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No Epistemic Norm for Action

Mona Simion

mis2@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract

One central debate in recent literature on epistemic normativity concerns the epistemic norm for action. This paper argues that this debate is afflicted by a category mistake: strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an epistemic norm for action. To this effect, I introduce a distinction between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content; I argue that, while it is plausible that norms of the latter type will govern action in general, epistemic norms will only govern actions characteristically associated with delivering epistemic goods.

1. Introduction

One central debate in recent literature on epistemic normativity concerns the epistemic norm for action. Several people think that, where one's choice is p-dependent, it is appropriate to treat the proposition that p as a reason for acting only if you know that p¹ (e.g. Hawthorne and Stanley (2008)). The most notable competing account puts forth a Bayesian expected utility maximization norm, according to which it is rational to choose an act only if it maximizes expected utility with respect to one's credences and utilities (e.g. Douven (2008)).²

This paper argues that the debate is afflicted by a category mistake: strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an epistemic norm for action. To this effect, I will first put forth a distinction that has been largely overlooked in the literature, between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content. Further on, I will offer a pretty straightforward way to tell their requirements apart (§2). In §3 I will argue that, inasmuch as actions lack a characteristic epistemic function, they are not governed by epistemic norms, but by other (prudential, moral etc.) norms with epistemic content. This result will also shed new light

¹While I will focus on the necessity direction of the norm, everything I say goes for the sufficiency direction, and therefore the biconditional version, too.

²For an overview of the debate, see Benton (2014). For recent work, see Littlejohn and Turri (eds.) (2014).

on the debate concerning the assertion-action commonality assumption, i.e., the claim that action and assertion are governed by one and the same epistemic norm. Finally, in §5 I briefly discuss the impact of the present result on the normativity of practical reasoning.

2. Epistemic Norms and Norms with Epistemic Content

Let us, on a first approximation, formulate the norm we are talking about as follows:

The X Norm for Action (XNA): One is in a good enough epistemic position to act on p only if p has X.

Now, as we have seen, there is no consensus in the literature as to what property X is supposed to stand for, whether it is knowledge, expected utility maximization or what have you. Many³ people, though, take it that XNA is a

³ There are a few important exceptions (many thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out). In particular, when it comes to the views defended by Tim Williamson (e.g. 2000) and Jeremy Fantl and Matt McGrath (e.g. 2002), whether they will eventually make the proper subject of this paper will depend a lot on the details.

The Williamson view does not take the norm for action to be of a particular type or another; rather, an action based on less than knowledge is, according to Williamson (pc), in a crucial way, malfunctional. Note, though, that it is not clear that this explanation will let Williamson off the hook when it comes to committing to typing his preferred nor. After all, functions are typed; therefore, so is malfunctioning. Something can be epistemically malfunctional, prudentially malfunctional and so on. Of course, for many traits, actions and artifacts, there will be such a thing as a central function associated with them. Failure to function properly in view of fulfilling this central function will often be referred to as merely malfunctioning. However, this still refers to the failure of properly functioning in view of fulfilling a function of a particular type – i.e, the central function associated with the artifact, trait or action in question. Take hearts, for instance: it seems proper to say that a non-beating heart s malfunctional. What this amounts to, however, is saying that it fails to properly function towards fulfilling its main function, which is the biological function of pumping blood.

On the Fantl&McGrath view, propriety of using p as a premise in practical reasoning and treating p as a reason for action can come apart from properly acting in the light of p in many ways; as such, they need not be committed to their being epistemic requirements on action. Plausibly, the view is perfectly compatible with a picture where it is fine to act on lottery propositions (say, sell your ticket) while, at the same time, it is impermissible to use such propositions in practical reasoning, or treat them as reasons for action, in virtue of not having knowledge-level justification. As such, while the view does want to say that epistemic requirements govern practical reasoning and treating p as a reason for action, it does not commit to the claim that action itself is the proper subject of epistemic evaluation.

Two things about this. First, I am in strong agreement with Fantl and McGrath concerning there being an epistemic norm governing practical reasoning, independently of any such norm governing action. More about this in Section #4 below. Secondly, though, depending on how it will be spelled out, I worry about ‘treating p as a reason for action’ not being the proper subject of epistemic requirements either, for just the same reasons as action: it is not clear to me what

distinctively epistemic norm; according to Matt Benton, for instance, “[...] when one faces a decision over whether to act that depends on the truth of some proposition, then acting without knowing that proposition can seem epistemically suspect and deserving of criticism” (Benton 2014). According to Jason Stanley (2016), also, “[r]ational action, practical reasoning, intentional action, and skilled action all plausibly involve epistemic norms” . Similarly, Martin Montminy argues that “[i]t is epistemically appropriate to act on the belief that p if and only if that belief counts as knowledge” (2012, 63). Also in support of a knowledge norm, John Hawthorne wonders whether winners of a bet with extremely good odds are “epistemically laudable for taking the bet” (John Hawthorne 2004, 175).

