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Why are Epistemic Reasons Normative?

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Abstract

Normativism is the (controversial) view that epistemic reasons for belief are really, genuinely normative. Normativists might wonder – and anti-normativists might *press* the question – *why*, or in virtue of what, are epistemic reasons normative? Borrowing Korsgaard’s metaphor, what’s the “source” of their normativity? Here I argue that this question is both highly interesting and subtly distinct from other common questions in the literature. I also propose an initial taxonomy of stance-dependent and stance-independent answers, and I advocate a novel, *hybrid* type of view as ultimately most promising for (mostly) vindicating normativism.

Keywords: Metaepistemology; source of normativity; epistemic reasons; epistemic rationality

1. Introduction

Lee does not believe in climate change – i.e., does not believe that human activities are significantly and rapidly altering global climate patterns. This is not because Lee sees problems with the available evidence supporting climate change, nor because Lee is unaware that climate change is widely accepted in the scientific community, nor even because Lee trusts any separate, fringe authority denying climate change. Rather, Lee formed his agnostic opinion about climate change at a time when the evidence he possessed was less conclusive, and although he has more and more decisive evidence now, he simply doesn’t update on it. He does not believe what his evidence supports because his old agnosticism has a kind of psychological inertia.

Lee does not believe what he has most epistemic reason to believe, or what his epistemic reasons support. So far, so uncontroversial. But what sorts of charges are these? It is natural to say Lee *ought not* to believe as he does – i.e., that he ought to believe in climate change. But is this really a normative failing on Lee’s part?

Suppose Lee simply doesn’t care about believing what he has most epistemic reason to believe – at least not when it comes to stuff like climate change. And suppose moreover that morally or practically, it does not much matter what Lee thinks about climate change. (He is ineligible to vote, he never finds himself talking about this with friends, his partner does all the shopping for their household and tends to buy “green” anyway, etc.) Does there remain any genuine, binding, authoritative *ought* that Lee is flouting?

Epistemologists are divided. Kiesewetter (2022), in the course of defending the normativity of epistemic reasons – a thesis he helpfully terms normativism – cites numerous

doubters. Some anti-normativists – e.g., Rinard (2017) – hold that the only normative reasons for belief are practical. Or in other words there are no binding, distinctively epistemic reasons; there just usually are moral or practical reasons for believing, roughly, what’s likely to be true or what one’s evidence suggests. On this sort of view, if we can set up the details of the case such that there is no practical reason at all for Lee to believe that climate change is occurring,¹ then it follows that Lee has no such normative reason.

Other anti-normativists think of epistemic reasons along the lines of what Kiesewetter calls “institutional” reasons. Such considerations are not necessarily (really, genuinely, authoritatively) normative but instead have only what Sosa (2007) might call domain-relative normativity. There is a sort of optionality or at least neutrality about the real normativity of ‘reasons’ whose status as such is institutional or domain-relative. For it is only if and when we take on the perspective internal to the relevant domain or institution that such reasons have any force. And there may or may not be a normative reason in the background enjoining us to take up the relevant perspective. So, on this sort of anti-normativist view, while Lee certainly *epistemically* ought to believe that climate change is occurring, it’s simply an open, unanswered question whether epistemic oughts are binding for Lee or have any bearing on the attitudes he *really* ought to have.

With one caveat to be explained later in the paper – I side with the normativists, partly for reasons that Kiesewetter (2022) has recently given.² In particular, normativists have an easier time explaining the similarities between epistemic reasons and normative practical reasons: both types of reasons provide (partial) justification, feature in patterns of good reasoning, and serve as good bases for beliefs or actions.

The present paper may be considered as an extension of the argument for normativism, but as such it proceeds in a risky way, by asking a very difficult question for normativism. Namely: where does the normativity of epistemic reasons come from? Or, why, or in virtue of what, are epistemic reasons normative?

