

## Epistemic Blame as a Challenge for Epistemic Instrumentalism

Michelle M. Dyke

**Starting point:** Is there such a thing as distinctively epistemic blame? (As opposed to moral blame?)

Boult (2021), Brown (2020), Hieronymi (2008), Piovarchy (2020), and Rettler (2017) have all suggested that there is.<sup>1</sup> I agree.

Here are two examples of epistemic blame to which we’ll return shortly...

### The Alien Conspiracy Theorist

Kai and Julian are college roommates. Julian considers Kai to be a generally smart person and a reliable source of information on a variety of topics like campus parties, university policies, and new bands. However, Julian finds it annoying whenever Kai enthusiastically mentions alien sightings that he’s read about on internet blogs. Let’s assume Kai is inclined to believe almost every such report that he reads. Julian often replies by asking him questions like, “How can you believe that nonsense?”

### The Dogmatic Politician

Hazel Taylor is a (fictional) U.S. senator. She often appears on television news programs arguing for the position that human-caused climate change is a myth and that Americans’ tax dollars should never be used to support programs intended to combat its effects. Ms. Taylor has no formal science education beyond the high school level. On many occasions, she is introduced to leading scientists and policymakers who present various forms of evidence for climate change. She invariably waves them off by casting doubt on their motives and political allegiances. Her beliefs remain unaltered. Whenever she reappears on TV, various American voters feel a sense of outrage and form the desire that she revise her beliefs.

Blaming others for epistemically irrational beliefs or inference patterns may involve a variety of elements, such as (but not necessarily limited to):

- expressions of anger, frustration, or resentment towards the subject
- a preference, hope, or desire that the subject modify their belief(s) or credences
- reduced trust in the future testimony of the subject, whether in general or regarding particular topics

**The subject of today’s talk:** Assuming there are instances of (warranted) epistemic blame, what can this tell us about the nature of epistemic norms and about why these norms are authoritative for us?

I’ll argue that most *instrumentalists* about epistemic normativity will have an especially difficult time explaining how people could be warranted in blaming others for their violations of epistemic norms.

**Epistemic instrumentalism** is the view that epistemic rationality is just a special kind of instrumental (means-ends) rationality. In terms of reasons: Our epistemic reasons are instrumental reasons that arise in connection with our ends.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a skeptical take, see e.g. Kauppinen (2018). Also note that in speaking about epistemic blame for irrational beliefs, I don’t mean to exclude the possibility that one might be morally blameworthy for one’s beliefs (such as, perhaps, uncharitable beliefs about one’s peers). I’m officially neutral here on this issue. Perhaps some beliefs are both morally and epistemically blameworthy at once when they violate both epistemic and moral norms.

I’ll make a case for this in Sections 1 and 2, focusing on two common varieties of instrumentalism. I suggest that the *epistemic blame objection* to instrumentalism that I’m proposing is especially forceful because it targets both versions.

*Why would anyone be drawn to epistemic instrumentalism in the first place?*

Instrumentalism is perceived as being especially compatible with a wholly naturalist worldview. It (allegedly) can avoid the kinds of commitments, such as to metaphysically odd normative properties or irreducibly normative principles, that are often considered objectionable in the case of *moral realism*.<sup>2</sup>

*Is this the end of the road for instrumentalists?* Not necessarily! In recent work, I’ve sketched a novel and distinctively collective version of epistemic instrumentalism. On this view, we possess epistemic reasons in light of our membership in a variety of communities with epistemic ends. In the final Section 3, I’ll explore how this view could provide the starting point of an appealing account of our standing to (epistemically) blame.