Foes of the knowledge norm also agree about the genuine epistemic nature of the requirement on action at stake. According to Mikkel Gerken, for instance, “[...] if the profiles of epistemic assessment for action and assertion are relevantly similar, it is prima facie evidence for the assumption that the relevant epistemic norms are also relevantly similar” (Gerken 2014, 726).

Furthermore, there is one more thing several⁴ people involved in the debate seem to agree on: XNA is an epistemic norm in virtue of the fact that it concerns is how good one’s epistemic position needs to be vis-à-vis p in order to make acting on p permissible. Thus, both sides of the debate seem to stand behind the following principle:

The Epistemic Support Principle (ESP): If a norm N determines the amount of epistemic support needed for proper ϕ -ing, then N is an epistemic norm.

One can find ESP both implicitly and explicitly assumed in several places the literature discussing the epistemic normativity of belief, assertion or action in the last decade.⁵ What this section will argue is that, insofar as epistemic normativity behaves like other types of normativity, ESP is false, and, therefore, XNA need not be an epistemic norm.

the epistemic function associated with either the former or the latter might be. Again, a lot will hinge on the details.

⁴ For exceptions, see anti-contextualist pragmatic warranted assertability maneuvers a la e.g. Rysiew (2001) and Brown (2006)). For explicit doubts about this recipe for individuating epistemic norms, see e.g. Hazlett, McKenna and Pollock (2012).

⁵ For the implicit assumption, see e.g. Gerken (2014), Benton (2014). Often, ESP is also explicitly endorsed; take, e.g., the following passages: “[T]he problem with the agents in the above cases is that it is not *epistemically* appropriate for them to flat-out assert that p [...]. One reason this is clear is that the criticism of the agents concerns the *grounds* for their assertions (Lackey 2013, 38); “Assertions are governed by an alethic or an epistemic norm – that is, a norm that specifies that it is appropriate to assert something only if what is asserted is true, or justifiably believed, or certain or known” (Maitra 2011, 277).

Let us look at what is the case with other types of norms; consider driving. One traffic norm is the one regulating speed limit within city bounds. However, just because a norm is regulating speed limit, it need not follow that it is a traffic norm. Say you are driving your sister to work and traffic norms have it that you are supposed to drive at most 50 km/h within city bounds. And you are respecting the norm: you are driving 50 km/h. Now say that your sister gets carsick at that speed, and asks you to drive a bit slower, under 30 km/h. It looks as if that's the all-things-considered proper thing to do in this situation. Still, according to the traffic norm, you can just go on driving 50km/h. The moral norm, however, overrides the traffic norm and renders driving 50 km/h all-things-considered inappropriate. Or say you are the only one who can defuse a bomb placed in center town, which would otherwise kill thousands. Surely driving 70 km/h, inasmuch as that's what's required for you to be there in time, is the all-things-considered proper thing to do. The prudential norm overrides the traffic norm when it comes to what the appropriate speed is in this situation.

Thus, it looks as if just because a norm regulates how speedily you can drive, it does not follow that it is a traffic norm. Notice, too, that the case of driving is hardly isolated; similar examples can be construed for many types of action, provided that the norms in question regulate how much of a gradable property one's action needs to enjoy in order to be permissible. When permissible action requires more or less of a gradable property G, all norms N regulating that particular type of action can fix the threshold for N-proper performance lower or higher on the G spectrum: it can be prudentially or morally appropriate to drive faster or slower, to have a better or a worse grade average, to speak louder or more quietly etc. Just because a norm is regulating the appropriate speed, it need not follow that it is a traffic norm; just because a norm regulates the appropriate tone of one's voice, it need not follow it is a norm of etiquette; and so on.

Now, action is certainly governed by many norms – prudential and moral norms are the most obvious candidates – and justification is a gradable property. Therefore, unless we are given reasons to believe epistemic normativity is somehow special in this respect,⁶ we should expect norms regulating the degree of justification required for proper action to make no exception; we should expect that just because a norm N affects the amount of warrant needed for proper action, it need not follow that N is an epistemic norm. Just like in the case of driving, where a moral norm determined how fast one could go, further norms can decide the amount of warrant needed for

⁶ As far as I can tell, there is no argument to this effect in the literature. If the point made by this paper goes through, there is reason to believe that we should not trust the prospects of one offering such an argument either.

proper action. The fact that a norm regulates the appropriate speed does not imply it is a traffic norm, and, similarly, the fact that a norm regulates the appropriate amount of epistemic support does not imply it is an epistemic norm. ESP is thus false: just because a norm regulates the amount of warrant needed for proper action, it need not follow that it regulates the amount of warrant needed for *epistemically* proper action.

