Michelle M. Dyke

Statement of Research Interests

My research is focused in epistemology and metaethics, with a special interest in the nature of moral and epistemic normativity. The guiding aim of my published work and ongoing research agenda is to articulate and defend a unified account of normative reasons, including moral reasons, reasons of self-interested practical rationality, and epistemic reasons. On my approach, these different kinds of reasons are all fundamentally instrumental in nature, but are differentiated by their sources in the contingently held aims of different sorts of agents.

As part of this general theory, I defend a form of epistemic instrumentalism that is essentially collective. Epistemic instrumentalism is the view that epistemic rationality is a particular kind of means-ends rationality. According to the version I advance, our epistemic reasons for belief arise in connection with ends attributable directly to epistemic communities rather than to individual persons. I also defend a novel form of moral relativism, according to which what we have moral reason to do is fixed in connection with the contingently held aims of the diverse societies of which we are members. My philosophical interest in these views is driven by a sympathy with classic objections to realism about value, including epistemological concerns and especially evolutionary debunking arguments. These arguments help to emphasize the ways in which the realist's commitment to mind-independent normative principles or irreducibly normative properties may be at odds with a wholly naturalistic worldview. The desire to offer an account of normativity that remains compatible with naturalism is a key attraction of both moral relativism and epistemic instrumentalism.

1. Epistemic Normativity: Collective Epistemic Instrumentalism

According to the epistemic instrumentalist, we possess epistemic reasons for forming beliefs, or for making inferences, insofar as doing so would be an effective means to our ends. According to different forms of epistemic instrumentalism, the relevant ends may be distinctively epistemic (e.g. our desire for knowledge), or may include a wide variety of everyday goals, such as completing a book or making it to the airport on time.

In "Could our epistemic reasons be *collective* practical reasons?" (*Noûs*, 2021) I propose a form of epistemic instrumentalism that emphasizes the importance of epistemic communities, with investigative goals, as a source of individuals' epistemic reasons for belief. On this view, what we have epistemic reason to believe depends not upon our own individual ends, but upon the investigative ends attributable directly to epistemic communities of which we are members, such as a jury's end of determining whether the accused is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, or a laboratory's end of determining whether a newly developed medication produces statistically significant benefits compared to already-approved treatments. I argue that this view can avoid a major objection to traditional forms of epistemic instrumentalism that has been pressed by Kelly (2003) and also discussed by Schroeder (2007), who calls it the "Too Few Reasons" objection.[1] The objection is that real people do not actually possess the goals they would need to possess,

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[1] Kelly, Thomas. (2003). Epistemic rationality as instrumental rationality: A critique. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 66*(3): 612-640.
Schroeder, Mark. (2007). *Slaves of the Passions.* Oxford University Press.

such as a general desire to maximize their store of true beliefs, in order for all of the epistemic reasons for belief that we find it natural to attribute to them to be instrumental reasons. Instrumentalism thus seems to yield "too few reasons" for belief when we focus on individual goals. I also argue that an emphasis on collectively held epistemic ends is independently motivated. First, there is a tradition within the philosophy of science of emphasizing the collective aspects of inquiry. Second, there has been a growing interest in social epistemology among those who recognize the crucial importance of phenomena such as the sharing of testimony as a source of everyday knowledge. I suggest that my own view would retain the advantages traditionally associated with epistemic instrumentalism, including its compatibility with a naturalistic worldview as well as immunity to the kinds of objections to normative realism first emphasized by Mackie (1977).[2]

I am currently working on further developing my view of epistemic normativity in a collection of related papers. In "Epistemic Blame and Epistemic Instrumentalism," I argue that we can appeal to considerations regarding the phenomenon of a distinctively epistemic kind of blame in support of an inherently social, as opposed to traditionally individualistic, form of epistemic instrumentalism. According to individualistic forms of epistemic instrumentalism, the normative authority of one's epistemic reasons comes from the value to a person of his or her own ends. I argue that as a result, these views lack the resources to explain why, in various paradigmatic cases of epistemic irrationality, one's peers can have the standing to hold one accountable for irrational beliefs and inference patterns. That is, it is not clear why one's inability to achieve one's own idiosyncratic goals effectively would merit such strong censure from others. I suggest that my own version of epistemic instrumentalism, by contrast, can account well for the appropriateness of epistemic blame. I presented this paper at the 2022 St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality.