### I. Epistemic Blame and “Intellectualist” (or Cognitive-Goal) Versions of Instrumentalism<sup>3</sup>

In order to argue that the phenomenon of warranted epistemic blame poses a problem for both versions of instrumentalism, I’ll use a working account of two necessary conditions for warranted epistemic blame:

1. The subject of blame must have violated some epistemic norm, and
2. The one expressing blame must have the standing to do so.<sup>4</sup>

Kelly (2003) argues against the following view:

The **Instrumentalist Conception**: “epistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality, viz. instrumental rationality in the service of one’s cognitive or epistemic goals” (p. 612, emphasis added)

On this simple first version of instrumentalism, one possesses epistemic reasons to form beliefs (etc.) when, and because, doing so will promote the epistemic ends that one has, such as (perhaps) the goal of increasing one’s store of true beliefs.

My objection this first form will be fairly quick. As Kelly (2003) has argued, what makes this view implausible is that most people do not possess the right sorts of lofty, intellectual goals that they would need to have in order for their own ends to be the source of all of the epistemic reasons we’re inclined to attribute to them. Our cognitive goals tend to be particular (e.g. a desire to learn how to get to the ballpark, or be informed of current events) rather than general (e.g. a concern for all truths).

This means, on this view, that in many plausible instances of warranted epistemic blame, not even condition 1 (that is, violation of an epistemic norm) can be met!

Recall Kai, our alien conspiracy theorist. Suppose he lacks ends like *maximizing his store of true beliefs*. His actual cognitive ends may include things like *finding all blog reports of alien sightings*. Is it appropriate for Julian to blame him for forming beliefs on what seems to him like insufficient evidence? This first kind of instrumentalist will have difficulty explaining the basis for a “yes” answer.

The epistemic blame objection to instrumentalism goes further than Kelly’s original argument in raising problems for other, more independently appealing, forms of instrumentalism...

---

<sup>2</sup> See especially Mackie’s (1977) objections to realism about value. For discussion of this consideration in favor of epistemic instrumentalism, see e.g. Côté-Bouchard (2015), Kelly (2003), Laudan (1990), Lockard (2011), and Quine (1986).

<sup>3</sup> The terms “intellectualist” vs. “pragmatist” come from Lockard (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Piovarchy (2020) endorses a version of (1). Boulton (2021) endorses a version of (2).

## II. Epistemic Blame and "Pragmatist" (or Useful-Rule) Versions of Instrumentalism

### Kornblith (1993) defends the following view:

Precisely because our cognitive systems are required to perform evaluations relative to our many concerns, and to perform these evaluations accurately, the standards by which we evaluate these cognitive systems themselves must remain insulated from most of what we intrinsically value, whatever we may value. This provides a reason to care about the truth whatever we may otherwise care about. It also provides us with a reason to evaluate our cognitive systems by their conduciveness to truth. And this is precisely what epistemic evaluation is all about... Have I assumed here that epistemic evaluation is measured by conduciveness to truth and nothing else? I have not. I have argued that truth is pre-eminent here; that any account of epistemic evaluation which does not give truth a central role to play is inadequate. There may still be a good deal of room for other factors to play a role... And it is just this kind of discussion which lends substance to debates about the dimensions of epistemic evaluation. (1993: 372-3)

On this view, systems of epistemic norms are authoritative for us because truth-conducive cognitive processes help us to achieve all of our ends, *whatever those ends are* (like buying the right toaster).

This view may seem like the most independently plausible version of epistemic instrumentalism, since it doesn't require attributing lofty epistemic goals to all human beings as a condition for their possessing epistemic reasons for belief.

**I wish to claim that views like Kornblith's leave it mysterious why we would ever have the *standing* to blame others for their violations of epistemic norms.** (Standing was condition 2 for warranted epistemic blame.)

Why is that? Consider **The Dogmatic Politician**. Let's suppose Hazel Taylor does not have either the general goal of *maximizing her store of true beliefs*, or the more particular goal of *updating her scientific beliefs on the basis of expert testimony from scientists*. Suppose that she does care a lot about getting re-elected, and that she represents a state where her core constituency is suspicious of academic expertise and climate change. When she refuses to revise her beliefs in response to expert testimony, she violates an epistemic norm. (Condition 1 for warranted epistemic blame is satisfied.)

