

Epistemic Norms and Epistemic Accountability

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Final version for publication in *Philosophers' Imprint*.

In May 1940, German Panzer divisions slashed through Northern France, threatening to encircle the British Expeditionary Force along with French and Belgian armies. In a desperate gamble, Winston Churchill decided to throw in more squadrons of the Fighter Command. In his recent *The Battle of Britain*, the historian James Holland reports that when one group of Spitfire pilots landed at an airfield, they saw a French fighter practicing aerobatics above. However, they also spotted a German Dornier bomber approaching, and urged the French colonel in charge to inform the fighter pilot. But, if we are to believe Holland, the colonel refused, saying “Today he is only authorized to do aerobatics” (Holland 2010, 225).

I think we shouldn't believe Holland. This story, based on an interview with one of the still surviving British pilots, has all the marks of an urban legend designed to embellish the bureaucratic incompetence of the hapless French. The odds are nil that there would be regulations forbidding a fighter pilot to take defensive action in time of war, not to mention that an airfield commander would enforce such regulations at the risk of losing the rest of his planes. As a military historian, Holland should know this, and consequently shouldn't report the anecdote without comment. The proper response to his being so gullible or negligent is not just to doubt his professionalism, but also to reduce epistemic trust in him – roughly, to give a lower credence to the rest of what he says, to be less willing to regard him as a potential partner in co-operative inquiry, and to have less attitudinal confidence in him. In this paper, I'm going to argue that what marks a norm someone violates as specifically epistemic is that this kind of response is appropriate (or is treated as such by someone who

endorses the norm), *even if* there is no reason to doubt the honesty and sincerity of the subject.

Putative epistemic norms of assertion, belief, and practical reasoning have recently become the focus of an intense debate. It is claimed, for example, that knowledge or warranted belief is the epistemic norm of assertion – that we (epistemically) ought only to assert what we know or what we have sufficient warrant for believing. But the issue of what exactly makes a norm epistemic has received less attention than it requires. It cannot be merely the fact that the norm pertains to the epistemic standing of the speaker or agent. The norm against lying tells us, roughly, not to say what we believe to be false when important choices of others hang on our word, but for all that, it is not an epistemic norm, but a moral one, justified in terms of respect or welfare. We need some principled way of telling when something is subject to an epistemic norm, a diagnostic for epistemic norms.

I will argue that the best way to tell different kinds of norms apart is to focus on the different ways in which it is *fitting to hold the subject accountable* for violating the relevant norm. If we can identify distinctively epistemic ways of holding someone to account, we can identify specifically epistemic norms. I argue that epistemic accountability does not involve blame, resentment, shunning, or punishment, in contrast with moral or social or legal accountability. Rather, as my example suggests, holding someone to account epistemically is a matter of reducing *epistemic trust* in their target and possibly letting them know it – roughly, giving less credence to something just because the subject believes or asserts it, even if we harbor no doubts about their honesty and virtue. We don't strictly speaking blame poor epistemic performers, just more or less automatically deduct credibility points from them in our internal scorekeeping, and that shows in how we treat their testimony, inquire together with them, or rely on their reasoning.

The need for a diagnostic for epistemic norms is certainly not unrecognized in the literature. For example, Matthew Weiner observes that “an account of the norms of assertion will need to distinguish criticism of assertion as epistemically inadequate from other kinds of criticism” (2007, 194). Similarly, Clayton Littlejohn maintains that “The notion of propriety we are concerned with is epistemic, not moral or prudential” (2009, 463), and E. J. Coffman (2014, 35) says that norms of assertion involve “the notion of *epistemic* propriety – as opposed to (say) *moral* or *prudential* or *conversational* or even *general* (‘all-things-considered’) propriety”. Yet, as I will argue, in practice, participants in various debates concerning epistemic norms have failed to develop and apply a proper diagnostic. The result, I argue, is that many important arguments about epistemic norms may miss their target.

To support this contention, I offer a brief case study of the debate about the knowledge norm of assertion. Examining influential arguments pro and con reveals that both sides often focus on non-epistemic appropriateness. For example, both Jennifer Lackey and Timothy Williamson, who are on opposite sides of the debate, appeal to the appropriateness of *resentment* in response to assertions made in certain epistemic conditions. But resentment is a paradigmatic form of moral blame, so its propriety indicates precisely that the speaker has violated a moral rather than an epistemic norm. I thus agree with Stewart Cohen when he says that “In the case of the norm of assertion, the lack of clarity in the meaning of ‘epistemic’ encourages the slide from [a] norm’s containing an epistemic condition to the norm’s being itself epistemic.” (Cohen 2016, 853–854). To focus such debates on genuinely epistemic norms, we need a better way to identify them. My aim here is to offer some tools for doing so.

1. Norms and Accountability

I'll begin by saying a few things about the nature of norms in general. The term 'norm' is used in various fundamentally different ways. I'll set aside the purely statistical or descriptive usage, as in "Having two children is the norm for families in Finland". Norms in the sense that interests us are *standards* for assessing behavior or thought. Talk of norms as standards is also importantly ambiguous, however. Social scientists sometimes say things like "It is a moral norm in Afganistan for women to refrain from challenging men in public". This kind of *external* usage involves no commitment to the correctness of the norm. All it means is that a certain normative principle is regarded or treated as correct by the members of a group, in this case in the way that is distinctive of moral norms. Clearly, not all norms in this sense are genuinely *normative* or authoritative in the sense that there is sufficient reason of the right kind to abide by them. Philosophical debates regarding moral or epistemic norms, in turn, concern precisely which, if any, norms are objectively valid or correct – which norms we *should* have. Insofar as there are objectively valid norms in this sense, they will apply to people whether or not they recognize them. This is the way the term is used when an epistemologist says that "It is an important epistemic norm to match our credence in a proposition to the strength of our evidence for it". This kind of *internal* usage amounts to an endorsement of the norm, but involves no sociological commitment to the effect that the norm in question is accepted in any specific group.

