Epistemic norms

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1. Epistemic normativity

When we evaluate our beliefs and our reasonings as justified or unjustified, good or bad, rational or irrational, we make, in a broad sense of the term, normative judgements about them. It is often said that justification itself is a normative notion, and that epistemology is a normative discipline. But the nature of epistemic normativity is elusive, and there are several strands in these debates, many of which are common to the domain of practical or ethical normativity and to the domain of epistemic or cognitive normativity.

(i) *Norms and values*. It is common to distinguish two kinds of normative notions, those which are deontic, and formulated in terms of *oughts*, *right* or *wrong*, prescriptions and permissions, and those which are teleological or axiological in terms of *good*, *bad*, *valuable, virtuous* or *defective*. There are important differences between these two kinds of normative properties. The former in general call for actions and can give rise to sanctions, and do not admit degrees, whereas the latter are more a matter of possession by the agent of a certain kind of sensitivity, call for praise or blame and are often comparative. The former are often associated to "thin" properties, whereas the second are often "thick" properties. One main problem about epistemic normativity is whether it should be formulated in terms of epistemic norms in the deontic sense or in terms of value-based notions and whether one has priority over the other.

(ii) *Norms, rationality and reasons*. The notion of norm is commonly associated with the notion of rationality, both because norms concern one what one ideally ought to do or to think and because rationality seems to be normative in the sense that it prescribes a certain kind of conduct. But it is not clear in what sense rationality is normative rather than descriptive of ideal agents or believers. There is an important sense in which what rationality requires normatively differs what one has a *reason* to do or to think. Some think the latter has priority

over the former. The "buck passing account" of values in the ethical domain (Scanlon 1998, Skorupski 2007) according to which all normative concepts (including the teleological ones) should be formulated in terms of reasons can be transferred into the epistemic domain.

   (iii) *Normative regulation.* A normative statement is usually supposed to govern or to guide the actions of those who are subject to it. What kind of guidance, or regulation does a norm imply? Mere permissions or recommendations, or strict prescriptions? And to what extent is the agent obeying the norm supposed to be aware that he is subject to it? To what extent does *ought* imply *can* and if it does what is the nature of the normative *can*? This depends in part on whether the normative ought is considered as categorical (prescribing regardless of any goal) or hypothetical (relative to a goal for which a prescription is instrumental).

   (iv) *Normative objectivity.* Are norms more like rules or conventions, which depend upon human decisions, or more like universal principles governing the whole domain of thought and action? Are they necessarily plural or can they be unified or ranked along a hierarchy? Are there some basic norms which rule a whole domain? This is closely related to the question of the objectivity of norms and to their ontological status: are there genuine normative facts and properties which make our normative statements true or false, or are normative statements mere expressions of our attitudes? Should one be a cognitivist (Wedgwood 2007) or an expressivist (Gibbard 2008) about them? Epistemology itself can be understood as a meta-normative discipline: it not only deals with epistemic norms and values, but also has, at a meta-level, to evaluate the appropriateness and objectivity of these norms. Are there standards to evaluate our standards, norms about which norms we should adopt? And there are such meta-norms, how to choose between them? If epistemic norms and values are objective, some must be such that they cannot be evaluated further.

   (v) *Naturalisation.* Do norms supervene on natural facts? Can they be reduced to these? Unless one adopts a form of non factualism (Field 2009) or a form of eliminavism (Weinberg, Nichols and Stich 2001), to the effect that normative discourse is illusory and that norms can be reduced to descriptive facts, one has to address the question of the relationship between the normative and the descriptive. The epistemological counterpart of this question concerns how much empirical matters count in epistemology and how much it can depend upon psychology or biology.

