to believe does not seem to depend on the content of his or her goals in the way that one would expect if the instrumentalist conception were correct. (Kelly, p. 621)

Relatedly: We take epistemic reasons to be "**intersubjective**" – they're the same for everyone.

Objection A. There is no cognitive goal (or goals), attributable universally or even near-universally, that accounts in an instrumental way for the epistemic reasons we find it natural to attribute to ourselves and to others.

Our cognitive goals tend to be particular (e.g. a desire to learn how to get to Fenway Park) rather than general (e.g. a general concern for truth). Also, our goals, and the importance we attach to them, differ from person to person. (None of this accords well with intersubjectivity.)

¹ W.V. Quine had hoped to describe epistemology as the instrumental "technology of truth-seeking" (1986, p. 665).

² See e.g. Mackie (1977). Full disclosure: I myself am committed to a form of meta-ethical antirealism, which I adopt for, among others, epistemological reasons. See my "Group Agency Meets Meta-Ethics: How to Craft a More Compelling Form of Normative Relativism," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics Vol. 15* (2020 forth.). I also defend Street's (2006) Darwinian Dilemma against a certain form of realist reply in my (2019) "Bad bootstrapping..."

Objection B: One can have epistemic reasons for belief in cases where *no* goal whatsoever that one actually possesses would be furthered by adopting that belief.

Plenty of truths, for which we may have good evidence, are of complete indifference to us.

(e.g. whether Russell was left-handed – Our reason to believe this does not seem instrumental.)

*One might wonder whether a *rule-based* instrumentalist approach could avoid these objections. I'd be happy to talk more about this in Q&A.

II. Sidestepping Kelly's Criticism: The Relevant Epistemic Aims are Possessed Contingently by *Communities*, not by Individuals

Claim: At least some (common and pervasive sorts of) communities may be attributed epistemic aims. (e.g. scientific communities, juries, investigative committees, task forces, competition judges) Their various aims are truth-related, but even more specific in their subject matter and associated constraints. (e.g. to discover whether the accused is guilty *beyond a reasonable doubt*)

Proposal: Our epistemic reasons are kinds of instrumental reasons that we inherit in light of our membership in various sorts of communities on the basis of epistemic aims attributable directly to the community rather than to each and every individual.

Such a view would have the great advantage that it does not entail either of:

(i) There is some cognitive end or collection of ends possessed universally, or near-universally, by human beings that accounts in an instrumental manner for the epistemic reasons that we frequently attribute to ourselves and to others. (*A commitment to this claim is what invites vulnerability to Objection A.*)

OR

(ii) Agent A cannot have epistemic reason to believe P unless some actual end of A's would be furthered by A's believing that P. (*This commitment invites vulnerability to Objection B.*)

This opens up conceptual space for an instrumental view of epistemic reasons that would not be subject to either of Kelly's main criticisms, while still answering to the initial motivations for instrumentalism.

- On this view, the force of epistemic norms still depends upon contingent ends, but *your* epistemic reasons are not directly contingent upon *your* individual ends.

Precedent for the Suggestion that Epistemic Normativity is Inherently Social:

Jeroen de Ridder (2014) – Scientific knowledge is “collective knowledge.”

Sinan Dogramaci (2012, 2015) – The everyday language of epistemic evaluation serves an inherently social “function” of making testimony trustworthy by promoting coordination on epistemic rules.³

Important Caveat: The view I am suggesting here is *not* a proposal about “collective knowledge” or “group belief.” (Nor am I trying to deny the possibility of any of these things.⁴)

³ Dogramaci (2015) goes on to argue that his view supports the conclusion that there is no plausible nonconventional theory of the *property* of rationality, which is not a conclusion I endorse.

⁴ For more on collective and group belief, see e.g. Gilbert (2013), List & Pettit (2011), and Björnsson & Hess (2017).

III. Making Sense of the Proposal

The proposal is instead about the nature and source of individuals' epistemic reasons; they are a form of instrumental reason fixed in connection with ends attributed directly to communities of which the individual people are members.

Rough first pass: An agent A has epistemic reason_C to believe P just in case:

- (i) A is a member of community C,
- (ii) Community C has some epistemic ends E,
- (iii) C's achievement of E is most effectively promoted by community C's adherence to epistemic standards (or rules or procedures) S, and
- (iv) A's believing P is prescribed by standards S.

