

EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION AND NORMATIVITY

Introduction:

It is plausible to argue that the concept of epistemic justification is the most fundamental concept in epistemology. The so-called traditional account of knowledge takes justified belief to be a constituent of knowledge.¹ Furthermore, on many accounts of knowledge the conditions for knowledge that go beyond having justified belief, e.g. the truth condition and conditions designed to "Gettier-proof" the analysis, seem to be less interesting to the philosopher seeking assurance of truth from the first-person perspective. There is a sense in which the best one can do through philosophical reflection is assure oneself that one has a justified belief-- whether or not one has knowledge as well is a matter of "luck", is a matter of whether the world co-operates so as to reward justified belief with truth.

It is an understatement to suggest that there is no agreement among epistemologists as to how to analyze the concept of epistemic justification. But a surprising number of philosophers with radically different approaches to analyzing justified belief, seem to agree that the concept of epistemic justification is in some sense a normative concept.² The issue is potentially significant because the alleged normativity of epistemic justification has been used to attack prominent analyses of justified belief. Ironically, many of these attacks have focussed on externalism. The irony lies in the fact that the most prominent externalist, Alvin Goldman (1979 and 1986), explicitly endorses the claim that the concept of epistemic justification is a normative concept, and denies for that reason that he is proposing a meaning analysis of epistemic justification. Rather he proposes to identify the non-normative (necessary and sufficient) conditions upon which epistemic justification supervenes. But whether he was proposing a meaning analysis or identifying synthetic necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of concept, a number of his critics have complained that one can have a belief which results from an unreliable process even though it would be quite inappropriate to blame the person for having the belief, or

¹ Butchvarov (1970) has argued, somewhat persuasively, that the "traditional" account of knowledge is remarkably hard to find in the history of philosophy.

² Chisholm has flirted off and on with attempts to reduce epistemic concepts to normative concepts ever since he first toyed with the idea in Chisholm (1957). Goldman (1979) and (1986), Foley (1987), Sosa (1991), Kim (1988), Hookway (1984), Plantinga (1992) and (1993), and Steup (1988), among many others, have all stressed the normative dimension of epistemic concepts.

criticize the person for the way in which the belief was formed.³ If the concept of epistemic justification is genuinely normative, how can we describe such a belief as unjustified? How can we characterize the victims of demonic machination as having unjustified beliefs when such victims are believing precisely what they *should* believe given the available subjective evidence (evidence which is phenomenologically indistinguishable from the evidence you and I use to reach our conclusions about the physical world).

The above objection may well confuse evaluation of a subject with evaluation of a subject's belief, but it may be enough to motivate a more detailed examination of the question of whether and in what sense epistemic justification is usefully thought of as normative. In examining this question we must get clear about what makes a concept or judgment normative.

Epistemic Judgments and Value Terms:

One might begin to suspect that a judgment is normative if it is equivalent in meaning to a conjunction of statements which include paradigmatically normative terms. This approach would seem to require that we give some characterization of what makes a term normative, but we might try to side-step this problem initially by simply listing some paradigmatic normative expressions, and characterizing as derivatively normative other expressions whose meaning can be partially explicated using these. Our list of paradigm normative expressions might be long or short depending on whether or not we are reductionists with respect to the content of various sorts of normative judgments. Thus if one is a consequentialist of some kind who thinks that all ethical judgments are ultimately judgements about the ways in which actions produce things of intrinsic value, one might get by with "intrinsically good/bad" as the fundamental normative terms--all other normative terms will be derivatively normative because an explication of their meaning will inevitably involve reference to intrinsic goodness/badness. But so as not to prejudice such issues, one might make the initial list relatively long and include such terms as "good", "ought", "should", "right", "permissible", "obligatory" (and their opposites).

³ Goldman himself became so sensitive to this objection that he eventually introduced a second (non-reliabilist) conception of justification to accommodate it--see Goldman (1988). See also Foley (1985) for a clear presentation of the objection.