Given that ESP is false, however, there is no reason to think that XNA is an epistemic norm for action. Recall XNA: ‘One is in a *good* enough epistemic position to act on p only if p has X’. With ESP out of the picture, good enough epistemic position need not mean epistemically good enough, that is, it need not mean good enough by the epistemic norm. One can be in a prudentially good enough epistemic position, a morally good enough epistemic position and so on. *The fact that a norm has epistemic content does not make it into an epistemic norm.*

Here is one natural worry that might arise at this point: Is the distinction concerning epistemic norms vs. norms with epistemic content merely terminological? What hinges on this distinction? Even if this paper is right, couldn’t we just continue using ‘epistemic norm’ as standing for ‘norm with epistemic content’?

The answer is ‘no’; first and foremost, because this would get us in trouble when it comes to fit with the general normative landscape, if we do individuate other types of norms along different lines. To see how this is a problem, take, for instance, the debate over pragmatic encroachment: is it the case that whether we know depends on practical matters? It is easy to see that, to the aim of finding the right answer to this question, distinguishing between genuinely epistemic and merely practical norms is likely to make all the difference. That is, what we want in support of the latter is reasons to believe genuinely epistemic normativity suffers from pragmatic encroachment; if the claim would be merely that norms with epistemic content can be prudential, well, it would likely turn out to be trivially true.

3. Actions and Characteristic Epistemic Goals

The previous section has shown that ESP is false and, hence, that there is no reason to believe that XNA captures an epistemic norm. This section argues that XNA is actually not an epistemic norm.

To see this, let us ask the following question: if the above distinction between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content is correct, how is

one to distinguish the requirements pertaining to norms of the former sort from the requirements pertaining to norms of the latter sort?

Here is a fairly straightforward way to go about it: notice that a norm's pertaining to one type or another has to do with the goal it is associated⁷ with. Thus, prudential norms will be associated with a prudential goal – maximizing practical utility – moral norms will be associated with the goal of maximizing moral goodness, etc. Epistemic norms will thus be concerned with guiding us in reaching epistemic goals.

Think again about your driving your sister to work. The requirement generated there by the moral norm has traffic-related content: 'Drive at most 30 km/h because your sister gets carsick'. This, however, in no way makes it a traffic norm; this is easy to see, given that it is associated with the moral goal of protecting your sister from harm, rather than with the goal of safely getting to your destination. Similarly, prudential norms can have epistemic content; take, for instance, the norm: 'Do not jump in the lake unless you know how to swim'. What makes this a prudential constraint rather than an epistemic one is the goal associated with it, which is life preservation.

If that is the case, however, it is not clear why action in general would be governed by an epistemic norm to begin with. When does it make sense to regulate something X by a norm of type Y, such as a prudential, moral or epistemic norm? The overwhelmingly plausible answer is: when X has attaining Y as a characteristic aim. Consider antibiotics; the characteristic goal associated with producing them is curing bacterial infections. As such, norms governing this activity will plausibly be there to insure that they reliably do so.

Conversely, when X does not have Y as a characteristic aim, there is little reason to regulate X by a norm of type Y. Producing antibiotics will most likely not be governed by, say, aesthetic norms, given that the characteristic aim associated with antibiotics is not to aesthetically please the consumer; antibiotics can be proper antibiotics even if they are not particularly pretty.

Notice that most actions are not characteristically aimed at any epistemic goals; my eating breakfast, running in the park, brushing my teeth, buying chocolate, helping my old neighbour cross the street are cases in point. Most of them are aimed at prudential goals, such as maximizing expected practical utility, some of them at moral goals, maybe a few at aesthetic goals. In the absence of any characteristic epistemic aim associated with them, though, there

⁷ Notice that the claim here is of mere association between norms and goals of a particular type; as such, it does not imply any substantive value-theoretic commitments. The consequentialist explains the 'ought' in terms of the 'good'; he will say that the norm is there to guide us in reaching the goal. The deontologist would have it that the goal is only valuable because the norm gives us reasons to favour it. Anyhow, the mere association claim holds. Thus, the argument made by this paper can be constructed in both consequentialist and deontological terms; nothing here hinges on this.

is little reason to think that these actions will be governed by an epistemic norm.