In this paper, I will take no stance on either what our norms are or what they should be. Instead, my focus is on the *metanormative* question of what marks a norm as specifically an epistemic one, whether it is a norm that is accepted in some group or an objectively valid normative principle. I take the truth of such metanormative claims to be independent of what the true or objectively correct norms are, or of whether such norms even exist. Beyond their intrinsic interest, metanormative views have implications for both empirical and philosophical inquiry into first-order norms. It is of considerable interest to anthropologists

and sociologists, for example, just what is evidence for the existence of a moral or social norm in a group.¹ Even if the group in question is us, it is not always transparent to us what our norms are. Nor is it always obvious what kind of norm something violates. To make such diagnoses, we need to rely on some metanormative view. In this section and the next, my project is developing a better way to identify epistemic norms in particular.

To begin with, I've already said that a norm in the sense at issue is a standard for behavior or thought. But, importantly, not every kind of standard is a norm. In particular, we must distinguish between genuine norms and mere *evaluative* standards. Evaluative standards are rules that rank possibilities. They determine betterness and worseness. Sometimes evaluative standards have a threshold, perhaps contextually determined, so that anything that meets it is satisfactory and anything that doesn't is defective. A norm, in contrast, is a behavioral rule that someone, the subject of the norm, is *accountable* for conforming to (in suitable conditions). So not all standards are or give rise to norms, since not all standards are such that those they apply to are accountable for meeting them. This is most obvious when it comes to standards that apply to non-agents. For example, apples can be graded according to how closely they approximate the standards for their kind. But apples are not accountable for being the right shade of red or the right weight.

There are also evaluative standards that apply to agents and their beliefs. For example, Tyler Burge (2009) argues that perceptual states and beliefs have a natural representational function, which they can perform better or worse depending on their veridicality, and which yields a standard for assessing them. In the terms I'm using, such function-derived standards are evaluative rather than normative, insofar as they are not

¹ For recent work on what it is for a norm to be accepted in a group or society, see Bicchieri 2006 and Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin, and Southwood 2013.

linked to accountability, as is plausibly the case when it comes to, say, visual impressions.²

This is good to bear in mind, since it means that even if some feature of a state makes it epistemically *good*, it doesn't follow that there's an epistemic *norm* to the effect that we should have it.

Norms, then, are rules that someone is accountable for conforming to in suitable conditions. To say that someone is accountable for conforming to a standard is to say that she is liable to be held to account for failing to do what it directs them to do, in suitable circumstances. In the case of paradigmatic norms, holding someone to account involves imposing a *sanction* on them. A sanction is a response that can be expected to make norm-conforming behavior more likely when it is made manifest to the subject (with the proviso, of course, that the subject responds as most or normal people would) – crudely, a punishment or a reward of some sort. Sanctions will not work on everyone or on every occasion – some people just don't care about what others think, for example, or are provoked to do the opposite in response to a sanction. Often, the term is used more narrowly to refer to only the overtly manifest part of the response (so that blame, for example, is not a sanction), but I use it broadly as a general term for any kind of potentially effective positive or negative response to perceived norm violation, for want of anything better. This is close to how the term is used by Philip Pettit, who maintains that some sanctions consist in “the formation of a good or a bad opinion about the agent, in circumstances in which it is more or less salient that such an opinion is formed” (Pettit 2007, 332).

It is, to be sure, possible for someone to violate a norm without being liable to being held to account (from some first-order perspective). This is the case when the subject has a sufficient *excuse* or *exemption*. Let's say that a subject is *excused* if and only if the capacities

² It is thus misleading from my perspective to call function-derived standards “natural norms”, as Burge does. It is clear that not all such functional standards are linked to accountability – to use one of Burge's own examples, “The heart should beat efficiently relative to its biological function” (Burge 2009, 275) doesn't ascribe to the heart a responsibility for beating efficiently, or license criticism in case of failure.

that are necessary for complying with the norm are *impaired* or *bypassed* in such a way that it would not be fair to hold her to account in the norm-relevant way. The reason I'm using this rather clumsy formulation is that whether a particular kind of impairment amounts to an excuse will depend in part on what kind of sanction or other way of holding accountable is in question. I will return to this issue below in the context of discussing the difference between epistemic and moral excuses. Meanwhile, someone is *exempt* from complying with a norm if they lack the capacities necessary for complying with the norm. For example, when my daughter was a one-year old, she was exempt from blame for hitting her brother, because she simply didn't understand that it was wrong or perhaps even that it hurt him.

Everyone agrees that there are many different kinds of norm, for example moral norms, social norms, and norms of etiquette. How can we tell the difference between them? The *subject matter* of the norms – the kind of thing they apply to – will not suffice, as there may be both moral and legal norms proscribing the very same behaviors, for example. Theft is both a violation of our moral norms and of our legal norms. Also, different cultures and people moralize different things – for example, not eating a particular food might be considered a moral matter in one place and a matter of etiquette or taste in another. So you can't tell whether a norm someone endorses is moral, for example, by observing that it regulates behavior that causes harm to others, say. The next candidate might be the *origin* of the different norms – how they came to exist – but I believe it is inessential. For example, it wouldn't be impossible for a group of tribal elders to determine both legal and social norms for a village. Even the *justification* for the content of the norms may be of the same kind. Moral, legal, and social norms against certain forms of free-riding, for example, might all be justified on the grounds of promoting peace or the common good. And even if there is a distinctive kind of justification for different kinds of norm to be found, a distinction made in these terms is subject to first-order controversy. For example, not everyone will agree that all

moral norms are justified in terms of promoting value, or epistemic norms in terms of conduciveness to true belief. So other things being equal, it is better to have a more neutral way of individuating norms for metanormative, diagnostic purposes. Nor will the *scope* of a norm – the range of people subject to it – suffice to decide the matter, as both moral and epistemic norms are presumably universal, and the same may be true of even aesthetic norms, if they exist.