   Questions (i)-(v) all arise for the practical or ethical domain and one can expect that they can be transposed to the epistemic domain. But there are important dissymmetries. In particular there are epistemic norms in the deontic sense, and if they entail specific duties to believe, it is not clear that what we ought to believe or not to believe must issue in actions, for believings are not, in general, things that we do. Moreover, if there are epistemic obligations or duties

about beliefs, we must be able to conform to them and to perform certain kinds of actions (although not everyone agrees, *ought* implies normally *can*); but if, as many philosophers think, beliefs are not actions and are not under the control of the will, we cannot conform to such obligations, and their existence is dubious. So it is not clear that responsibility for belief, or the capacity to be subject to praise or blame in the epistemic domain must rest upon the existence of epistemic duties. These questions lie at the heart of the "ethics of belief" debate (Clifford 1878, James 1905, Feldman 2000). Another reason to deny the parallelism between the practical and the epistemic case is that although the idea of a plurality of ethical values, reasons or norms makes sense in the former, it does not make sense in the latter: there may be many kinds of good reasons for which one does something, but normally belief is justified only by one kind of reason - its being true or the fact that it is supported by evidence. Other kinds of reason to believe, in particular practical ones, obviously exist, but they are, in comparison to epistemic ones, the wrong kind of reasons. Wishful thinking is a normatively incorrect kind of believing, although it can be correct in the practical domain (if I am indifferent in my choice between A and B, I can choose either, but if I have equal evidence for believing *p* or *q*, I must suspend judgment). In spite of important structural analogies between practical and theoretical reasoning (Audi 2000), there are important disanalogies. Pragmatism is in general the view that practical values and norms can be compared to – and sometimes can override- epistemic norms. But if the normative landscape differs from the practical to the theoretical realm, pragmatism is less plausible.

Because they do not give the same kind of answers to questions (i)-(v), not all epistemologists believe in the existence of epistemic norms. Some think that they reduce to epistemic values and favour a teleological or value based account of epistemic normativity. Others reduce it to the normativity of rationality or to the normativity of reasons. Yet others reject the very idea of normative authority in the epistemic domain, because they consider that epistemology has to be naturalised, although they do not reject the existence of epistemic values altogether.

2. *Norms of rationality*

If there are epistemic norms, what are they? One can understand these, in the first place, as general requirements of rationality flowing from the very nature of belief and of the mental. For instance two main requirements of rationality are those of coherence and deductive closure:

(a) one ought not to believe p and not p
(b) one ought to believe that q if one believes that p and that p entails q

But what is the nature of this *ought*? One can take it as a constraint on rational belief or as a general principle for the interpretation of any believer as rational (Davidson 1980). In this sense the principles of logic, or those of probability theory, are the most general norms for belief, and no subject can be said to have a belief unless these norms can be applied (Davidson 2004). The problem with these very high profile norms is that they do not seem to be normative at all. For a principle to be genuinely normative, it must have normative force, and to be able to actually regulate belief. It must also have normative freedom, in the sense that one must have the possibility of violating it. But general or abstract norms of rationality like (a) and (b) have neither of these properties, since they are idealised descriptions of a rational believer: at best they tell us what the constitutive properties of rational belief are, but they offer us no guidance (Railton 20003). Perhaps normative statements like (a) or (b) apply to what it is to have a mind or being interpretable as a thinking being, but they do not prescribe (Schröder 2000, Engel 2007)

Nevertheless ideals of reason or normative requirements like (a) and (b) *can* be violated: one can certainly have contradictory beliefs or fail to draw a conclusion from one's other beliefs. Moreover, one can appreciate the force of the ideal and yet fail to conform to it. If one believes that p, and believes that p entails q, one can fail to infer q, if one has a reason not to believe q. For instance if you believe that the earth was created in less than a week, and believe that if the earth was created in less than a week, you are rationally required, or committed to believing that the earth was created in less than a week, but certainly you ought not to believe this, since it is false, and you have good reason or justification to believe that it is false. The difference between this latter *ought* and the one which figures in the rational requirement (b) is often expressed in terms of the idea that rational requirements take wide scope:

(a') You ought (if you believe that p, and that p implies p, believe p)

From (a') one cannot detach the conclusion 'q', whereas inferences like the preceding one about the origin of the earth take narrow scope:

(a'') If you believe that p, and that if p then q, then you ought to believe that q

which is invalid. On one conception (Broome 2000) what it takes to be rational always involves wide scope normative requirements, one another (Kolodny 2005) to be rational always implies having a reason, rationality is only a matter of narrow scope.