If we proceed in this fashion it seems undeniable that the concept of epistemic justification looks suspiciously like a normative concept. As Plantinga (1992) has effectively reminded us, the etymology of the word "justification" certainly suggests that we are dealing with a value term. And epistemologists often seem quite comfortable interchanging questions about whether or not evidence E justifies one in believing P with questions about whether or not one *should* believe P on the basis of E. In what is often taken to be one of the earliest statements of a justified true belief account of knowledge, Ayer (1956) described knowledge as true belief where one had the *right* to be sure. So again, the idea that the concept of justification is normative is at least *prima facie* plausible. But we must surely proceed more cautiously than this. While it may be alright to begin by listing paradigm normative expressions and characterizing judgments as normative whose meaning can be explicated (in part) through the use of these expressions, it doesn't require much reflection to convince us that expressions like "right" and "should" are importantly ambiguous. When we talk about whether or not someone should do X, we might be talking about what that person morally should do, prudentially should do, legally should do, should do given the rules of etiquette, should do given that the person has certain goals or ends, and so on. If we add to the mix judgments about what someone should *believe*, it seems that we must add to the list of "should"s the *epistemic* "should". If it makes sense to treat belief as something one can do (and be held responsible for), then it seems obvious that we must carefully distinguish our moral obligations with respect to what we should believe, what prudence dictates, and what it is epistemically rational to believe.⁴ Thus it has been argued that a husband might have a special moral obligation to believe in his wife's innocence even in the face of rather strong evidence that she is guilty of infidelity. It might also be the prudent thing to do in the sense that his subjective goals or ends might be more effectively satisfied by trusting his wife. But at the same time it might be wildly irrational epistemically to believe in his wife's innocence.

There has been a great deal of literature attempting to cast doubt on the intelligibility of treating believing as an action, as something one chooses to do. One doesn't just decide to believe something the way one decides to go to the store. Many of our beliefs might seem to be forced upon us in a way that makes inappropriate questions about whether or not we should have the beliefs in question.⁵ At the same time, it is hard to deny that one can indirectly influence

⁴ We could even imagine a society odd enough that it tries to legislate over matters of belief, thus creating legal obligations to believe and refrain from believing certain propositions.

⁵ See, for example, Alston (1988).

one's beliefs. If one concludes that one would be happier if one believed in an afterlife, and that it would be advantageous to have such a belief, there are certainly things one can do that will increase the probability of bringing about the belief. In any event, I am not concerned in this paper with the question of whether it makes sense to talk about what a person ought to believe. I presuppose the intelligibility of such judgments, but insist that we make the relevant distinctions between kinds of judgments we can make about what we ought to believe.

Ethical Judgments as the Paradigm of Normativity:

If we recognize the ambiguity inherent in judgments about what one ought to believe, then one must decide whether it is all, or only some of these "oughts" that indicate the normativity of judgments that employ them. One approach is to begin by simply stipulating that the moral "ought" is the example of a normative expression, par excellence, and the question of whether the epistemic "ought" is normative rests on how close its meaning is to the moral "ought". But if this is the approach we take then to investigate the relevant similarities we will still need to characterize what it is about *moral* judgments that makes *them* normative.

At this point our investigation into the alleged normativity of epistemic judgments seems headed into a morass of issues involving metaethics. There is no agreement among ethical philosophers about what makes moral judgments distinctively normative, nor indeed what the relevant contrast is supposed to be between the normative and the non-normative. For many the relevant contrast is between *descriptive* judgements (concepts, terms) and *prescriptive* judgments (concepts, terms). According to many of the classic non-cognitivists, the normativity of ethical judgments consists specifically in the fact that their primary function is not to describe some state of affairs, but is rather to recommend or prescribe some specific action or action kind. The most straightforward version of this view is Hare's claim that moral judgments are grammatically disguised (universalizable) imperatives.⁶ Frankly, I don't know of any prominent epistemologists who endorse the idea that epistemic judgments are normative and who explicitly intend thereby to contrast them with descriptive judgments that have a truth value.⁷ We can put the conclusion conditionally. If moral judgments are disguised imperatives lacking truth

⁶ The emotivists Ayer and Stevenson also emphasize the "quasi-imperative" character of moral judgments. See Ayer (1952) and Stevenson (1937).