Interest in where normativity “comes from” or its source has been perhaps most notably explored in recent literature by Korsgaard (1992, 1996).³ Of course Korsgaard’s interest was not epistemic; she was concerned with practical reason and morality. When the rubber hit the road, Korsgaard thought – when what one supposedly morally ought to do was hard or unwelcome – one might justly question the authority of that ought and the legitimacy of its source. And some stories about where seeming-normativity comes from were, in Korsgaard’s view, unsatisfying. They seemed to *dissolve* any felt normative pressure to act as one “ought.” But Korsgaard approached her search for the source of practical normativity, as I intend to approach the search for source of the normativity of epistemic reasons, in a hopeful spirit. I believe we can (and should want to) find a *vindicating* story about the normativity of epistemic reasons. And if indeed we can, this is clearly good news for normativism. The overall plausibility of normativism depends not only on the sorts of arguments already addressed by Kiesewetter and others, but also on the normativist’s ability to defend

¹Admittedly, this may take some doing. Most of us have *some* instrumental or at least moral reason to believe that climate change is occurring. On the other hand, perhaps there is an evil demon threatening to kill Lee (or everyone in Lee’s family or town) unless he suspends judgment on this question. Or, more plausibly, Lee might just be happier if he worries less about climate change.

²Kiesewetter’s is far from the only important defense in recent literature. See, e.g., Grimm (2009) for a nice review of the intuitive force of normativism (though he does not use that term).

³Source language is also used in epistemology, especially within the debate over “instrumentalism” I will discuss presently; cf. Kornblith (1993) for one influential example.

her view from meta-normative challenges and (to put things more positively) to give a satisfying story as to why epistemic reasons really bind us – why they really bind Lee.

The first aim of the paper is to ask this question about the source of normativity for epistemic reasons (henceforth the “source question”) clearly and directly, distinguishing it from other questions in epistemology and metaepistemology and mapping its possible answers and their obvious challenges.

However there is one popular sort of answer to the source question I will not address here: namely what is sometimes called practical “instrumentalism,” or the thought that the normativity of epistemic reasons comes, in turn, from practical or moral reasons – broadly from the usefulness or practical goodness of believing what our evidence supports.⁴ I set this answer aside because (i) I cannot here do it justice; (ii) it is unclear to me whether there are defensible *normativist* versions of this answer; and (iii) as I shall argue, there are interesting divisions among alternative answers⁵ that seem distinctly underexplored.

Briefly, my concern about genuinely normativist versions of practical instrumentalism runs as follows. The practical instrumentalist thinks that, roughly, the practical value of epistemically reasonable beliefs explains the normativity of the latter. But suppose, in a particular, admittedly perhaps marginal sort of case, that having an epistemically reasonable attitude would be practically *sub-ideal*. With some careful fleshing out of the details, Lee’s own case may be like this. Or consider the case of a patient who will have a better chance of recovery if they believe that they will indeed recover, in a manner unsupported by their evidence or epistemic reasons. If the ultimate source or explanation of the reason to believe in accordance with one’s evidence is practical, then it seems only a rule-fetishist would maintain the normativity of epistemic reasons in a case where believing in accordance with these would be counterproductive, practically speaking. Rule fetishism is no good. But to say instead – as, for example, instrumentalism-defenders Cowie (2014) and Sharadin (2018) suggest⁶ – that epistemic reasons *are not* normative in such a case is to give up on normativism; this is precisely the *anti-normativism* of Rinard (2017), reviewed above. Obviously there is more to say, and indeed there is an entire literature on practical instrumentalism I cannot here properly engage.⁷ But I am inclined to think that if *epistemic* reasons are robustly normative, their normativity had better not have a purely practical source.

⁴Cf., e.g., Cowie (2014). Note that *some* so-called instrumentalists – e.g., the “special interests” instrumentalists discussed in Sharadin (2018), or the “intellectualist instrumentalists” discussed in Lockard (2013) – may not count as practical instrumentalists in my sense here, as they do not explain the normativity of epistemic reasons in terms of *practical* normativity at all but rather in terms of distinctively *epistemic* desires or ends. Such people seem to be among the “stance dependence” theorists I canvas below.

⁵Cowie (2014) deems alternative answers “intrinsicist,” while Sharadin (2021) distinguishes “intrinsicist” from “autonomist” answers. But I think there are other highly important divisions to be made among non-instrumentalist views; both Cowie and Sharadin seem to have in mind only the subset of non-instrumentalist views that I will call “stance independent.”

⁶Cowie (2014: 4014) suggests that, in response to such cases, instrumentalists will simply accept that, “[E]pistemic reasons for belief ... are not necessarily normative”; and Sharadin emphasizes the marginality of such cases but admits their existence: “[O]nly quite exceptional cases, such as cases where an agent’s interests would not in any way be promoted by believing truly, will be ones where an agent genuinely lacks a reason to believe in accord with the evidence” (2018: 3804).