I don't claim that the reasons I've given in the previous paragraph constitute any kind of knock-down argument against individuating norms on the basis of subject matter or justification, among others. But they suffice to motivate looking for a different way of distinguishing between different kinds of norm. Fortunately, there is an alternative answer ready to hand, since it is overwhelmingly plausible that the *consequences for violating* different kinds of norm are different. This suggests that to identify the type of norm at issue in a particular case, we should look at the *mode of accountability* internally related to the norm. In the case of a social norm, the distinctive mode of accountability is a (negative) sanction in the form of shunning, ostracism, ridicule, or disassociation. In the case of a legal norm, it will be a regulated punishment such as a fine, loss of privileges, or imprisonment. What is distinctive of moral norms, in turn, is that their violation *prima facie* merits blame in some form – disapproval, resentment, indignation, contempt, or guilt. Sometimes, too, compliance with a norm merits *positive* sanction, such as praise in some form. When it comes to morality, praise tends to be appropriate only when compliance is particularly difficult or when one goes beyond what the norm requires. But this may not hold for every kind of norm.

In the case of social norms, the very existence of the norm seems to require that sufficiently many members of the group or society are disposed to engage in sanctioning behavior, or at least regard it as appropriate (see Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin, and Southwood

2013). If no one in Sweden minds spitting on the floor in any way, there isn't a social norm against spitting on the floor in Sweden. However, if there are objectively valid moral norms, for example, their existence doesn't hang on anyone's dispositions to hold someone accountable. All I'm claiming is that in that case, it would be *fitting* to hold violators accountable, provided they are not excused or exempt. And part of what it is for a norm to be *accepted* as a moral one in a society is for a sufficient number of its members to regard distinctively moral ways of holding accountable as appropriate in the right circumstances. Insofar as there are objectively correct epistemic norms, the same goes for them, *mutatis mutandis*.

2. Epistemic Norms

I've argued that the distinctive ways of holding accountable for violation suffice for us to sort norms into different kinds. If there are genuinely *epistemic* norms, not just moral or social norms that govern the practice of asserting or believing or acting on reasons, there will then presumably also exist distinctively epistemic accountability. What is it, then, to hold someone epistemically accountable? One way to get at the answer is to ask: How is it appropriate to respond to someone who violates *nothing but* an epistemic norm in their thought or action?

It is not trivial to isolate instances of merely epistemic violations. The fact that the success of our projects often hangs on meeting epistemic norms means that when someone violates an epistemic norm, they will often *also* violate a prudential or moral norm. For example, speaking from within our presumably shared norms, someone who engages in wishful thinking is epistemically irresponsible, but also likely to end up making bad investments, say. Similarly, Clifford's (1877/1999) ship-owner who conveniently forms the belief that his rickety vessel is seaworthy when his evidence doesn't sufficiently support it,

and acts on this belief, is plausibly not only epistemically criticisable but also morally blameworthy. This overlap seems to encourage Clifford to think that epistemic norms are a species of moral norm. But this is implausible for several reasons. First, epistemic norms, on the one hand, and moral or prudential norms, on the other hand, can conflict, for example when our evidence points in the direction of p , while it would be beneficial for ourselves or others to believe that not- p . Second, there are violations of epistemic norms that are either not violations of moral norms at all, because they're entirely harmless, or do not merit moral blame even if they merit a sanction-like epistemic response (Haack 2001). Third, the grounds that justify the norms are plausibly different – for example, happiness plays no role in justifying epistemic norms. (I'll return to the second and third point below.)

To have a concrete case of a merely epistemic violation, I'm going to introduce an instance of groundless assertion in the context of *loose speculation*. I focus on loose speculation, because nothing particularly hangs on what is said, so it is unlikely (though not impossible) that it violates moral or prudential or social norms. I will also focus on assertion rather than belief, since the propriety of epistemic sanctions is more easily visible in that context.

So consider Speculative Sam. He likes to opine on many matters. Today he's holding forth about the situation in Ukraine as we're chatting in the pub. He knows no more than everyone else. Nevertheless, he says "I'm telling you, Putin is going to attack with the full force of Russian arms before the winter is over". When challenged for evidence, he has nothing to offer beyond what everyone agrees on – the Russian army would handily defeat Ukrainians in battle, successful wars are domestically popular, and so on. At one point, he claims to know the Russian soul, but there's no reason to think he does, or even that such a thing exists. It becomes clear that Sam doesn't know what he's talking about. Nor is he justified in his belief, though he does indeed believe what he says. He's not just joking, for

example – he genuinely asserts that the Russians will attack. His straightforward assertion is not, I take it, morally inappropriate, since nothing is at stake here. But it is nevertheless plausibly *epistemically* inappropriate.

What would be the appropriate way to hold Sam accountable for such a groundless assertion? Since he hasn't done anything morally inappropriate, there's clearly no point in blaming him, say expressing resentment or contempt towards him. Morally speaking, he's functioning all right – there's nothing wrong with the quality of his *will* or regard for others, as we might say (cf. Strawson 1962). But (speaking from an engaged perspective), there is something wrong with the way he processes information and evidence in forming beliefs and making claims, at least on this occasion. Is there some kind of negative consequence that we could impose that would target precisely this aspect of his functioning, such that manifesting it to him could be expected to make it more likely that he will act otherwise in the future, if it's possible for him to do so? Yes. We could change our attitude of *trust* in him. More specifically, we could reduce our *epistemic trust* in him, and possibly let him know that we're doing so, so that it might function as a quasi-sanction.

Keeping Score of Epistemic Trustworthiness

By epistemic trust in S I mean, first, our disposition to give credence to some proposition *p* just because we take it that S believes that *p*, or because S sincerely asserts that *p*. Second, since we don't just learn things *from* others, but also *with* others, epistemic trust in S also involves willingness to treat S as a partner in common inquiry, other things being equal.³ For example, if someone is extremely risk-averse in forming beliefs in spite of having good evidence, we might be disposed to give credence to whatever they believe, but nevertheless be unwilling to partner with them, regardless of their moral character. Finally, since trust is

³ I owe this point to Matthew Chrisman.

not mere reliance, epistemic trust also includes our disposition to have associated emotional responses, such as the attitude of confidence in *S* and feeling let down if we do give credence to *p* because *S* asserted it, and *p* turns out not to be the case.