Yet if she can\* continue to violate that norm in the specific context of political discussions of climate change without too thoroughly straying from the use of truth-conducive cognitive processes in her everyday life, then she may on the whole be *more* effective in pursuing all of her own intrinsic interests (including exciting her constituency and retaining power) than would be enabled by her perfect adherence to epistemic norms.

If some of Hazel Taylor's TV viewers blame her for violating norms that require deference to expert testimony, it appears they feel entitled to a state of affairs in which Hazel Taylor adheres *more* to epistemic norms and is *less* effective at achieving her own goals. But why would that be appropriate? Recall that for Kornblith, the authority, for us, of epistemic norms is supposed to be derived from *our ends*.

So what's missing? What is Hazel Taylor expected to do (by those who blame her), and what is her normative failing? Why might viewers feel entitled to Ms. Taylor's adherence to the rules of epistemic rationality?

If epistemic blame can be warranted in cases like these, then Kornblith's view of epistemic normativity is missing something important.

### III. The Collective Instrumentalist View and Standing to (Epistemically) Blame

General Question: When (and why) do we have the standing to blame others for violations of norms?

Here's one simple answer, for example, that will not work:

We generally (excepting when special conditions obtain) have the standing to blame others for violating all and only those particular norms *that apply to both of us*.

Counterexamples (not necessary): child blaming a parent, client-professional, patient-doctor

These cases help to highlight the issue of when norm compliance is "owed" to others.

So what is needed in order for us to have the standing to direct epistemic blame towards others?

I've proposed elsewhere a collective version of epistemic instrumentalism according to which we possess epistemic reasons in light of our membership in epistemic communities, where the epistemic ends that give rise to those reasons are attributed directly to the community as a whole.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that the view avoids Kelly's (2003) objection (since I do not need to make assumptions about the epistemic goals of individual agents) and is independently motivated (e.g. by a tradition within the philosophy of science of emphasizing the collective nature of inquiry, as well as Dogramaci's (2012, 2015) work on the function of everyday epistemic evaluations).

Notice that in the cases of **The Alien Conspiracy Theorist** and **The Dogmatic Politician**, Kai and Hazel Taylor regulate their beliefs in ways that impede their epistemic communities' ends of enabling the acquisition and sharing of reliable information on subjects of interest and importance to the community.

Kai's peer testimony, at least on the particular subject of aliens, is highly unreliable.

Not only is Hazel Taylor's testimony regarding climate change unreliable; she is impeding the transfer of information from reliable sources to non-experts by casting herself in the position of an authority on the subject and voicing a view, based on inadequate evidence, that opposes that of the experts'.

Blame clearly comes in degrees. **Here's a thought:** The degree of epistemic blame that is warranted varies with the extent to which one impedes the epistemic goals of the community. This would make a minor infraction like Kai's (being prone to endorsing conspiracy theories on one particular subject matter) deserving of less blame than is warranted in Hazel Taylor's case.

In summary, the key suggestions of this more speculative final section are:

1. For A to have the standing to direct epistemic blame towards B, A and B must be members of an epistemic community.
2. The explanation of why we have the standing to blame others involves reference to collective epistemic aims of that community. The presence of such aims is what makes others' beliefs and inferences our "business" (to use Boulton's phrase).

---

<sup>5</sup> Dyke, Michelle M. (2020). "Could our epistemic reasons be *collective* practical reasons?" online first in *Noûs*

3. The degree of epistemic blame that is warranted will vary with (among other things) the extent to which one's violation of epistemic norms impedes the community's achievement of its epistemic aims.

#### **IV. Wrapping Up**

**The Takeaway:** Once we focus attention on the phenomenon of (warranted) epistemic blame, we can see the need for an increasingly social epistemology.

For those who are already drawn to epistemic instrumentalism, I hope my own version of the view will look increasingly appealing.

But a committed realist about epistemic normativity should also feel pressure to fill out their view by providing a plausible explanation of when, and why, we have the standing to blame others for their epistemically irrational beliefs and inferences.