Complications: There are other and more fine-grained doxastic responses possible besides just "believing P." Reasons also vary in strength. The notions of "membership," "effective promotion," "community adherence" and "standards" all call out for further refinement. (This flexibility is to some extent a virtue of the account.)

The subscript on Reason_C flags that epistemic reasons will vary along with real communities' ends.

Epistemic Ends and Standards

I am attributing epistemic ends to communities – like the aim of discovering whether the accused is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, or whether a new medication reduces symptoms of a disease.

These different aims call for different epistemic standards (in that community adherence to them is effective in promoting those aims), which specify things like:

- what counts as evidence
- how to revise one's beliefs, or update one's credences, on the basis of that evidence
- whether suspension of judgment is called for
- whether new observations or experiments are needed
- the appropriate level of precision to which a value or result must be reported
- which sorts of inference patterns are condoned
- how the reliability of particular people or practices is to be verified
- how disagreement within the community is to be resolved

These standards determine what a member of the community has epistemic reason to believe.

Example: Andy has epistemic reason, as a member of a lab, to use widely accepted statistical methods.

The **hardest case** for my proposed view is probably that of **everyday common sense**.

- Why do I have epistemic reason to believe the train station is just around the corner on the basis of testimony from a stranger?
- Why do I have epistemic reason to believe my car keys are on the kitchen table if that is where I remember leaving them?
- Why does Thomas Kelly have epistemic reason to believe in Russell's left-handedness?

No highly organized epistemic community with explicit epistemic aims seems to be involved. Where would the standards come from? This is where an account like Dogramaci's might be very helpful; he thinks that our tendency to judge these beliefs (and especially the procedures that give rise to them) positively as 'rational' does serve a *social function* of promoting the possibility of reliable testimony.

IV. Selected Questions & Objections

A Potential Objection: The “Lone Wolf”

Imagine a hypothetical lone individual with no community ties. Would she lack any distinctively *epistemic* reason to believe her keys are still where she remembers leaving them?

Reply: Maybe! But she can still have a purely self-interested *practical* reason for belief. This isn't so bad.

Epistemic Community Membership

I do *not* want to say that an individual's possession of epistemic reasons requires the individual's own explicit *endorsement* of the epistemic community's *ends*. (because of Kelly's arguments)

Does it require the individual's endorsement of her *membership* status within that community? (This also seems too strong. I'm not sure most of us do have those kinds of attitudes, either.)

Instead, we seem willing to attribute epistemic reasons to all members of an epistemic community.

For now, I am open to the idea that the requirements for membership might vary by epistemic community. (For example, joining a jury requires something more explicit than joining a social community that gives one reasons to form beliefs using *modus ponens*.) This would admittedly make epistemic reasons more heterogenous than we might have previously suspected.

A Potential Objection: Revisiting Kelly's ‘Intersubjectivity’

On the proposed view, one's epistemic reasons will vary in connection with one's community membership, rather than being the same for everyone. What's more, one person may be a member of multiple distinct epistemic communities at once.

Reply: There do in fact seem to be differences in the epistemic norms we take to apply to e.g. scientists vs. jury members vs. peers in casual conversation. The intuition of presumed intersubjectivity is thus perhaps overstated.

A (Related) Potential Objection: Categoricity

On the proposed view, epistemic reasons are not totally categorical. It's false that epistemic norms are guaranteed to apply to every person regardless of her contingent circumstances (even if what matters is community *membership* rather than individual *attitudes*).

Reply: It's true that epistemic norms are not categorical on this picture. Yet this might actually accord quite well with the initial motivations for an instrumental view. Those who insist on the categoricity of epistemic norms above all else are probably not very tempted by instrumentalist views of epistemic norms, anyway. The instrumentalist will likely welcome a disanalogy to moral reasons as conceived by the moral realist.

Takeaway: I hope I have shown that the social-instrumental approach to epistemic normativity that I sketch here is worth pursuing further despite the challenges and questions that remain.

The view is consistent with two of the major initial motivations for instrumentalist views while promising some novel advantages, including especially the ability to avoid Kelly's (2003) criticisms.