Notice that epistemic trust is different from what we might call practical trust. I might not trust someone to tell me the truth, even if they know it. Lacking this kind of trust is compatible with having high epistemic trust – I may well think that the other person does indeed know the truth while thinking that it's unlikely they're being straight with me. Relatedly, epistemic trust involves no assumption of good will or commitment to moral or social norms on the part of the trusted person, in contrast to what many have argued concerning practical trust (Baier 1986, Jones 2012).

So, we might say that the basic way of holding someone epistemically accountable is subtracting credibility points from someone. This is perhaps most clearly manifest in the context of *testimony*. When we hold someone to an epistemic norm we endorse and take them to have violated, we no longer take what they say at face value, even if we don't have any ethical doubts about them. We lower our credence in what they say, either in general or about some particular subject matter, such as world politics, and are less willing to partner with them in the project of finding out how things stand regarding it. (It might suffice that we regard it as appropriate to do these things.) But since there are other ways in which the beliefs we attribute to others can influence what we believe and do (for example, I might attribute beliefs to others on the basis of their behavior, and then adopt those beliefs myself), we may hold someone epistemically accountable in non-testimonial contexts as well. We may also *credit* someone's performance epistemically: we might *increase* our epistemic trust in someone in virtue of how they process evidence. We may be disposed to emulate them, and even urge others to do so. This may be important for understanding the difference between epistemic blamelessness and positive justification.

Meanwhile, it is good to bear in mind that epistemic accountability may also be first-personal: we may decrease or increase *epistemic self-trust*, too. For example, if I discover that my reasoning about people of color has been biased in the past, I may, and should, lower my credence in my own beliefs pertaining to them, and try to reflect harder in the future when forming such beliefs. If I learn that my perception of colors is out of sync with others, I should be cautious about forming beliefs on the basis of such perception, and double-check where possible. As Karen Jones emphasizes, epistemic self-trust also has an attitudinal component – disposition to have feelings of confidence and the associated willingness to rely on the deliverances of one’s own senses and reasoning instead of uncritically deferring to others, on some domains (Jones 2012, 243).

The adjustments and micro-adjustments of epistemic trust in response to perceived violations of epistemic norms are, of course, not in general conscious. As Miranda Fricker puts it in a slightly different context, “Without actively assessing or reflecting on how trustworthy our interlocutor is, the responsible hearer none the less remains unreflectively alert to the plethora of signs, prompts, and cues that bear on how far she should trust.” (Fricker 2007, 66) In psychological terms, holding someone epistemically accountable is typically a fast and effortless Type I operation that doesn’t tax working memory, rather than a reflective and conscious Type II one. The same goes for communicating the adjustment to the subject. It might, after all, consist of a mere raising of eyebrows, or making non-committal sounds in response to an assertion, as well as an explicit challenge. In this respect, there is nothing special about epistemic accountability. Just the same goes for administering shades of moral blame.

Is reducing (or increasing) epistemic trust genuinely a way of holding someone accountable, though? In other contexts, when someone is held to account by sanctioning or blaming them, this will typically make it more likely that they will conform to the norm in

the future. But is reducing credibility in someone and letting them know it any kind of analogue of punishment? Yes, it is. One way to see this is to look at Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice. She discusses how the social position or identity of a speaker, whether in terms of class, race, or gender, may result in a credibility deficit – for example, someone with a working class accent may not be taken seriously, regardless of the content of what they say. What makes this specifically *epistemic* kind of injustice, in my terms, is that the prejudiced hearer subtracts trust points regardless of whether a justifiable epistemic norm has been violated. Again, I want to emphasize that treating victims of prejudice, for example, as if they violated *moral* norms by being dishonest is a *distinct* kind of injustice, though it also involves giving them less credibility than they merit. It is potentially misleading to label this sort of practical distrust as a species of (testimonial) epistemic injustice, as Fricker does.⁴ But as long as we keep this difference in mind, the label does have some justification, since practical distrust, too, means that the target isn't treated as a partner in inquiry or a potential source of knowledge.

In any case, Fricker shows nicely that losing credibility – rightly or wrongly – is bad and undesirable for a person, and therefore something that can function as an analogue of the harm involved in punishing. She distinguishes between primary harm, which consists of undermining a subject in a capacity essential to being human and a rational being, namely as a knower and source of knowledge (Fricker 2007, 44). Typically, it is bad for you if I don't take your word for something. It's even bad for you if I don't feel let down when you say something that turns out to be false – if I feel that it is to be expected that you get it wrong. We're not equals in my eyes if I don't take you seriously as a potential informant. I might be treating you, in effect, like a child. And that's not a standing that a self-respecting adult wants to have. As Fricker (2007, 46ff) also observes, a number of secondary harms follow

⁴ Fricker notes that "epistemic trustworthiness has two distinct components: competence and sincerity" (2007, 45), both of which can be impugned by prejudice.

from poor epistemic standing. It is particularly bad if people won't take your word when a lot hangs for you on what you know, for example when you are charged with a crime you didn't commit and your evidence is ignored. But lack of credibility has negative consequences even if it's not unjust. Some are practical: when people doubt and feel like they have to double-check what you say, they may well prefer to interact with someone who can be epistemically trusted, and you lose out on opportunities.

In short, when others reduce their epistemic trust in us and manifest this in their behavior, it is genuinely a way of holding us accountable, a sanction-like response that is (other things being equal) apt to make us change our behavior with respect to a norm, even if no blame or punishment is involved.⁵ Note also that we may sometimes make it clear to someone that we have lowered our epistemic trust in her even when it is not in our self-interest to do so, for example when the person is someone who is influential in our profession. This parallels the way in which we're sometimes willing to impose moral sanctions when it is contrary to our perceived self-interest, and further supports the case the reducing epistemic trust and manifesting this in our behavior is genuinely a way of holding someone responsible, not just self-protection.⁶

Varieties of Accountability

Thinking about the distinctive nature of epistemic accountability may also help solve a puzzle for the very notion of an epistemic norm of *belief*, in particular. Some epistemic norms govern voluntary actions or activities, such as assertions and perhaps inferences. But others govern beliefs, which are typically not voluntary, or so most philosophers believe.