⁷ My colleague Laird Addis, whose area of specialization is not epistemology, would endorse the idea that epistemic judgments lack truth value, but as I say, he is surely the exception.

value, and if one is a cognitivist with respect to epistemic judgments, then one must surely hesitate before reaching the conclusion that epistemic judgments are in some important sense normative.

Of course not all ethical philosophers are non-cognitivists. Indeed, noncognitivism is very much a product of twentieth-century philosophy. If one holds that there are genuine moral properties, and that moral judgments typically describe their exemplification by things, people, or actions, what would the relevant contrast be between the way in which these judgments are normative, and the way in which other descriptive claims are not normative? One can, of course, simply stipulate that a judgment is normative if and only if it refers directly or indirectly to these distinctively moral properties. But if we take this approach, then after we distinguish the epistemic "ought" from the moral "ought", there isn't even a *prima facie* reason to suppose that epistemic judgments are normative in this sense. If referring to moral properties is a necessary condition for a judgment's being normative and we reject any reduction, in part or in whole, of epistemic judgments to moral judgments, then we will have removed epistemic judgments from the class of normative judgments.

One can try to combine one's descriptivism in ethics with an acknowledgement of the claim that morality necessarily motivates rational people. And one could go on to describe the normative character of moral judgments as consisting precisely in this "pull" that moral judgments have. Just as one cannot recognize that one ought to take some action X without being "moved" to do X, so one cannot recognize that one epistemically ought to believe P without being at least moved to believe P. But it is precisely the acknowledgement of this special character that moral judgments are supposed to have that leads so many philosophers either to abandon descriptivism in ethics or combine it with some version of subjectivism. If moral judgments describe objective properties it is more than a little difficult to see how the mere belief that something has the property can in itself necessarily motivate the person to pursue that thing.⁸ If the connection is only contingent, then the claim that it exists might be philosophically unproblematic (though empirically suspect). I certainly have no interest in denying that when one decides that it is epistemically rational to believe P one sometimes (or even usually) ends up believing P as a result, and if the existence of a propensity to believe what one judges epistemically rational to believe is all that is meant by claiming that epistemic judgments have normative force, I concede that they might well be normative in this sense (though again the normative character of a judgment is now a matter for empirical investigation).

Normativity and Rules:

⁸ One of the fundamental objections to objectivism first raised by Hume (1988) and developed by many others, perhaps most vigorously by Mackie (1977).

Without identifying normative judgments with prescriptive judgments one might still suppose that Hare was on to something in his attempt to characterize what makes normative judgments special. A great many philosophers concerned with metaethics have sought to tie the meaning of ethical judgments to rules. Hare thought of those rules as universalizable imperatives, but one needn't go that far in order to embrace the conclusion that moral judgments always involve at least implicit reference to rules. To judge that one ought to do X is to judge that the relevant rules of morality require one to do X. To judge that it is morally permissible that one do X is to judge that the relevant rules of morality do not prohibit one from doing X. And to judge that it would be wrong for one to do X is to judge that the relevant rules of morality do prohibit one from doing X. If we turn to judgments about what one is legally required, permitted or prohibited from doing, one might suppose that there too the relevant concepts are to be defined by reference to rules, this time the rules of law. Legally prohibited actions are those the rules of law prohibit. Legally permitted actions are those the rules of law do not prohibit. Even etiquette has its "rules" and one can easily follow the model to define the relevant judgments concerning what one ought to do from the perspective of etiquette. Perhaps, then, we should view normative judgments as those which make implicit reference to rules which prescribe, permit, and prohibit certain actions or moves, and epistemic judgments might be viewed as paradigmatically normative because there are certain rules of inference which tell us when we must believe, are permitted to believe, or are prohibited from believing certain propositions given that we believe certain others or are in certain non-doxastic states (in the case of noninferentially justified belief).