Non detachment is a symptom of the difficulty of applying the ideals of reason to particular case. We need to know how ideal rational norms like (a) and (b) regulate the epistemic attitudes of agents. Because we are not frictionless

beings and can be irrational sometimes, some conclude that rational requirements, in so far as they express the norms of logic, are impotent, and that logic has no relevance to actual psychological reasoning (Harman 1986). But still, one can learn logic, and it can improve our reasoning ability, just as one can learn epistemic rules. The problem is how to implement them so that they actually guide our epistemic practices.

3. Epistemic norms and epistemic concepts

Epistemic norms can be formulated as correctness conditions relating a kind of epistemic state with an objective condition (Mulligan 2008), and the relation between these is plausibly understood as a necessary and sufficient condition:

x judges (believes) correctly that p   *iff* the proposition that p is true
x conjectures correctly that p   *iff* it is probable that p
x has a correct interrogative attitude towards p *iff* it is questionable whether p
x doubts correctly whether p   *iff* it is doubtful whether p
x is correctly certain that p   *iff* if is certain that p

Alternatively we may think of them as "possession conditions" for various kinds of concepts (Peacocke 1992), which are typically associated to the kind of epistemic justification which they provide. Thus perceptual concepts obey different kinds of "normative liaisons" from judgmental concepts or from logical concepts. But such a scheme is bound to be abstract unless one tries to spell out the relation between the correctness condition and the believer (doubter, interrogator). The more plausible proposal is that epistemic norms are conditions of "epistemic permissibility" for beliefs, which issue *mays* rather than *oughts* depending on the kind of epistemic state (Pollock and Cruz 1999):

(c) If it perceptually seems to you that p, then you are *prima facie* rationally permitted to believe that p (*perception)*
(d) if you are permitted to believe that p and that if p then q, then you are *prima facie* rationally permitted to believe q (*deduction*)
(e) if you have observed *n* As which are Gs, then you are *prima facie* rationally permitted to believe q (*induction*)
(f) if someone testifies to you that p, then you are permitted *prima facie* rationally permitted to believe p

Such norms of permission are relative to each kind of epistemic domain (reasoning, perception, etc), they specify specific epistemic rights or permissions to believe, which are rational, and *prima facie*. Let us suppose that they are correct norms. These raise several kinds of questions.

First what is the nature of the kind of justification that these norms codify? For (c) at least it is not clear that it is a kind of propositional justification, licensed by a transition from beliefs to belief, since the inputs of perceptual beliefs need not, at least on many views of perception, trade in propositional contents. The relation of *prima facie* rational permission is often called "entitlement" (Burge 1993, Peacocke 2005), and it involves the idea that it provides a kind of default justification. But the nature of this entitlement is a matter of controversy.

Second, if we understand (c)-(f) (but (a)-(b) as well) as rules specifying the kinds of circumstances in which an agent is licensed to believe, how do they regulate? If we understand them on the model of rules (such as rules of chess), we can construe these in two ways (Boghossian 2008): as a conditional proposition specify a permission (or an obligation) of the form

If condition C obtains, you may (must) φ

or (for requirements of the form (a) or (b)) as an imperative of the form

If C, do φ !

The imperative construal does not seem appropriate, since a mere imperative does not wear its normative status on its face: it is only an instruction, and it does not tell us what kind of normative requirement is at issue (permission or obligation? of a practical or of an epistemic kind?). The propositional reading is better in this respect, but it seems overly intellectualistic: in order to obey a norm do we have to believe a proposition which expresses it (one follows, as Wittgenstein says, the rule "blindly")? In addition it faces easily the kind of regress made famous by Lewis Carroll's tortoise (Carroll 1895): for if I need a second propositional norm toobey a norm, I need another to obey the second, etc. Perhaps, as Pollock and Cruz 1999 suggest, the kind of knowledge that we have of epistemic norms is procedural, rather than declarative knowledge of a propositional form.