William Alston famously challenges epistemic deontology, roughly the view that epistemic

⁵ What Peter Graham (2015) says about epistemic norms as social norms that reinforce socially beneficial epistemic behavior fits well with the view defended here.

⁶ I owe this point to Katherine Hawley.

justification should be understood in terms of epistemic blamelessness, by appealing to a version of the ‘ought implies can’ principle: the applicability of notions like blame to something requires that it is under effective voluntary control, and beliefs are *de facto* not under effective voluntary control (Alston 2005). Epistemic deontologists have answered in two basic ways: either denying that we lack the relevant kind of control over our beliefs (Steup 2000, Ginet 2001) or denying that ought implies can in this context (Feldman 2001). While the view I have defended here is not committed to epistemic deontology (I have not said anything about what makes a belief justified), there is clearly room for a parallel challenge to the very idea that there could be epistemic norms for belief, insofar as norms are understood as necessarily involving accountability. I’m going to grant here for the sake of argument that at least most of our beliefs are not under effective voluntary control (if they are, there is no special problem for epistemic accountability). So how can we be accountable for our beliefs, if they are involuntary?⁷

In response to this challenge, let me first note that I’m open to the possibility that genuine epistemic *norms* only apply to assertion, inference, and epistemic deliberation. The present account is compatible with thinking that there are only *evaluative* standards for *belief* – standards for better or worse belief that are not linked to accountability. However, there is a case to be made for a less concessive response that challenges the applicability of ‘ought implies can’ in this context. After all, it seems that the core intuition behind the principle is that it would be *unfair to blame* someone for something that wasn’t under their control. But whether it is unfair to hold someone accountable in a *non-blaming* way may be a different matter.

For example, suppose that it is necessary for complying with the norm of avoiding reckless driving that your blood alcohol level is below 0.1% by volume. You’ve had a few

⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this journal for highlighting this worry.

drinks that a reliable friend told you had very low alcohol content, and you don't feel drunk, so that you're highly justified in believing that your blood alcohol level is below the required level, and you decide to drive home. But in fact you are over the limit, drive erratically, and are caught by the police. In this case, you may well have an excuse from moral sanctions – in the circumstances, it wouldn't be fair to resent you, say. But you plausibly *don't* have an excuse from legal sanctions – you should pay your fine. The legal sanction doesn't imply that you're morally bad, or there's something wrong with your character or your will.

Similarly, someone may lack an epistemic excuse even if they have a moral one (and conversely). Consequently, it may be fair to hold someone epistemically accountable even if they lack effective voluntary control and have a moral excuse. After all, what makes something like lack of control or ignorance a moral excuse is that it shows, roughly, that “the fact of injury was quite consistent with the agent's attitude and intentions being just what we demand they should be”, as Strawson (1962) puts it. By parallel, an epistemic excuse will be something that shows that in spite of violating an epistemic norm on a particular occasion, the agent is epistemically trustworthy. For example, we shouldn't reduce confidence in someone who has been temporarily misled into endorsing a faulty pattern of inference by someone whom they have excellent reason to trust, such as their famous logic professor.⁸ We can still make sense of their bad inference as a violation of an epistemic norm rather than merely an evaluative standard: considered in isolation, it would be grounds for reducing epistemic trust. It would also be grounds for reducing epistemic trust, if it did reflect the subject's belief-forming habits, just in the same way as a morally excused violation would be grounds for blame, if it did reflect the agent's quality of will.

⁸ What about epistemic exemptions? In the moral case, the Strawsonian view is that when someone is exempt from moral responsibility, the right attitude to take towards them is an objective one, to see them as someone to be “managed or handled or cured or trained” (1962). The plausible epistemic analogue of such objective attitude is not distrust, but refraining from the trust game altogether, so to speak – not reducing the target's credibility points, but rather not keeping a credibility score at all. Needless to say, it is a grave epistemic injustice to treat someone in this way without sufficient reason.

So, I hold that lack of efficient voluntary control isn't an epistemic excuse, even if it is a moral one. It's not unfair to reduce epistemic trust in someone because of something that wasn't up to their will, because holding them epistemically accountable doesn't carry any implication that there was something wrong with the quality of their will. For example, someone who grew up in a bizarre, isolated community might acquire very bad belief-forming habits without being to blame for it. Nevertheless, their predictably false beliefs and bad inferences count against them epistemically, and it's appropriate to trust them very little. So the whole idea of 'ought implies can' will have a different role in the epistemic context, if it has any. There is good reason to think that even if the principle applies when it comes to moral accountability, it doesn't apply to epistemic accountability.

There's a further question to be asked here, to be sure: if beliefs aren't under voluntary control, as I've been granting here for the sake of argument, what's the point of communicating a sanction-like response to them?⁹ (Note again that this is not a problem for the present account when it comes to epistemic norms governing activities over which we have some degree of control.) After all, a part of the rationale for social sanctions or moral blame is forward-looking: they may get people to do what they're supposed to. In response, the first thing to bear in mind is that the point of accountability in general isn't *just* to get people to conform to the norm – it makes sense to blame Assad for the horrors of Syria, even if our moral stance doesn't make a difference to what he does, and we know it. Such attitudes shape our moral relationship to the wrongdoer, and conveying them may affect the attitudes of third parties and comfort the victims. Something parallel may hold in the epistemic case.

Second, even if we can't form specific beliefs at will, as I have been granting, we do have a measure of control over *how* we form beliefs. As Alston, perhaps the best-known

⁹ A (different) anonymous reader for this journal rightly pressed me on this point.

critic of doxastic voluntarism, acknowledges, we can influence both particular beliefs and belief-forming habits. He notes that in a particular instance, I have voluntary control over “whether and how long I consider the matter, over whether and where I look for relevant evidence or reasons, reflect on a particular argument, seek input from other people, search my memory for analogous cases, and so on” (Alston 2005, 75). More broadly, I can voluntarily engage in activities like “training myself to be more critical of gossip, instilling in myself a stronger disposition to reflect carefully before making a judgment on highly controversial matters, talking myself into being less (more) subservient to authority, and practicing greater sensitivity to the condition of other people” (ibid.). Realizing that others are holding us epistemically accountable by manifesting their epistemic distrust can get us to respond in any of these ways. Consider again the Holland case I started with. Perhaps as things stand, he can’t help believing things he’s told by old fighter pilots, whom he so reveres. But if enough people he respects manifest their distrust – and perhaps if someone lets him know he’s being ridiculed for his gullibility in a major philosophy journal! – he may have a rethink and become disposed to seek more independent verification in the future.

