

Comments on “A Pragmatic Social Epistemology”

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There is a great deal about which Michael Hannon and I agree when it comes to epistemic normativity.

We both defend forms of what I call *collective epistemic instrumentalism*.¹

(Hannon calls his view “social epistemic instrumentalism.”)

What is that? The *epistemic instrumentalist* thinks that all demands of epistemic rationality are demands of instrumental (means-ends) rationality.

Hannon and I both think that the *best version* of epistemic instrumentalism is one according to which the force of epistemic norms derives from the presence of *collective* epistemic ends (ends attributed directly to whole communities of inquiry) rather than from the ends of the individual people that make them up.

There are three features of these theories that, we agree, make them philosophically attractive.

1. Epistemic instrumentalism offers a *naturalist-friendly* account of epistemic normativity.

This claim was emphasized by Quine (1969; 1986) and has been echoed by various philosophers of science.

2. Compared to traditional (that is, individualistic) versions of epistemic instrumentalism, *collective* epistemic instrumentalism better explains why we are still subject to the force of epistemic norms even when believing in violation of those norms does *not* undermine the pursuit of our *own* goals.

So our views **better handle problem cases for epistemic instrumentalism** like those from Thomas Kelly (2003).

3. A collective approach to epistemology is **independently motivated**, for instance by Sinan Dogramaci’s (2012) work on how social enforcement of rules for rationality (the practice of “epistemic evaluation”) solves coordination problems for belief, enabling the sharing of reliable testimony in peer communities.

In the rest my comments, I want to explore a key point of disagreement between us.

To start, note that virtue/desideratum #2 sounds a lot like a claim about the categoricity of epistemic norms.

- **Question: In what sense can the collective epistemic instrumentalist vindicate the *categoricity* of epistemic norms?**

There may be a significant difference between our views here. I worry that Hannon’s view (i) introduces an arbitrary bifurcation in the sources of normativity (“norms” vs. “reasons”), and, as a result, (ii) fails after all to vindicate the claim that socially enforced epistemic norms *really are authoritative for us* when flouting them does not interfere with the successful pursuit of our individual ends.

¹ See Dyke (2021), “Could our epistemic reasons be collective practical reasons?” in *Noûs*, 55(4), 842-62.

Hannon on the Categoricity of Epistemic Norms

Hannon claims that (p. 6) “social epistemic instrumentalism can account for the categorical force of epistemic normativity, properly understood.”

He prefers to characterize **categoricity** as follows (p. 7, italics in original):

The normative force of categorical norms is characteristically *not contingent upon one having a certain goal or end...* A categorical requirement is *in force* even when we would rather not comply... the individual can appropriately be held accountable for complying or failing to comply with the norm.

So far, I agree.

Yet Hannon **denies** that epistemic norms are what he calls **strongly categorical** (p. 8):

According to the view I favor, epistemic normativity is inescapable but not strongly categorical.

That is, on his view, epistemic norms do not *automatically* give individuals reasons to comply *even when* they are in force.

Hannon adds: “Still, we can legitimately criticize agents even in the rare cases where they lack any reason to follow the epistemic norms.” (p. 11)

Notice Hannon differentiates sharply between socially enforced epistemic “norms” and a person’s “reasons.”

To reframe my original questions/concerns more precisely:

- If, on Hannon’s view, we might lack **reason** to comply with **epistemic norms** (Depending upon our own goals?), can this view vindicate any kind of “categoricity” worth the name for those norms?
- What role is being played by “reasons” here? How does the force of norms and reasons compare?

Hannon’s Criticism of My View on the Categoricity of Epistemic Norms

Hannon criticizes my own view for leaving it unclear “why being a part of a community with certain goals would give an individual reasons to achieve those goals.” (p. 10)

On my (2021) view, an agent A has epistemic reason to believe P just in case:

- (i) A is a member of community C,
- (ii) Community C has some epistemic ends E,
- (iii) C’s achievement of E is most effectively promoted by C’s adherence to epistemic standards S, and
- (iv) A’s believing P is called for by standards S.

Yet I have never claimed that epistemic norms provide one with distinct reasons to comply with those norms. My suggestion is that being subject to an epistemic norm *just is* to have (an) epistemic reason(s).

It’s an admittedly radical proposal on which our possession of epistemic reasons is neither a brute fact, nor is it dependent upon our *individual* ends. The normative force of *epistemic* reasons in particular comes from *collectively held ends*. Those norms have force for us because we are members of epistemic communities.

This strikes me as a parsimonious way of securing the kind of categoricity we really wanted in the first place. On my view, epistemic norms are “categorical” in the first way defined by Hannon. We are subject to epistemic norms (equivalently, for me, possess epistemic reasons) regardless of our own personal ends. This secures #2.

What is left to say (that we need to say in discussing epistemic normativity) about one’s “reasons?”