While the above might seem initially promising, it is clear that we must proceed more carefully lest we overlook important distinctions between the kinds of rules to which judgments might make implicit or explicit reference. In metaethics, there is again no consensus on whether the content of moral judgments does always involve reference to rules or, if they do, how we should understand those rules. It is useful, however, to distinguish two importantly different kinds of rules. Some rules, for example, the rules which a rule utilitarian has in mind in analyzing the content of moral judgments, can themselves be thought of as propositions which have a truth value. Thus, according to some rule utilitarians, the relevant rules take the form: It is always (prima facie) right (wrong) to take some action of kind X. The statement of the rule will be true if a certain proposition describing the consequences of people following that rule compared to the consequences of their following alternative rules is true.⁹ The rules of law, the rules of a game, or the rules of etiquette, might be better thought of as imperatives which are neither true nor false. Propositions

⁹ This is, of course, a crude statement of rule utilitarianism. There are all kinds of subtle variations on the view designed to circumvent objections.

describing particular actions as permissible or impermissible relative to the rules are true or false but are so because they report what the relevant rules prescribe and prohibit. One can, of course, take precisely the same approach with respect to moral judgments, but as I indicated, one certainly need not.

If epistemic judgments involve implicit reference to rules, how should we think of those rules? Again, one could be a non-cognitivist with respect to the relevant rules. One could think that rules of non-deductive inference, for example, are imperatives which are neither true nor false. Individual epistemic judgments are either true or false but only because they report what the relevant epistemic rules require, permit, and prohibit. But I daresay most epistemologists would resist this suggestion. The relevant generalized rules of epistemology will take the form of propositions which assert that one is justified in believing certain propositions relative to one's justifiably believing certain others or relative to one's being in certain non-doxastic states. It doesn't hurt to characterize these propositions as rules, if one likes, but if the "rules" themselves have a truth value, then it is not clear to me that we have uncovered an interesting sense in which epistemic judgments are normative. Epistemic judgments are no more normative than judgments about lawful necessity and possibility are normative. Such judgments also implicitly involve reference to general propositions. To claim that it is lawfully possible that X is probably just to claim that the conjunction of the laws of nature, L, is logically consistent with the proposition describing the occurrence of X. Events "obey" laws in the sense that we can usefully generalize over kinds of events that always occur. In the same sense individual beliefs are justified or not in virtue of exemplifying certain general properties where we think of the "rules" of epistemology as generalizations describing the kinds of conditions under which beliefs are justified.

Normativity and Goals or Ends:

Richard Foley (1987) and others have suggested that we might profitably view the different "oughts" as species of a common genera. Crudely put, Foley's idea is that normative judgments all assess the efficacy of achieving goals or ends. In a sense all normative judgments are species of judgments concerning practical rationality. There are different kinds of normative judgments concerning what we ought to do and what we ought to believe because there are different goals or ends that we are concerned to emphasize. Thus when we are talking about morally justified action (what we morally ought to do), the relevant goal might be something like producing moral goodness (avoiding evil) and the actions that we ought to perform are those that are conducive to the goal of producing the morally best world. When we are concerned with what prudence dictates, however, the relevant goals or ends to be considered expand, perhaps to include everything that is desired intrinsically, for example. On one (rather crude) view, what one prudentially ought

to do is what maximizes satisfaction of one's desires. What one ought to do legally or what one is legally justified in doing is a function of the extent to which an action satisfies the goal of following the law. What one ought to do from the standpoint of etiquette is a function of following the goals or ends set down by the "experts" who worry about such things. So all one has to do in order to fit the epistemic "ought" into this framework (and thus classify usefully the kind of normativity epistemic judgments have) is delineate the relevant goals or ends that define what one epistemically ought to believe. And the obvious candidates are the dual goals of believing what is true and avoiding belief in what is false.