A further problem which the present proposal faces is that of its common association with the deontological conception of epistemic justification (Chisholm 197, Steup 2001, Alston 1989). It seems to imply it: a belief is justified if and only if it held in accordance with correct epistemic norms, and if it respects epistemic obligations. But is not clear that the existence of epistemic norms entails the deontological conception of justifcation. The norms could be necessary although insufficient conditions for justification. And in the entitlement sense, they typically do not entail obligations.

For similar reasons, the notion of epistemic norm is often associated to a kind of internalism in epistemology, and to the idea that the subject must have an internal access to his reasons or justifications. But in so far as the norms of kind

(a)-(f) are concerned this needs not be the case. Perceptual norms of kind (c) and the entitlement to which they give rise need not, and generally do not, entail the existence of a conscious access of the agent to them. Moreover the norms can be understood in externalist fashion of the general form

If p is generated by a reliable cognitive process it is permissible to believe p

(perhaps along the lines of the "J-rules" of justification proposed by Goldman 1986), where the agent needs not know about the existence of the reliable process. Nevertheless it becomes hard to say, in this externalist construal of rules and norms,that they can act as *reasons* to believe.

4. The Ur-norm of truth

Are epistemic norms diverse, in the way rules, maxims, recipes, or heuristics can be? Even when we conceive them as rules for inquiry, such as Descartes' *rules for the direction of the mind*, they have a certain systematicity (Descartes' rules are guided by a certain conception of intuition as the basic source of knowledge). But can't we say that there is a hierarchy and that some norms enjoy more prominence than others? These, in order to have the proper kind of generality, have to be categorical and expressed in terms of *oughts* rather than in terms of permissions or entitlements, and which we can formulate as above in the manner of correctness conditions. There are three obvious candidates.

The first, along the lines of (a) above is the rationality norm:

(NR) For any P, a belief that P is correct if and only if it is rational

or in categorical terms:

(NR0) One ought to be rational in one's beliefs

The second one is the norm that an evidentialist like Clifford (1878) likes so much, that we ought to believe on the basis of sufficient evidence:

(NE) A belief is correct if and only f it is based on appropriate evidence

None of these are unproblematic. There are several criteria of rationality. The minimal one is logical coherence or non contradiction, which can also, if one admits degrees of belief, expressed through some form of probabilistic coherence. There are also several kinds of concepts of evidence, and the amount

of "sufficient" evidence that a subject needs to have is left undetermined by the statement of (NE) (Owens 2000).

A more obvious candidate for the role of general norm for beliefs is the so-called norm of truth for beliefs (Wedgwood 2002, Boghossian 2003, Shah 2003, Engel 2007) which is usually considered as the best expression of the familiar metaphor that belief has an "aim", which is truth:

(NT) For any p, a belief that p is correct if and only if p is true

It is natural to interpret this in terms of an *ought* rather than in terms of a *may* statement:

(NTO) For any P, one ought to believe that p if and only if p

which, given that it is a biconditional can be broken into two parts :

(NTOa) For any p, if p one ought to believe that p

(NTOb) For any p, one ought to believe that p only if p

which respectively seem to capture what James (1905) calls "the two ways of looking at our duty in matter of opinion: knowing the truth and avoiding error"

(NTB) seems more fundamental than (NR) and (NE). For it seems that when we look for rational beliefs or for belief supported by evidence, it is because these properties enhance their chance of being *true*. A set of beliefs which would be rational but false would be of little help to an inquirer, and evidence is evidence *for* truth. In addition, if belief plausibly is taken, among all propositional attitudes, as the central one (Boghossian 2008), (NT) seems to enjoy a kind of priority. But even if we grant that (NT) is the Ur-Norm, (NTB) and (NT) in both formulations raise several problems.

In the first place, (NT), like the correct conditions set up at the beginning of § 3 above, seems more or less trivial. Does it say more that to believe that p is to believe that p is true? If so how can it have normative force and a power of prescription? So the objection that a mere analytic principle of rationality cannot create a norm reproduces.

In the second place (NTO) seems clearly wrong. It says that for any proposition which is true, one ought to believe it. But certainly no one is under the obligation, if only the rational requirement, of believing any true proposition whatsoever. There are too many trivial, uninteresting, or useless propositions which no one cares to believe.