⁷Clifford (1999 [1877]) provides one canonical inspiration for instrumentalist views. See also Stich (1990), Kornblith (1993), Papineau (2013), Cowie (2014), and Sharadin (2018, 2021). (Nolfi (2021) defends a related view, though disavowing the label of instrumentalism (Nolfi 2021: 6729, fn. 20).) For influential dissent, see e.g., Kelly (2003), Lockard (2013).

What other, more direct answers to the source question might one give? That is, if we want to know whence comes the normativity of epistemic reasons in particular, and we don't simply punt this question to the practical domain, what might we say?

I take it there are two natural sorts of answers. First, one might think the normativity of epistemic reasons comes from *us* – perhaps from our (idealized) epistemic desires, values, or dispositions as believing agents. Call such answers “stance-dependent.” Or one might think the normativity of epistemic reasons stems from outside of ourselves, as it were. Perhaps there just are values or norms that ground the normative pressure to believe in accordance with our epistemic reasons, or perhaps this normative pressure is simply brute. Call such answers “stance-independent.”

In the second half of this paper, I will take up my second aim, arguing for a third, and perhaps less natural sort of answer to the source question, a “hybrid” answer. My suggestion is that the normativity of epistemic reasons derives from the *alignment* of our internal epistemic desires or dispositions with external epistemic values or norms. I give a dominance argument for this sort of position; though less familiar, a hybrid theory escapes some of the major challenges of stance independence and stance dependence without incurring any further major costs.

This is good news for normativism – or, more precisely, for some versions of normativism whose contours will emerge later in the paper.

I begin with some necessary preliminaries, reviewing what epistemic reasons are (section 2), and situating the main question of the paper in relation to other commonly discussed questions in the literature (section 3). Section 4 lays out the basic hybrid proposal and the dominance argument for hybrid theories, while sections 5–7 argue for the argument's premises.

2. Preliminaries: Epistemic Reasons

The clearest, least controversial example of an epistemic reason to believe that *p* will be some piece of *evidence* supporting *p*. Meteorologists' records of warming temperatures and increases in extreme weather activity over recent decades are evidence that climate change is occurring, and hence they are epistemic reasons (of some defeasible strength) to *believe* that climate change is occurring.

One might think that epistemic reasons are simply equivalent to evidence, that the two concepts can be used interchangeably. The attitudes one has most epistemic reason to have will be just those attitudes best supported by one's evidence. But there are a few controversial wrinkles here.

Some think that there can be epistemic reasons not only to believe propositions but also to suspend judgment with respect to propositions. Perhaps the very *paucity* of one's evidence with respect to a question could be an epistemic reason to suspend judgment, though the paucity of one's evidence is not itself evidence. There's also the orthogonal question of whether one's epistemic framework – or one's epistemic “standards,” or “rules,” or “goals” – may affect the epistemic reason one has to believe vs. suspend, independent of one's evidence. And of course there's the yet further question, relating to so-called pragmatic or moral encroachment, of whether epistemic reasons are truly and fully independent of moral or practical reasons – or, if you like, whether they are impervious to non-epistemic considerations.

Thankfully, I needn't take any controversial position on the nature of epistemic reasons. Normativism holds that whatever epistemic reasons one has – whether these be exhausted by one's evidence or not – matter to what one (really) ought to believe.

And my question is *why*, or in virtue of what. I mention these controversies about the nature of epistemic reasons only because it will be helpful to have in mind in what follows the platitude that evidence provides epistemic reasons (though potentially other considerations may also affect or provide epistemic reasons as well).⁸

3. The Source Question in Relation to Other Questions

So what is the source of normativity for these (apparently) normative epistemic reasons, paradigmatically provided by evidence? Before attempting an answer, it will be helpful to clarify this question and situate it in relation to other questions in the epistemological and ethical literature.

What I call the source question is, it seems to me, best expressed via the eponymous source metaphor. Where does the normativity of epistemic reasons *come from*? But we might also ask for the “ground” of their normativity⁹ – i.e., what metaphysically explains why epistemic reasons are normative for us. Or we might ask a why-question: why or in virtue of what are the attitudes I have most epistemic reason to have, attitudes I ought to have?

This source question falls within the burgeoning domain of metaepistemology. There are facts on the ground, as it were, about our epistemic discourse and practice, including the seeming fact that we ought to believe in accordance with our epistemic reasons. But in a reflective, metaepistemological mood, we might wonder whether it is really true that we ought to have such beliefs, in any robustly normative sense, and, if so, why.