If Pascal were right about his famous wager, belief in God might be the path one *prudentially* ought to follow, focusing on such goals as avoiding pain and seeking comfort. If you have promised your parents to believe in God, if it is good to keep a promise, and if there are no other good or bad effects of such a belief to consider, it might follow that *prima facie* you *morally* ought to believe in the existence of God. But neither of these normative judgments is relevant to whether you *epistemically* ought to believe in the existence of God. The only consideration relevant to this normative judgment is the efficacy with which such a belief contributes to the goals of believing what is true and avoiding belief in what is false.

Now as plausible and potentially illuminating as this account might seem initially, it is, I think, fatally flawed. In the first place, it must be immediately qualified to accommodate certain obvious objections. Suppose, for example, that I am a scientist interested in getting a grant from a religious organization. Although I think that belief in the existence of God is manifestly irrational (from the epistemic perspective), I discover that this organization will give me the grant only if it concludes that I am religious. I further have reason to believe that I am such a terrible liar that unless I actually get myself to believe in the existence of God they will discover that I am an atheist. Given all this *and my desire to pursue truth and avoid falsehood*, which I am convinced the grant will greatly enable me to satisfy, I may conclude that I ought to believe in the existence of God (or do what I can to bring it about that I believe in the existence of God). Yet by hypothesis this belief is one that I viewed as epistemically irrational. We cannot understand epistemic rationality simply in terms of actions designed to satisfy the goals of believing what is true and avoiding belief in what is false.

How might one modify the account to circumvent this difficulty? Foley suggests restricting the relevant epistemic goal to that of *now* believing what is true and *now* avoiding belief in what is false.¹⁰ Even this, however, will fall prey to a revised (albeit more farfetched) version of the objection presented above. Suppose, to make it simple, that belief is under one's voluntary control and that I know that there is an all powerful being who will immediately cause me to believe massive

¹⁰ Foley (1987), p. 8.

falsehood *now* unless I accept the epistemically irrational conclusion that there are unicorns. It would seem that to accomplish the goal of believing what is true and avoiding belief in what is false *now*, I must again adopt an epistemically irrational belief.

The obvious solution at this point is to restrict the relevant goal that defines the epistemic "ought" to that of believing what is true now with respect to a given proposition. If I epistemically ought to believe that there is a God, the only relevant goal is that of believing what is true with respect to the question of whether there is or is not a God. If we say this, however, we must be very careful lest our account collapse the distinction between true belief and epistemically justified or rational belief. If we are actual consequence consequentialists¹¹ and we take what we ought to do or believe to be a function of the extent to which our actions and beliefs *actually* satisfy the relevant goals, then trivially we epistemically ought to believe in God when there is a God and we epistemically ought not believe in God when there is no God. Foley suggests at this point that it is something about beliefs an agent has, or more precisely would have after a certain process of reflection, about the efficacy of achieving the epistemic goals that is relevant to evaluating what one epistemically ought to believe. But there is a much more natural way of explicating the relationship between epistemic goals and what a person ought to believe, just as there is a more natural way of explicating the relevant relation that holds between a person's moral goals and what a person morally ought to do and a person's prudential goals and what a person prudentially ought to do. The obvious move is to say simply that what a person ought to believe is a function of what that person is *justified* in believing would accomplish the goal of believing now what is true with respect to a given proposition. But that is, of course, a convoluted way of saying that what a person is justified in believing is what a person is justified in believing, an account entirely plausible but less than enlightening.

Notice too that on many standard consequentialist accounts of morality or practical rationality, it is also crucial to introduce *epistemic* concepts into the analyses of what one morally or prudentially ought to do. I have argued in some detail that the concepts of what one morally ought to do and what one rationally ought to do are extraordinarily ambiguous.¹² Although there are actual consequence consequentialist analyses of what one morally or rationally ought to do that find *occasional* expression in ordinary discourse, they are far from dominant.¹³ Consider

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of what constitutes actual consequence consequentialism and what differentiates it from other versions of consequentialism see Fumerton (1990).