The Analysis

Bearing these considerations in mind, here is my tentative definition of what is distinctive of epistemic norms:

Epistemic Norm (EN)

E is an epistemic norm if and only if E is a standard whose violation makes it appropriate, other things being equal, to hold the subject accountable by reducing epistemic trust, insofar as she lacks an epistemic excuse or exemption.

A few clarifications. As I've formulated EN, it applies equally to norms that are actually accepted in some group, and to putative objectively valid epistemic norms. To make explicit the former, we could say that something is an epistemic norm in G if and only if it is a standard to whose violation a sufficient number of members of G regard as appropriate to respond by reducing epistemic trust (in the absence of excuse or exemption – I'll take this as read in the following). As regards the latter, we can say that E is an objectively correct epistemic norm if and only if E is a standard whose violation makes it objectively appropriate to hold the subject accountable by reducing epistemic trust, other things being equal. The 'other things being equal' clause is necessary, because, for example, we might already lack epistemic trust in someone (or they might be long dead), so there's no room for reducing trust. Nevertheless, they can violate an epistemic norm – if we did (or could) have trust in them, we would be entitled to reduce it. It might also make sense to decide to trust someone even if their epistemic performance is poor, perhaps in order to encourage them to do better. This would again be a scenario in which other things would not be equal – there would be, so to speak, a wrong kind of reason to trust someone epistemically. (I leave it open whether it is possible to decide to trust someone – perhaps we can only decide to behave *as if* we trusted them.)

Combining the above definition of an epistemic norm with my definition of epistemic trust, we get the following fuller, if tentative, account:

Epistemic Norm (EN*)*

E is an epistemic norm requiring S to ϕ if and only if E is a standard that requires S to ϕ and, other things being equal, it is fitting to hold S accountable for failing to ϕ by becoming more weakly disposed to believe something just because S believes it, less willing to partner with S in collaborative inquiry, and reducing confidence in S,

and making these reactions manifest to S (if one is in the right position to do so) insofar as she lacks an epistemic excuse or exemption.

EN* is obviously subject to the same clarifications as EN. I leave it open here just who is in a right position to manifest reduction in epistemic trust to someone who violates a norm, and how it is appropriate for them to do so. Again, there are parallels here to enforcing other kinds of norm, so there shouldn't be any special challenge for this account of epistemic norms.¹⁰

Finally, I emphasize again that when we hold someone epistemically accountable, we reduce trust in them independently of our beliefs about their moral character, for example. To be sure, it is perfectly possible that someone simultaneously violates both epistemic and non-epistemic norms. If so, the same performance may merit both ways of holding accountable. But there is nothing unusual about this – after all, the very same action may merit both moral and legal sanctions, for example. I will call a norm *pseudo-epistemic* if and only if it is a standard that relates to an agent's epistemic position but attaches non-epistemic consequences to violation. I say 'pseudo-epistemic', because there is a temptation to treat all norms that pertain to epistemic standing as epistemic ones. Berit Brogaard, for example, is explicit about this: "Epistemic norms are norms that constrain ways of going about forming and revising beliefs and using beliefs in theoretical reasoning and communication with others." (Brogaard 2014, 15) I think this is wrong. For what is hopefully the least controversial example, consider the moral norm against lying. If I discover that you have lied (without good reason or excuse), I may well blame you for it. But I won't thereby think worse of you as a believer. As far as lying goes, what's wrong with you is your values or

¹⁰ Maria Lasonen-Aarnio pointed out to me that it's very likely we all violate some epistemic norms, among other things because we probably have some inconsistent beliefs. This is not an objection to the present account, however, but rather a reminder that we should indeed be somewhat wary of trusting each other (and ourselves). Full epistemic trust is only fitting towards epistemic saints, if such creatures exist!

desires, not your epistemic credentials (a liar might be a super-reasoner who is hypersensitive to evidence and only forms safe beliefs). The proper sanctions are moral, not epistemic. The case is further buttressed by considering the justification for the norm, which will make reference to something like respecting persons or promoting the general good. So the norm against lying isn't epistemic – but if we're not careful, we might mistake it for one, because it governs the use of beliefs in communication and thus shares a subject matter with some genuine epistemic norms. Only *some* norms governing belief formation, revision, and use are genuinely epistemic.¹¹

3. Misdiagnosing Epistemic Norms

I've argued that epistemic norms are rules whose violation makes one liable to distinctively epistemic ways of holding accountable. Thus, the proper diagnostic for whether an assertion, for example, violates an epistemic norm is whether the speaker is liable to lose epistemic trust points on account of it.¹² This might seem trivially true. However, a close examination of the recent literature on epistemic norms shows that this is hardly the case. Many arguments about putative epistemic norms rely on faulty diagnostics, in particular on liability for non-epistemic sanctions. I am not here going to take a stance on matters of substance, but simply argue that several important arguments on all sides are flawed in this way, and offer some suggestions for properly focusing the debate.

¹¹ E. J. Coffman makes the same point in a footnote: “an (epistemically evaluable) item’s being somehow proper in virtue of its subject’s epistemic features doesn’t suffice for the item’s being epistemically proper.” (2014, 56n41)

¹² Again, we can read this either as talking about our epistemic norms, in which case we treat it as appropriate to reduce epistemic trust in the speaker who violates the norm, or as talking about objectively correct epistemic norms, in which case the claim is that it is objectively appropriate to reduce trust.

