

## Epistemic Teleology and the Normativity of Apparent Reasons

985 words (excluding the indicative bibliography).

Some authors have argued that epistemic rationality has to do with responding to *factive* sufficient epistemic reasons one has—call this the Owned Reasons Thesis. By way of contrast, rationality is sometimes understood as an internal norm, which has to do with responding correctly to *apparent* (factive or non-factive) reasons—call this the Owned *Apparent* Reasons Thesis.

The Owned Reasons Thesis seems to offer a better teleological explanation of the normative significance of epistemic rationality. Indeed, responding to factive reasons is more truth-conducive than responding to apparent reasons (factive or non-factive) reasons. So, in a teleological perspective, it seems that the Owned Apparent Reasons Thesis faces a special challenge for explaining the normativity of epistemic rationality, as in the following:

**Special Challenge Problem.** While the Owned Reasons Thesis provides a teleological explanation of the normativity of epistemic rationality (having to do with truth-conduciveness), the Owned Apparent Reasons Thesis does not provide a plausible teleological explanation of the normativity of epistemic rationality.

How can we solve this problem? In this paper, I solve the above problem by designing an *epistemic* version of the theory of the second best. The theory of the second best is an economic theory designed for explaining what agents can and should do if the Pareto-optimal option is unavailable.

I will begin by formulating the epistemic theory of the second best. In a teleological perspective where truth is the evaluative norm of belief, a belief-forming process does not bear deontic significance if it is not in the correct relationship with the truth norm of belief. Thus, one way to understand epistemic teleology is to introduce a *ordered* hierarchy of belief-forming processes, as in the following:

(Pr- $\alpha$ ) A believes P if and only if P;

(Pr- $\beta$ ) A believes P if P is sufficiently supported by his or her non-misleading epistemic reasons;

(Pr- $\gamma$ ) A believes P if P is sufficiently supported by his or her epistemic reasons;

(Pr- $\delta$ ) A believes P if P is sufficiently supported by his or her apparent epistemic reasons.

Pr- $\gamma$  echoes the Owned Reasons Thesis, whereas Pr- $\delta$  echoes the Owned Apparent Reasons Thesis. Provided that agents cannot identify misleading epistemic reasons and apparent non-factive epistemic reasons, Pr- $\alpha$  is epistemically superior to Pr- $\beta$ , Pr- $\beta$  is epistemically superior to Pr- $\gamma$ , and Pr- $\gamma$  is epistemically superior to Pr- $\delta$ . Hence, we would then have an ordering of belief-forming processes in terms of epistemic optimality.

Now, with respect to such an ordering, what is the *first-best* belief-forming process? That's an easy one: A believes P if and only if P is true! That is, Pr- $\alpha$  is the maximally truth-conducive process. However, concluding that agents are epistemically required to believe P if and only if P is true is too simple. Perhaps agents with unlimited cognitive capacities who need no guidance are epistemically required to believe P if and only if P. However, it seems that lack of omniscience or the need for guidance are *legitimate constraints* on the available belief-forming processes. In other words, our ordering of belief-forming processes can be constrained in order to *exclude* processes such as Pr- $\alpha$ . In view of the foregoing, here is how we can define the notions of constraint and available processes:

**Constraint on Available Processes.** A set of legitimate constraints on available processes  $C^A$  is a collection of statements (typically of the form “it is impossible or sufficiently improbable that X”) which explains why some belief-forming processes are unsuitable in a given context.

**Ordered Available Processes.** Relative to a set of legitimate constraints  $C^A$ , let  $\{Pr^A1, Pr^A2, \dots, Pr^Am\}$  be the ordered set of available belief-forming processes containing m elements, such that Pr<sup>A</sup>1 is the *second-best* belief-forming process (or best belief-forming process relative to a set of legitimate constraints).

The notion of legitimate constraint (central for determining which processes are available) is unclear and contentious. Of course, logical impossibilities are a source of legitimate constraints, but what about the laws of nature or the social laws or extremely improbable events (provided that we have a non-arbitrary definition of the notion of extreme improbability)? The good news is that we won't need to pinpoint the legitimate constraints on the set of available belief-forming processes. We simply need to assume the following: Pr- $\gamma$  can only be the

epistemically optimal belief-forming process *relative to* a set of legitimate constraints  $C^A$ . Those are the constraints I am interested with.

Now, in order to argue to solve the Special Challenge Problem, I will offer the following argument:

- (P1) The process of responding correctly to owned factive epistemic reasons ( $Pr-\gamma$ ) bears normative significance if and only if  $Pr-\gamma$  is an epistemic second-best.
- (P2) Following (P1), the process of responding correctly to apparent epistemic reasons ( $Pr-\delta$ ) faces the Special Challenge Problem if and only if (i)  $Pr-\gamma$  is an epistemic second-best and (ii)  $Pr-\delta$  is not an epistemic second-best.
- (P3) However, in cases where  $Pr-\beta$ ,  $Pr-\gamma$  and  $Pr-\delta$  are not equally optimal (because agents cannot identify their misleading epistemic reasons or their apparent non-factive epistemic reasons),  $Pr-\gamma$  is not an epistemic second-best.
- (C) So, following (P2) and (P3), the process of responding to apparent epistemic reasons ( $Pr-\delta$ ) does not face a special challenge in explaining the deontic significance of epistemic rationality.

I will briefly explain why (P3) is the only problematic step in the above reasoning. Then, I will argue that (P3) is true. The crux of my argument is that a necessary condition for explaining why  $Pr-\beta$  is unavailable entails that  $Pr-\gamma$  is also unavailable. So, either  $Pr-\gamma$  is a suboptimal belief-forming process (because  $Pr-\beta$  is available and more truth-conducive) or some legitimate constraints exclude  $Pr-\gamma$  from the available belief-forming processes. Regardless of whether  $Pr-\gamma$  is suboptimal or unavailable, this entails that  $Pr-\gamma$  is not an epistemic second-best. Hence, (P3) is correct and we have a solution to the Special Challenge Problem.

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