Consider, in contrast, asserting, perceiving, reporting, judging, learning, reading, applying to the university etc. These actions are all characteristically aimed at delivering epistemic goods. As such, it makes sense for them to be governed by epistemic norms. Take assertion, for instance; it looks as if, due to our physical and psychological limitations, a lot of the knowledge we have is testimonial; thus, assertion is one of our main epistemic vehicles. As such, it makes perfect sense that it will be governed by epistemic norms, associated with the characteristic epistemic goals of this speech act; that is, norms meant to insure that the practice of assertion delivers the epistemic goods we are using it for.⁸

Thus, having an epistemic norm for action makes perfect sense when it comes to actions characteristically associated with epistemic goals, like assertion. It makes sense to ask what property exactly one's assertion must enjoy for it to be epistemically proper; that is, properly equipped to reach its epistemic goal. However, just as in the case of producing antibiotics, there is no reason to think that my buying chocolate will be governed by an epistemic norm, due to the fact that it is not characteristically aimed at delivering epistemic goods.

Now, one interesting by-product of this result concerns the assertion-action commonality assumption; that is, the fairly popular claim that, given that assertion is a type of action, the epistemic norm governing the former is going to be but an instance of the epistemic norm governing the latter.⁹ Notice that the above results undermine commonality, together with the motivation behind it: assertion is not governed by an epistemic norm in virtue of its being a type of action, but due to its characteristic epistemic function.

4. Action and Practical Reasoning

Say that the result above is correct; one legitimate question that arises at this point is: where does this leave practical reasoning? Importantly, note that nothing I said above affects the discussion concerning the epistemic normativity thereof.¹⁰

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to dive deeply into this subject matter, here is, very briefly, where the results above leave us: Many people

⁸ See Simion (2016) for discussion.

⁹ See Brown (2012) for discussion.

¹⁰ Jeremy Fantl and Matt McGrath hold a view according to which propriety of practical reasoning and action can come apart. See fn. 3 for discussion.

lump action and practical reasoning together when it comes to discussions of epistemic normativity. If this paper is right, this is likely to be a mistake that generates important theoretical costs. Since action in general has no epistemic function, it is not governed by any epistemic norm. Rather, it generally serves prudential aims, and is therefore governed by prudential norms. At the same time, of course, practical reasoning will also serve a prudential function: that of leading to prudentially good action. In virtue of the latter, it will also be governed by prudential norms.

In contrast to action, though, practical reasoning does, arguably, also serve an epistemic function: generating knowledge (or true belief, or justified belief, whatever one's preferred epistemic goal is) of what one ought to do, for instance, is one plausible candidate for the epistemic function of practical reasoning. If that is so, it will, arguably, afford an epistemic norm.

But couldn't defenders of one account or another of the epistemic norm for action not worry too much about the results of this paper, and merely retreat in a discussion about practical reasoning? Two things about this; first, I would see this as a great success for this paper. Secondly, and more importantly, though, the retreat would not be a 'mere retreat' at all, but it would rather require a fairly substantial revision of methodology. Here is why: most cases put forth in defense of one account or another in this literature appeal to intuitions about propriety of acting in a particular situation. If this paper is right, however, the latter says little about the *epistemic* propriety of practical reasoning: prudential propriety of an instance of practical reasoning will likely depend on the prudential propriety of the generated piece of action; importantly, though, epistemic propriety need not. Thus, arguably, on pain of deontic equivocation, this methodology needs be revisited: arguments pro and against one account or another of the epistemic norm for practical reasoning will have to stay clear of considerations pertaining to the propriety of the corresponding action. Again, though, this discussion affords a paper on its own.

What is important for our discussion here is to note that, even if practical reasoning does turn out to have an epistemic function, and therefore will be governed by an epistemic norm, this will not transmit epistemic requirements to the generated action. And here is why: I take it that the transmission thought would go along the following lines: You ought to know that p in order to permissibly use p in practical reasoning (epistemic norm); You ought to only act on the conclusions of permissible practical reasoning; Therefore you ought to know that p in order to act. Now, the problem is that deontic transmission need not preserve the type of permissibility at stake in the premise of interest to us. To see this, consider, again: You ought to drive 50 km/h in order to get safely at your destination (traffic norm); You ought to get safely at your

destination in order to keep your promise to mom (moral norm); Therefore, you ought to drive 50 km/h in order to keep your promise to mom (moral norm). Even if the first premise states a traffic norm, it need not follow that the conclusion does too. Similarly, in the argument above, even if the first premise states an epistemic norm, it does not follow the conclusion does too.

5. Conclusion

I have argued here that there is no epistemic norm governing action in general, although most actions will plausibly be governed by several other norms with epistemic content – like prudential or moral norms. I have also argued that, in order for a particular type of action to be governed by an epistemic norm, it needs be the case that there is a characteristic epistemic goal associated with it.

In the light of these results, it looks as if the question concerning what one's epistemic relation to *p* has to be in order to render acting on *p* permissible should be framed as concerning a type of normativity that plausibly governs all types of action. Uncontroversially, I guess, the most obvious candidate is prudential normativity. Thus, what we are asking is what one's epistemic relation to *p* has to be in order to render acting on *p* prudentially permissible. And what we are looking for is a prudential norm with epistemic content.¹¹

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