In the third place, even if one takes (NTO) in the second , more plausible (NTOb) , which says that if one ought to believe that p, then p is true, nothing

seems to follow, since the first member of the conditional can be either true or false; if it is true, nothing follows about what the subject ought to believe, and if it is false, it just says that the subject lack an obligation to believing something, which is not the same as a positive obligation to believe (Hattiangadi 2005).

These difficulties illustrate the difficulty of the regulation problem, of the mere (propositional) statement of a norm to show, as it were, how it can be obeyed. If (NT) is understood in the intellectualist sense as prescribing, on the part of every believer, an intention or goal to accept a belief if and only if it reaches the truth (Velleman 2000), the proposal is too intellectualistic to be convincing, for not only the norm (NT) need not be explicitly: present to the mind of the believer, but it it need not be present at all, even tacitly: there are too many cases where one believes that p without believing it for the sake of truth, but of a desire for it to be true.

A more promising solution to the regulation problem exploits one important feature of ascriptions of belief (Moran 2000): when one deliberates about whether to believe that p, the best way to answer consists in asking oneself whether p. In other words, belief is "transparent" to the truth of the proposition believed. This holds only for conscious, deliberate belief, but it also seems to belong to the very concept of belief. This feature may bridge the gap between the abstract statement of the norm (NT) and its realisation within a believer's psychology, for a belief may be regulated for truth without being explicitly attended in a deliberation about whether to believe that p (Shah 2003, Engel 2007).

5. The evidential norm

A more common objection to the truth norm, which is implicit in most attempts to resist the idea that it can have normative force, is based on the suspicion that it presupposes a form of evidentialism, the view according to which one ought to believe that p only for evidential reasons, pertaining to the kind of evidence that one has for p's being true. There are a number of formulations of the evidentialist norm, including (NE) above, Clifford's maxim, and its explicit association to a certain theory of justification according to which a belief that p is epistemically justified if and only if it fits the evidence that one has of p at a given moment (Conee and Feldman 2000).

Whatever its proper formulation can be, evidentialism faces, at least since Pascal's famous wager argument and James' will to believe objection to Clifford, the following challenge: given that our reasons to believe - at least in the sense of our *motivating* reasons - fall short of being our exclusive reasons, it seems perfectly correct to believe that p for (normative) reasons other than truth and evidence, in particular pragmatic or prudential reasons. In this sense, certain kinds of belief behaviours described currently as self deceptive or irrational can be rational in the practical sense To give the stock examples, observation of

lipstick on a husband's collar is an evidential reason to believe that a husband is unfaithful but can coexist with a practical reason to believe that, contrary to evidence, the husband is faithful. More importantly there can be a possibility of weighing epistemic and practical considerations for believing, for instance if the benefit of a not too well evidentially supported belief (say that one will recover from cancer) outweighs the benefit of believing the contrary (that one's life is threatened). On this view epistemic reasons to believe are only contingently normative, and they can be overriden by reasons to desire to believe; hence the so-called constitutive norms of truth (NT) or of evidence (NE) are not constitutive at all. Where the evidentialist claims that the only permissible attitude towards a proposition p is the attitude that one has towards its truth or its evidence (namely belief that p), the pragmatist claims that the contrary attitude (belief that not p) or another attitude (say, accepting that not p, or taking a certain prudential stance towards it) is licensed, if a certain goal of the agent favors its being rational (Foley 1993). If so the permissibility norms above become indeed very permissive, to the point of being only relative and purely contextual.

   The trouble with this line of thought, however, is that it is hard to conciliate not only with the existence of asymmetries between epistemic reasons and practical reasons mentionned above (§ 1), but also that it implies, most implausibly, that all beliefs are under the kind of "manipulative" control which a subject can have when he manages to cause himself or herself to believe something for the sake of a certain practical goal. But such a kind of managerial control is necessarily indirect, and unable to answer the constitutive reasons for belief by definition. One way or another pragmatic reasons to believe seem perfectly extrinsic, and the idea that belief has an aim cannot simply be reduced to the idea that it has one purpose or other (Owens 2000). The pragmatist, in order to defend the view that there is nothing intrinsic in epistemic norms and reasons for believing, needs to deny the transparency feature of the regulation of belief (Hieronymi 2006).