In new work in progress, titled "The Commensurability Objection to Epistemic Instrumentalism" I argue that most forms of epistemic instrumentalism describe epistemic reasons for belief as too similar to, and wholly commensurable with, all of our other practical reasons. I argue that this view does not do justice to the datum of an intuitive tension between what one has epistemic reason to believe on the basis of one's evidence as opposed to practical reason to believe in light of the pragmatic advantages of doing so. I suggest that my own version of epistemic instrumentalism can explain the distinctness in kind of these reasons by appealing to their different sources; epistemic reasons arise in connection with the collective ends of epistemic communities while our practical reasons for belief arise in connection with our individual ends. I am also contributing a paper on "Instrumentalism about epistemic reasons" to the forthcoming 3rd Edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, edited by Kurt Sylvan.

2. Moral Normativity & Moral Relativism

I defend a form of moral relativism, according to which our moral reasons arise in connection with the aims attributable to real human societies. My (2020) paper, "Group Agency Meets Metaethics: How to Craft a More Compelling Form of Normative Relativism" which appears in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 15*, Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, articulates the advantages of

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[2] Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin Books.

this view. In this piece, I contrast my own proposal with the views of e.g. Harman (1996) and Velleman (2015).[3] I argue that the moral relativist should be careful not to equate what one has moral reason to do in any given society with what is conventionally approved or socially expected within that society. On my own view, we can have moral reasons to reform existing customs and practices where doing so would provide a more effective means to the achievement of a society's most fundamental goals, such as the maintenance of a stable economy. I also describe this view in an invited chapter on "Relativism" for *The Oxford Handbook of Metaethics*, edited by David Copp and Connie Rosati, which is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

According to this form of moral relativism that I defend, we can sensibly attribute ends, and thus reasons, directly to societies. In another new paper in progress, "Societies as group agents," I defend the claim that we can attribute functional states to real social groups, such as nations and urban populations, that play roles analogous to those of beliefs and goals in individual persons. This paper will appear in a special edition of the journal *Inquiry* on reductionism about group agency, edited by Olof Leffler and Lars Moen.

3. Epistemological Objections to Value Realism, esp. Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

On my view, some of the strongest objections to realism about value are epistemological in nature. I have a particular interest in evolutionary debunking arguments, which draw attention to etiological facts about the evolutionary history of our moral beliefs as a source of undermining defeat for moral beliefs as the realist construes them.

My (2020) paper, "Bad bootstrapping: the problem with third-factor replies to the Darwinian Dilemma," in *Philosophical Studies*, contributes to the ongoing debate over the success of evolutionary debunking arguments. In the paper, I draw from the epistemic literature on reliabilism about knowledge in order to argue that "third-factor" replies to Street's (2006) "Darwinian Dilemma" version of the debunking argument are unsuccessful.[4] According to the Darwinian Dilemma, the appearance of what would be an unlikely coincidence between the mind-independent moral facts and our moral beliefs (shaped as they are by our evolutionary history) gives the realist reason to doubt that her moral beliefs are true. Third-factor replies appeal to assumed moral facts as part of a third-factor explanation for why it is actually unsurprising that the moral facts as the realist understands them would correspond to our moral beliefs. I argue that third-factor replies take the form of "bootstrapping," a question-begging pattern of reasoning that has been discussed as an objection to reliabilism. In that literature, it is alleged that the reliabilist is forced to concede that bootstrapping can yield knowledge, even though the relevant form of reasoning is intuitively illegitimate.

I will be presenting new work in progress, titled "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Modal Safety of Our Moral Beliefs" as a symposium paper at the 2023 Central APA meeting. The paper responds to a recent argument from Clarke-Doane and Baras (2021), who suggest that evolutionary debunking arguments cannot succeed in providing a source of undermining defeat

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[3] Harman, Gilbert, and Judith Jarvis Thomson. (1996). *Moral relativism and moral objectivity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
Velleman, J. David. (2015). *Foundations for moral relativism: Second expanded edition*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.
[4] Street, Sharon. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies, 127*, 109-166.

for our moral beliefs because they do not establish that our moral beliefs fail to meet conditions of either safety or sensitivity for belief.[5] I argue in response that evolutionary debunking arguments can be interpreted as giving us reason to doubt that the method in which our moral beliefs were formed renders them safe, where a belief that P is "safe" if and only if one could not have easily formed a false belief as to whether Q, where Q is any proposition relevantly similar enough to P and that is formed using the method one actually used to determine whether P. I argue this is so because evolutionary debunking arguments highlight the contingency of our moral beliefs; the course of our species' evolution could have taken us down a very different path while the necessary moral truths, as the realist understands them, would have remained unchanged. The paper concludes by drawing broader epistemological lessons about the relationship between undermining defeat and the conditions of safety and sensitivity; there are other sorts of "luck" at odds with the justification of our beliefs that are not ruled out by either safety or sensitivity conditions. I am also contributing a piece on "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments" for the forthcoming 3rd edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*.

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[5] Clarke-Doane, Justin and Dan Baras. (2021). Modal security. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 102*(1), 162-183.