My case study here will be the debate about the epistemic norm of assertion.¹³

Assertions, after all, are intentional actions over which we have as much control as any action, so even if an epistemic ought implies can, they will be governed by epistemic norms, if anything is. Here talk of “the” epistemic norm is meant to indicate that the norm in question applies to all assertions merely as such. Various such norms have been proposed, going back at least to Peter Unger (1975). According to Timothy Williamson (1996, 2000), whose work ignited the current debate, the norm of assertion is the following:

KN: One ought to assert that p only if one knows that p .

Some defenders of a knowledge account argue that knowledge is not only necessary but also epistemically sufficient for assertion. Here is how Lackey, a critic, formulates it: “One is properly epistemically positioned to assert that p if one knows that p .” (Lackey 2011, 252) I will phrase it in terms that make it a little clearer that knowledge suffices for the epistemic permissibility of asserting:

KS: If one knows that p , one may (epistemically) assert that p .

Critics of knowledge norms find KS too lenient and/or KN too demanding. The former critics thus argue that knowledge doesn’t suffice for epistemically proper assertion, and the latter that it is often okay to assert things we don’t know, either because our justified beliefs happen to be false, or because the justification doesn’t connect with their truth in the right way, as in Gettier cases. Rival accounts thus include the following:

RB: If it is reasonable for S to believe that p , one may (epistemically) assert that p .

(Cf. Lackey 2007)

¹³ Sometimes people speak of a “constitutive norm”, but such talk is highly misleading, as constitutive rules arguably cannot be violated and have no sanctions attached to them. To avoid distraction, I will simply talk about the epistemic norm of assertion in what follows.

KJS: If one has knowledge-level justification to believe that p , one may (epistemically) assert that p .

CWS: If S has warrant for believing that p that is adequate in S 's conversational context, one may (epistemically) assert that p . (Cf. Gerken 2012)

How can we settle the debate between these rival accounts? Well, they're all meant to be accounts of *our own* epistemic norms, or epistemic norms that *we should have* in the light of our commitments. So we can, in principle, reflect on our practice of assertion, especially our practices of challenging and criticizing assertions, and observe when we find it fitting to hold someone epistemically accountable for asserting. I don't claim that this is the only approach, but it has been a popular one. I will next examine some well-known arguments for and against knowledge norms using this approach.

Anti-KS intuitions

Let me begin with Jennifer Lackey's well-known objections to KS. She presents a number of cases that are meant to show that knowledge is not always sufficient to make an assertion epistemically appropriate. They involve what she calls *isolated secondhand knowledge*, where someone comes to know something by way of reliable testimony, but nevertheless is not, according to her, in a position to properly assert what she knows, without further justification. Consider the following scenario:

Matilda is an oncologist at a teaching hospital who has been diagnosing and treating various kinds of cancers for the past fifteen years. One of her patients, Derek, was recently referred to her office because he has been experiencing intense abdominal pain for a couple of weeks. Matilda requested an ultrasound and MRI, but the results of the tests arrived on her day off; consequently, all the relevant data were reviewed

by Nancy, a very competent colleague in oncology. Being able to confer for only a very brief period of time prior to Derek's appointment today, Nancy communicated to Matilda simply that her diagnosis is pancreatic cancer, without offering any of the details of the test results or the reasons underlying her conclusion. Shortly thereafter, Matilda had her appointment with Derek, where she truly asserts to him purely on the basis of Nancy's reliable testimony, 'I am very sorry to tell you this, but you have pancreatic cancer.' (Lackey 2013, 34–35)

According to Lackey, assertions based on isolated secondhand knowledge (ISK assertions, for short) are epistemically inappropriate, in spite of meeting KS, so KS is not an epistemic norm of assertion. Her evidence for this is the following: "Derek would ... rightly feel *resentful*, even *incensed*, that his oncologist had flat-out asserted a cancer diagnosis to him without being able to offer any direct support on its behalf." (2011, 265, my emphasis)

I share Lackey's intuition that there is *something* inappropriate about assertions in her scenarios. The question, then, is whether ISK assertions are genuinely *epistemically* inappropriate – whether holding the subject epistemically accountable is merited. And this is something we have reason to doubt. It has been observed before (e.g. Coffman 2011) that Lackey's argument leaves open that ISK assertions might be inappropriate in some non-epistemic way. The diagnostic I've offered for identifying different kinds of norm gives us a principled reason to believe that Lackey is appealing to non-epistemic inappropriateness. She does, after all, appeal to propriety of resenting or feeling incensed, which are paradigmatic forms of moral blame.¹⁴ While what she says is plausible, it is evidence that (some) ISK assertions violate a moral norm, not that they violate an epistemic one.¹⁵

¹⁴ Could Lackey respond simply by saying that what she has in mind is what we might call "epistemic resentment", a critical attitude of the same sort I've been discussing? (A referee for this journal made this suggestion.) I don't think so. Her cases are designed precisely to elicit ordinary resentment – the sort that might

Of course, while Lackey's observations about proper sanctions only show that at least some ISK assertions violate a moral norm, for all I've said so far, they might *also* violate an epistemic norm. To make the case for that, we would need to show that not only resentment, but also reduction of epistemic trust is appropriate in response to Matilda's assertion, for example. Defenders of KS might argue that it isn't appropriate, because as far as we can tell on the basis of this assertion, Matilda forms and communicates beliefs very responsibly, using highly reliable sources. Critics of KS, in turn, might counter that the willingness to making such assertion in a discursive context in which it is jointly presupposed that speakers are capable of backing up their assertions with reasons shows that one is a less than fully reliable partner in epistemic cooperation (cf. Gerken 2012), and thus merits loss of some credibility. Again, I won't take a stand on what the right way to go is, but simply want to point at the proper grounds one way or another.

A similar case could be made regarding Lackey's appeal to anti-KN intuitions, which are based on the seeming appropriateness of *praise* for agents who assert things they have excellent evidence for, but which they're unable to believe because of their racism or religious faith (and hence don't know) (Lackey 2007). Again, while such an agent may be to a degree *morally* praiseworthy for "being able to transcend his own racism" (2007, 599), it would require a distinct argument to make the case that such assertions contribute to their epistemic credit.

involve feeling incensed, as she says. There's no way to construe that as a non-blaming attitude. The same goes for Williamson's and Unger's arguments discussed below.