6. *Epistemic norms and epistemic values*

   The pragmatist's challenge to the truth and to the evidentialist norms is the strongest form of a worry that epistemic norms might not trade in *oughts* , but in *goals*, or in ends, and that they owe their force not to some categorical imperative or even permission, but to the existence of certain epistemic objectives. The most extreme view of this sort would simply be a kind of relativism, according to which there is nothing more in epistemic norms that certain kinds of *policies*, which one may adopt in one circumstance required by inquiry, but that one may withdraw in another circumstance (Field 2009). A less relativistic view would claim that the *oughts* of thought and reason are not as

general and context independent as rationality principles or Ur-epistemic norms, but can be, in some sense, specialised. Some *oughts* may relate to a kind of function that a a given role enjoys, like professional *oughts*: just as the role of a teacher is to teach or of a lawyer is to defend his clients, the *oughts* of belief might be so specialised (Feldman 2000). And given that there is an obvious connexion between normativity and the performance of a function, which has been exploited by many philosophers who hope to reduce norms to biological functions (Millikan 1996 Papineau 2000) it may promise a short way to naturalistic reduction. In a different spirit some theorists hold that norms are related to social functions, or to various commitments implicit in human discourse, which are utimately social (Brandom 19994, Chrisman 2008). But pushing too much in that direction would also go too far if it is supposed to explain epistemic normativity in expressivist terms.We have a sense, which the cognitivist conception of normativity captures better (Wedgwood 2007), that the *oughts* of belief are more general, and that what thought requires outpasses. One way to defend this view consists in reflecting upon the intimate relation that belief has to knowledge. Whether or not one accepts the strong kind of externalism according to which knowledge is a primitive mental state distinct from belief, it makes sense to suggest that the aim of belief is knowledge, and that it is knowledge which gives to epistemic norms their intrinsicness (Williamson 2000). In this sense, it may be that the norm of belief, both in the constitutive sense and in the regulative sense, is knowledge

This still does not solve the ontological issue associated to question (i) and (v) of § 1 above. The generality of epistemic norms can be captured through the idea that they are, in some sense, related to values, and one may think that the truth and the evidentialist norm can be translated into the idea that the ultimate aim of belief is truth, because truth is the ultimate cognitive value. Although the pragmatist will here agree that the normative concepts are better captured in teleological terms, this needs not detract from the irreducibility of the truth goal. Space is then left to understand the normativity of epistemic norms in terms of this goal, and to understand normativity as related to features of our capacities to reach "aptly" the truth goal (Sosa 2007), whatever it is, or to understand it, in a more full-blooded Aristotelian sense, as the achievements of a virtuous agent, in the way a virtue epistemolgoy does (Zagzebski 1996, Hookway . Space if left too to the debate between the monist about the cognitive goal, who believes that epistemic achievement is related to only one kind of objective, truth, and the pluralist who allows others goals, like understanding (Kvanvig 2000). There are indeed a number of conceptions of epistemic value, which are all candidates at accounting in teleological terms, epistemic normativity (Pritchard 2007, Haddock, Millar and Pritchard 2009).

But whether or not these teleological accounts are correct, they will have to make sense of two facts: that the evidentialist norms are, in some sense which is yet to be spelled out but which all friends of the idea of an epistemic norm grant,

consitutive of the epistemic domain, and that they can guide or regulate inquiry. But it is not clear that the constitutivity claim amounts to the same as the goal claim, and that they can, in either way, be reduced to each other. For it is perfectly possible to accept that the truth and evidentialist norms set general conditions on belief in general, whereas the considerations pertaining to the value of a given belief in various circumstances pertain to inquiry, or the process of formation and acquisition of beliefs. In order to understand the concept of a belief and of an epistemic state in general, one needs to understand the first, but the second, which are relevant to inquiry, need not coincide with the constitutive norms for belief and knowledge.

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