

Epistemic Norms on Evidence-Gathering

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1 THE STATE OF PLAY

Epistemologists have denied the existence of *epistemic* norms on evidence-gathering by appealing to:

- **Instrumentality** of evidence-gathering norms.
- **State-centeredness:** Epistemic norms govern **states**, not **actions**.
- **Evidentialism:** Whether *S* is justified/rational in believing that *p* depends entirely on whether the belief that *p* is supported by the evidence *S* *has*.

2 ROOM FOR EPISTEMIC NORMS ON EVIDENCE-GATHERING

Our claim: The worries above do not preclude epistemic norms on evidence-gathering.

Worry 1: Instrumentality

Response: Accept that epistemic norms are non-instrumental. If there are epistemic norms on evidence-gathering, they apply independently of the agent's desires.

Worries 2 and 3: Evidentialism and State-Centeredness

Response: State-Centeredness is unattractive; expanding to norms on *responding* but not *gathering* evidence is unmotivated.

1. Overly narrow epistemology.
 - Even if all epistemic norms are state norms, room for evidence-gathering to factor in.

2. There are epistemic norms on responding to evidence the agent has. Why stop at these activities, instead of also epistemically assessing evidence-gathering?

- We have epistemic access to the evidence we have, but not to evidence in our environment, and genuine norms require such epistemic access.
 - Response: We are not always in a position to recognize the evidence that we have (Srinivasan (2015)). And we often know we could check other sources.
- Unlike gathering evidence, responding to evidence is not agency-involving. Epistemic norms are not norms on agency.
 - Response: Responding to evidence one has is also agency-involving.

Upshot: Either we go for an overly narrow picture of epistemology or we should see no in-principle obstacles to epistemic norms on evidence-gathering. And, even in the narrow picture, unpossessed evidence may turn out to be relevant to epistemic norms.

3 EPISTEMIC PRACTICES AND NORMS

1. **Practice Indicates Norms:** If there is a legitimate practice of epistemically criticizing agents for whether and how they ϕ , then we have reason to think that there are epistemic norms on ϕ -ing.
2. **Accountability for Evidence-Gathering:** There is a legitimate practice of epistemically criticizing agents for whether and how they gather evidence.
3. **Evidence-Gathering:** We have reason to think that there are epistemic norms on evidence-gathering.

3.1 Defense of Premise 1

Norms: (roughly) standards that play first-, second-, and third-personal roles in regulating behavior and assessing others.

What makes a norm *epistemic*?

- *Diagnostic:* Epistemic norms are such that agents can be *epistemically* criticizable for violating them.

What marks *epistemic* criticizability?:

- Distinctive form of epistemic criticism involves epistemic trust-reduction: we are less willing to rely on such agents for our beliefs (Boult forthcoming; Kauppinen 2018)
- Involves a *judgment* that the agent was criticizable

Qualifications:

- **Non-exhaustive:** There can be other ways of epistemically criticizing agents.
- **Excuses:** Not all norm-violations justify criticism.

Legitimacy: Minimally, legitimate practices within the epistemic domain must be reliability-conducive (Goldberg 2018)—or, more generally, appropriately connected to epistemic goods.

3.2 Defense of Premise 2

We do epistemically criticize agents who fail to gather evidence—e.g. by reducing our trust in them.

Cloistered Claire: Claire gets all of her nutrition news from Guup, which tends to endorse fad diets that are not always scientifically backed. This month, it encourages its readers to add 1 tbsp of coconut oil to their coffee each day. She believes this without gathering more evidence.

Gullible Gabe: Gabe tells you that there are 10% fewer jobs in finance this year than there were last year. You defer to him. You

later learn that he got this fact from a dated *Economist* magazine that he read at his therapist's office. He assumed that it was up-to-date despite the prevalence of dated magazines in therapists' offices—something he should know about.

Diagnosis: You would be disposed to reduce your trust in Claire & Gabe—either generally or in a domain. (But you would not, for instance, morally blame them.)

4 OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

4.1 Objection 1: The Confound Charge

Objection: These agents are criticizable because they violate other norms (e.g. practical, moral, occupational).

Response: Does not adequately capture our cases:

- Nothing moral at stake.
- Criticizable independently of their goals or stakes.
- No obvious occupational role; testifier role is partly epistemic.

4.2 Objection 2: Higher-Order Evidence

Objection: We criticize these agents only insofar as they have higher-order evidence that their evidence is incomplete or unreliable.

Response: Won't explain all cases.

- Especially not if you hold restrictive views of *having* evidence, like many evidentialists.
- Ex: agents in epistemic bubbles who, upon reflection, could realize that they ought to gather more evidence—but do not reflect (and so do not have the evidence).
- Cf. Goldberg, should-have-known cases.

4.3 Objection 3: Over-generation

Objection: Yields epistemic norms on eating sandwiches.

- **Intuition:** we sometimes epistemically criticize people for forming beliefs on an empty stomach, on little sleep, etc.

Responses:

1. **Bite the bullet?:** Some people do this, but it's not ideal!
2. **Clarify the locus of criticism:** Are we really epistemically criticizing these agents for whether and how they eat lunch?
 - No! Suppose they didn't form any complicated beliefs, or double-checked such beliefs. Then no epistemic criticism.
 - Insofar as we do criticize such agents, it's for their belief-forming and zetetic practices.
3. **Practices!:** No practice of epistemically criticizing people for whether they eat lunch.

5 UPSHOTS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Applications

- Two-stage picture: epistemic normativity requires agents to both *gather* and *respond* to evidence in good ways (cf. [Hughes \(2021\)](#)).
- Norms on evidence-gathering help account for the epistemic problems at play in:
 - Epistemic bubbles: Bad evidence-gathering (contrast with echo chambers)
 - Confirmation bias in evidence-gathering
 - Obliviousness in inquiry

- Gullibility and insufficient vigilance
- Closed-mindedness
- Resting on past laurels and being out-of-date

5.2 The Zetetic and the Epistemic

- This project is part of the *zetetic turn* in epistemology. It offers a new argument for the existence of epistemic norms governing inquiry—as well as a way to identify them.
- Our view explains the significance of whether a norm counts as *epistemic*: epistemic norms license distinctively epistemic reactions and criticism.
- The relationship between the epistemic and the zetetic:
 - The epistemic and zetetic are *partly overlapping* normative domains.
 - Epistemic norms include both norms on states and on action—if non-instrumental and meet the conditions in §3.
 - There can be conflicts between epistemic norms; some epistemic norms may be imperfect duties.

6 WORKS CITED

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