Epistemic Normativity for Naturalists

1. Naturalized epistemology and the normativity objection

Can science help us understand what knowledge is and what makes a belief justified? Some say "no" because epistemic facts are inherently *normative*.¹ Science leaves open the question of how things *ought* to be, whether they are *wrong*, *good*, *justified*, and the like. But since epistemology is essentially about how things ought to be it is entirely *autonomous* from science.

In response to this objection, many naturalists have opted for what Wrenn (2006) calls the 'engineering' reply. Naturalism can preserve the normative character of epistemology, the reply goes, because epistemology is normative in the same way that engineering is: it tells us what *means* we ought to take *in order to attain certain ends*, and such instrumentally normative facts are not autonomous from science.

In this paper, I argue that naturalists should abandon the engineering reply in favor of what I call a *deflationist* reply. According to deflationism, what is essential to epistemic facts is not genuine or robust normativity, but rather mere *norm-relativity*. Since mere norm-relativity is *not* autonomous from science, epistemology need not be autonomous from science. Naturalists should go for the deflationist reply, I argue, because it (i) avoids the problems of the engineering reply and (ii) withstands objections.

2. Problems for the engineering reply

Problem 1: The engineering reply assumes epistemic consequentialism.

According to epistemic engineers, to evaluate a belief epistemically is to evaluate how conducive it is to epistemic goals. But this is only true if *epistemic consequentialism* is true. This is a problem for two reasons.

First, *epistemic consequentialism is highly controversial*. Many reject epistemic consequentialism.² Therefore, the engineering reply alone is not sufficient to convincingly refute the normativity objection. It also needs defence of consequentialism. Second, the issue between epistemic consequentialism and non-consequentialism is itself a normative epistemological question. The problem, however, is that *the engineering reply implausibly treats this debate as trivial*.

Problem 2: The engineering reply assumes normative naturalism. According to the engineering reply, epistemic facts are both natural and normative. But the question whether natural facts can be normative is highly controversial. Many metaethicists and normativity theorists (some of whom – e.g. normative error theorists and expressivists – accept metaphysical naturalism) argue that they cannot. While some of them invoke versions of G.E. Moore's (1903) famous 'Open Question' argument, others argue that natural facts are "just too different" from normative facts - as Enoch (2011) puts it - to be normative.³

¹ E.g. Sellars (1956), Kim (1988).

² See for instance Firth (1981), Jenkins (2007), Littlejohn (2012), Berker (2013a), (2013b), and Greaves (2013) for criticisms of epistemic consequentialism.

³ See also e.g. Scanlon (1998), Dancy (2006), Parfit (2011), and Olson (2014). A related problem is that the engineering reply assumes that normativity can come from our ends, i.e. that facts about what we care about can suffice to ground normativity. But such a desire-based or internalist story of the source of normativity is similarly controversial.

Problem 3: Epistemic evaluations are inescapable. You cannot escape or opt out of epistemic evaluations by simply not caring about epistemic ends. Your false and wishful belief about P is epistemically unjustified whether or not you want to know the truth about whether P. Consequently, if these standards are inherently normative (as epistemic engineers concede), then their normativity is *inescapable*. The problem, however, is that the engineering reply makes epistemic normativity *escapable* or goal-dependent; it is conditional on *having* or *caring about* the end in question.

3. An alternative: the deflationist reply

Metaethicists standardly distinguish between *genuine* or *robust normativity* and mere *norm-relativity*.⁴ While all norms trivially set standards relative to which certain things can be required, permitted, and the like, not all norms automatically have robust normative authority. There is not necessarily a robust reason to conform to e.g. etiquette, club rules, fashion, laws, etc. This distinction means that *facts and claims can be norm-implying without being robustly normative*. This opens the door to the following alternative to the engineering reply:

Step 1: Epistemic deflationism. While epistemic facts are norm-implying, they are not robustly normative like moral facts. Unlike moral norms and just like e.g. norms of etiquette, there is not necessarily a genuine normative reason to conform to epistemic norms.⁵

Step 2: Merely norm-implying domains are not autonomous from science. There is no obstacle to scientific inquiry helping us figure out the content and nature of norms that lack necessary normative authority. The question of what is required or valuable *relative* to some standard is a non-normative question that can very well be examined empirically.

The deflationist reply

1. If epistemology epistemic deflationism is true, then epistemology is not autonomous from science.

- 2. Epistemic deflationism is true.
- 3. Therefore, epistemology is not autonomous from science.

4. Deflationism avoids the problems of the engineering reply

Deflationism is not committed to epistemic consequentialism. Merely norm-implying domains are not necessarily consequentialist. Norms that lack necessary normative authority can be deontological. Whether an act is, e.g., legal or decorous is not necessarily determined by the consequences of that act.

⁴ The term 'norm-relativity' is from Hattiangadi (2007). Other labels used in the literature for the same distinction include *reason-implying* versus mere *rule-implying* normativity (Parfit, 2011), *robust* versus merely *formal* normativity (McPherson, 2011), *strong* versus *weak categoricity* (Joyce, 2001), *normative requirements* versus mere *requirements* (Broome, 2013), and *irreducible* versus merely *reducible normativity* (Olson, 2014).

⁵ Although this is the minority of epistemic normativity, versions of it can be attributed to Papineau (2013) and Hazlett (2013). See also Grimm's (2009) reading of Sosa (2007). See e.g. Cuneo (2007) and Rowland (2013) for explicit criticisms of that view.

Deflationism is not committed to normative naturalism. Since it does not view epistemic facts as genuinely normative, deflationism is not committed to the controversial claim that natural facts can be genuinely normative.

Deflationism accommodates the inescapability of epistemic evaluations. Since it does not view epistemology as robustly normative, deflationism doesn't have to show that epistemic norms are *inescapably normative*. It only has to show that they inescapably *apply* to us (even though they are not *inescapably reason-giving*). Many norms that lack necessary normative authority apply to agents independently of what they care about. Your illegal or indecorous acts, for example, are illegal or indecorous whether or not you care about the law or etiquette.

5. Deflationism can withstand objections

Objection 1: deflationism makes epistemology trivial.

Reply. All that is needed for a norm N to lack necessary normative authority, is that there *can* be cases where there is no robust reason to conform to N. But this leaves the possibility that it *almost always* matters whether you are conforming to N and therefore that N is a very important kind of norm.

Objection 2: deflationism cannot accommodate epistemic reasons.

Reply. 'Reasons' claims can be read in a merely norm-implying (and not robustly normative) way. Even in the few situations where there is no *genuinely normative* reason to do as e.g. the law requires, it remains true that there are *legal reasons* to do so. According to epistemic deflationism, epistemic reasons are just like that: not necessarily robustly normative.⁶

Objection 3: deflationism makes epistemology conventional and relative.

Reply. Norms can be absolute, universal, and nonconventional without having necessary normative authority. This can be the case if the norms in question are grounded in some fundamental end or standard that is itself absolute and nonconventional (which is how many epistemologists construe the epistemic domain. E.g. as deriving from the fundamental standard of *truth* or *knowledge*).

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⁶ For more on the distinction between robust and merely norm-implying reasons, see e.g. Olson (2014).

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