¹² Fumerton (1990), Chapter 4.

¹³ We do *sometimes* seem to tie our evaluation of an agent's action to the actual

the sadist who kills for pleasure the pedestrian in the mall when that pedestrian (unbeknownst to the sadist) was a terrorist about to blow up the city. There is surely a clear *sense* in which the sadist did not behave as he morally ought to have behaved.¹⁴ The conventional poker wisdom that one should not draw to fill an inside straight is not falsified by the fact that this person would have filled the straight and won a great deal of money. How can we acknowledge that a person did what he ought to have done even when the consequences are much worse than would have resulted from an alternative? How can we acknowledge that a person behaved as he should not have behaved even when the consequences are far better than would have resulted from some alternative? The answer seems obvious. We must recognize the relevance of the epistemic perspective of the agent.

consequences of that action. The child playing catch in the living room who breaks the picture window gets accused of a far greater wrongdoing than the child playing that same game of catch who makes a luck stab at the ball deflecting it just before the window breaks. I'm inclined to think that appropriate philosophical reflection should lead one to reject an analysis of wrongdoing that makes it dependent on actual consequences but in the end I'm content to argue that there are more interesting and fundamental concepts of what someone ought to do that must take into account epistemic perspective.

¹⁴ A sense that is still distinct from our evaluation of the moral character of the agent.

To determine what someone (morally or prudentially) ought to have done, we must consider what that person was epistemically justified in believing the probable and possible consequences of the action to be. Indeed, I have argued that there are literally indefinitely many derivative concepts of morality and rationality that also take into account what a person was epistemically justified in believing about the morality or rationality of actions, given more fundamental concepts of morality and rationality.¹⁵ But if the analysis of familiar concepts of what a person ought to do must take into account the epistemic situation of the agent, it is simply a mistake to try to assimilate the epistemic "ought" to the "ought" of morality or practical rationality. In fact, an understanding of the "ought's" of morality and practical rationality is *parasitic* on an understanding of rational or justified belief. It would be folly, needless to say, to try to understand fundamental epistemic concepts in terms of what the agent was epistemically justified in believing about the probable and possible consequences of having a certain belief. Even philosophers who do not mind "big" circles in their philosophical theories will get dizzy traveling the circumference of this one.

Normativity, Praise, and Criticism:

So far the only sense in which we have acknowledged that epistemic judgments are normative is that they are sometimes expressed using an "ought." That "ought" has been shown not only to be distinct from other "ought's" used in the expression of paradigm value judgments, but it has been shown to be *fundamentally* different. Nevertheless, we have not yet exhausted attempts to explicate normativity in a way that allows us to fit both epistemic judgments and our paradigm normative moral judgments under the same umbrella. It is sometimes claimed that our epistemic judgments are normative in that they implicitly involve *praise* or *blame* and *criticism*. Should we construe this as the relevant mark of normativity? Almost surely not. The problems with doing so are enormous. For one thing, however we define normativity, we want our paradigm of normative judgments, moral judgments, to fall under the concept. But it is far from clear what the relationship is between judging that someone did not do what he or she ought to have done and blaming or criticizing that person.

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of these important derivative concepts of morality and rationality, see again Fumerton (1990), Chapter 4 and Foley (1990).

If you see a fire in the house next door and heroically attempt to save the people inside, I may conclude that you ought to have called the fire department instead of trying to solve the problem on your own. At the same time I might not *blame* you for failing to make the call. I might decide that under the circumstances it is perfectly natural for a person to panic and fail to do the rational thing. I might also think that you are just too stupid to figure out what you ought to do, and indeed, I might seldom blame you for the many idiotic things you do that you should not do. In short, there seems to be no conceptual connection between the evaluation of an agent's action and the praise or blame of the agent who acted that way. And if this seems right concerning the evaluation of what a person ought to have done, it seems even more obvious in the epistemic evaluation of a person's belief. Do we blame or criticize very stupid people for believing what they have no good epistemic reason to believe?¹⁶ At the very least, logic does not require us to blame people for believing what it is epistemically irrational for them to believe.