¹⁵ What could such a moral norm be? It seems to me that the obvious explanation is that there is a general moral norm governing helpfulness in general and advice or information-providing in particular. Roughly, when others rely on our assistance for something, we should not create the expectation that we will provide such assistance, if we can't or won't do so. In the case of offering advice or something akin to it, this means that when the hearer has a legitimate interest in knowing the reasons there are for believing that *p* – when merely knowing that *p* won't answer the practical question they have – we shouldn't assert that *p* unless we can back it up. In some contexts, merely by asserting something we create the implicature that we have additional information, and when people are likely to ask for it, we shouldn't risk leaving them hanging. This might be the moral norm that Matilda violates when she says to Derek that he has cancer, without knowing the reasons why. See also Benton 2014.

Pro-KN intuitions

I've observed that some well-known purported counterexamples to KS and KN target intuitions about non-epistemic appropriateness. But that is not to say that knowledge really is the epistemic norm of assertion in some way. We also need to look at positive evidence for knowledge norms. Such evidence comes in many forms. What interests me here is the appeal that defenders of KN make to appropriate responses to assertions made without knowledge. Williamson offers the following sort of lottery case. Suppose you have bought a lottery ticket. The lottery took place a little while ago, but neither one of us has heard the results. You are anxious about whether you've won anything. Knowing that the odds are minute, I want to inject a dose of reality and say "Your ticket did not win". This, it turns out, is true. Williamson argues that in a case like this, no matter how high the odds, short of 1, of my being correct,

You will still be entitled to feel some *resentment* when you later discover the merely probabilistic grounds for my assertion. I was representing myself to you as having a kind of *authority* to make the flat-out assertion that in reality I lacked. I was *cheating*. (Williamson 1996, 498, emphases mine)

Suppose that Williamson is right about the appropriateness of such responses. Does it follow that the speaker has violated an epistemic norm? No, as it is quite obvious that the terms he uses indicate the presence of a moral norm violation: resentment, authority, cheating. For all this case shows, KN, too, is a pseudo-epistemic norm! The appropriate sanctions are non-epistemic, and unsurprisingly so, since on Williamson's own account, the fault involved in asserting a lottery proposition is a moral one, namely "cheating".

The direct ancestor of Williamson's account is Peter Unger's view of assertion. Unger (1975) argued that when we make a straight assertion that *p*, we represent ourselves as knowing that *p*. Hence, if we assert that *p* without knowing it, we falsely represent ourselves, and consequently merit sanctions. I think this claim about representation is open

to debate. But most importantly for my purposes here, falsely representing ourselves is a moral rather than epistemic flaw. Unger himself talks about dishonesty, and says we "think worse of" someone who asserts things they don't know (Unger 1975, 261–262). And it's most obviously such when we know that we don't know something, but nevertheless say it – in such a case, Unger says, the speaker is "open to some blame" (Unger 1975, 261).

Things get more murky if we represent ourselves as knowing something without knowing that we don't know it, as he acknowledges. We might have no beliefs concerning our own epistemic status with respect to something we believe, for example. In such a case, it's not clear if any kind of blame is appropriate. In any case, the issue of misrepresentation is not specific to assertion – for example, it seems to me that when we order someone to do something, we defeasibly represent ourselves as having the requisite authority in just the same way as we defeasibly represent ourselves as knowing what we assert, and are subject to similar *moral* criticism if we try to boss others around without suitable authority.¹⁶ This is more evidence that the norm in this vicinity is a general moral one.

The lesson for knowledge norms here is that it is one thing to argue that when we assert something, we represent ourselves as knowing it, and another thing to argue that knowledge is the epistemic norm of assertion. The first could be true without the second being true. To pinpoint an epistemic norm, we need to find a different kind of evidence for it. First, as I noted, Williamson and other defenders of KN appeal to the appropriateness of resentment and other moral sanctions in response to a lottery assertion. While this doesn't suffice to support KN as an epistemic norm, if what I say above is correct, there's nothing to stop friends of knowledge norms arguing that a lottery assertion *also* merits the genuinely epistemic form of holding accountable, reducing epistemic trust in the speaker. Perhaps our response to someone who says "Your ticket did not win" on probabilistic evidence should be

¹⁶ John Searle (1969, 64) calls the speaker's authority over the hearer the "preparatory condition" of an order.

parallel to our response to a historian who fails to properly verify what his sources say – we shouldn't take what they say at face value, without making sure they actually know something we don't. Again, I'm not claiming that this is right, only indicating that this is how the argument should proceed.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I've argued that we can tell whether a norm is epistemic or not by looking at what should happen when the relevant standard is violated in the absence of an epistemic excuse. If the appropriate response is blame or praise, this is evidence that the norm is *not* an epistemic one. Holding someone accountable in a distinctively epistemic way involves reducing credibility in her and possibly making this manifest to her, if one is in the right position to do so. It may be appropriate to hold someone accountable in this way for beliefs that are not under voluntary control, because doing so does not amount to unfairly blaming the subject. My limited case study of arguments concerning the epistemic norm of assertion suggests that the ongoing debate would be improved if such diagnostics were taken more seriously. I haven't sought to defend any particular view on the content of epistemic norms of assertion or belief. My claim is simply that evidence for them will have to consist at least in part in the appropriateness of genuinely epistemic accountability.

Acknowledgements

This paper benefited enormously from feedback from audiences at the University of St Andrews, Institut Jean Nicod, University of Southampton, and Uppsala University, as well as constructive comments by two anonymous referees for this journal. I would especially like to thank Jessica Brown, Yuri Cath, Matthew Chrisman, Matti Eklund, Mikkel Gerken, Elizabeth Harman, Katherine Hawley, Uriah Kriegel, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, Vili

Lähteenmäki, Lilian O'Brien, François Reçanati, Andrew Reisner, Ninni Suni, and Folke Tersman for their helpful suggestions.

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