It might be argued, however, that I am confusing the praise or blame of an agent with the positive evaluation or criticism of the agent's action or belief. "I am not criticizing you," someone might say, "I am criticizing what you did." And there surely does seem to be some sense in which when one's beliefs are called unjustified or irrational, one takes those *beliefs* to have been criticized. Shall we say that judgments about the epistemic justifiability or rationality of a belief are normative in that they imply praise or criticism of the *belief* (as opposed to the subject who has that belief)?

This is not helpful for two reasons. First, the notion of implying praise or criticism is simply too vague. When I tell the store owner that the knife I bought is extremely dull, there is surely a sense in which I am criticizing the knife (or implying criticism). When after test driving the car, I complain that it accelerates very slowly and pulls to the left, I am in some sense criticizing the car. But does that make "dull," "accelerating slowly," and "pulling to the left" normative expressions? Surely not. But why? One answer might be that there is no *conceptual* connection between judging that something has these characteristics and criticism. I might have wanted a dull knife to minimize the possibility of accident, for example. Now is there any *conceptual* connection between judging of a belief that it is epistemically irrational and criticizing the belief? Can we not imagine societies in which one values a kind of irrationality much the way a few people value dull knives? Indeed, I can think of a few philosophical movements that for all the world seem to place a premium on the incoherence of belief systems. And if that suggestion seems a little snide, can we not at least find some subculture of poets who explicitly disdain the confines of

¹⁶ For a useful critical evaluation of possible conceptual connections between epistemic evaluation and moral evaluation, see Alston (1988), Plantinga (1988) and Feldman (1988).

epistemically rational belief systems, the pursuit of truth, and so on? I have already agreed, of course, that there is a sense of "ought" that is customarily used in describing beliefs that a person is justified or rational in holding. And one can claim that if a belief is judged to be irrational, it is being implicitly criticized as one that the subject ought not to have, but this will now take us full circle to the earlier problematic attempt to characterize the normativity of the epistemic "ought".

Conclusion:

We have explored a number of different ways in which we might interpret the claim that epistemic judgments are normative. But after we have carefully distinguished the epistemic judgments we make about beliefs from the other ways in which we might evaluate beliefs, it is not clear to me that there is really any interesting sense in which epistemic judgments are normative. Indeed, it is not clear that we can really develop any philosophically interesting sense of normativity which does not itself presuppose highly controversial views. If any judgments are normative it is ethical judgments, but unless some version of non-cognitivism is true, ethical judgments describe some feature of the world in precisely the same sense in which other judgments describe some feature of the world. We explored the idea that the relevant feature of the world might be the existence of rules which lack a truth value, and that this might be the essence of their normativity, but we saw that a great many moral philosophers would deny that the relevant moral rules lack truth value, and an even greater number of epistemologists would resist the analogous suggestion that the relevant epistemic rules lack truth value. The idea that normative judgments all make implicit reference to goals or ends gave little comfort to the idea that epistemic judgments are normative for upon reflection the way in which other normative judgments involve reference to goals or ends seems to presuppose a prior understanding of epistemic probability. It seems even more hopeless to claim that there is a conceptual connection between judgments about epistemic justification and praise and blame.

If the above is correct then some epistemic internalists may be off target in their criticisms of externalism. As we noted in the introduction, many would argue that externalist epistemologies are implausible precisely because they fail to capture some alleged normativity of epistemic judgments. Although I believe there are fatal objections to the externalist's approach to understanding epistemic concepts, I'm not convinced that this is one of them.¹⁷

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¹⁷ I owe special thanks to Matthias Steup. Through extensive e-mail correspondence, he helped me get clearer about many of these issues.

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