This source question is, admittedly, actually rather more pedestrian than other possible questions in metaepistemology. In a wildly reflectively mood, we might wonder whether there are *any* epistemic oughts at all, and if so where those come from. This broader source question underlies many excellent contributions to a recent edited volume on metaepistemology, where answers to the question are broadly classified as “realist,” “anti-realist,” and “constitutivist.”¹⁰ But I maintain that it is fruitful to ask after the source of normativity for epistemic *reasons*, in particular. (I also prefer a different taxonomy of possible answers – briefly and in part, for the reason that “anti-realism” has dismissive and skeptical connotations that needn’t characterize all stance-dependent views.)

Asking after the source of normativity for epistemic reasons in particular is fruitful, in the first place, because unlike the broader epistemic source question, my narrower

⁸One further clarification may be in order. On some views, there is an important distinction between the epistemic reasons to which one has access and the epistemic reasons one possesses. (Cf. Sylvan and Sosa 2018.) Suppose that a certain rash on the skin reliably indicates a particular medical condition. If I can see the rash on my arm, these theorists might say I have access to an epistemic reason to believe I have the relevant medical condition. But of course if I don’t know about the indication relation, I don’t *possess* an epistemic reason to believe I have the relevant medical condition. (Of course other theorists – notably including “mentalists” about epistemic reasons – will deny that the rash is an epistemic reason for belief in any interesting sense in this case.) Here again, thank goodness, I can remain neutral. I am concerned with whatever epistemic reasons are *normative* – whatever facts or mental states bear on what we (genuinely) ought to believe, via the epistemic reason relation. *If* there’s an important distinction between possessed and not-necessarily-possessed epistemic reasons, my interest is in whatever category is normative, and I needn’t take an official stand on which that is.

⁹This is one way Chang (2013) poses the source question for practical normativity. The literature on grounding and metaphysical explanation is vast. See Fine (2001) for an introduction to the contemporary literature.

¹⁰Kyriacou and McKenna (2018).

source question does not assume that there is a single source of all epistemic normativity. Perhaps there is a sense in which one really ought to have beliefs that constitute knowledge, another sense in which one really ought to have beliefs that are true, and yet another sense in which one really ought to believe in accordance with one's epistemic reasons; all these may be differently grounded.

In the second place, in addition to the burgeoning of metaepistemology, there is a flurry of interesting recent work on reasons and rationality in both epistemic and practical contexts. This suggests that the search for the source of normativity for epistemic *reasons*, in particular, (i) may be especially promising, in that a wealth of theorizing from disparate corners of philosophy can inform the search, and (ii) may be especially interesting, in that our answer to the source question may possibly bear on a wide variety of other questions currently under discussion.

Of course, having claimed that the source question is related to other interesting questions in the literature, it seems incumbent on me to explain how it is nonetheless distinct. This will in turn clarify the source question itself.

3.1. Normativity of rationality

Some ways of phrasing the source question might suggest a close relation to Kolodny's (2005) well-known question, "Why be rational?" – at least if we took the normativity of epistemic reasons to be closely related to the normativity of epistemic rationality. But Kolodny – and other philosophers working in the literature on the "normativity of rationality"¹¹ – takes rationality, necessarily, to be mere structural or formal rationality. Kolodny is interested in whether one has reason to be an ideal "rational" agent, "understood as one whose attitudes stand in certain structural relations, or result from certain formal procedures" (2005: 510). His question is whether it is substantively rational to be structurally rational.¹²

In contrast, my project takes at face value the appearance that epistemic reasons – whether these ultimately reduce to requirements of coherence (a structural element), evidential responsiveness¹³ (a substantive element), or some combination of the two – really are normative and asks why. In other words, I assume normativism about epistemic reasons and then, despite asking a hard question for that view, attempt to vindicate it. The "normativity of rationality" literature is fairly clear that questions about the source of normativity for reasons is distinct. Lord, for example, states that identifying what makes *reasons* normative (if indeed, this is not primitive) is outside his scope in *The Importance of Being Rational* (2018: 12).

3.2. Subjectivism/relativism vs. objectivism

Another question in the vicinity of the source question, which we have already brushed against, is whether epistemic reasons are fully determined by a subject's evidence or whether these are also sensitive to her framework (or epistemic standards, epistemic rules, epistemic goals, prior credences, etc.). That is, could there be purely objective

¹¹See especially Kiesewetter (2017), Lord (2018).

¹²See also Worsnip (2018).

¹³For example, see Kelly's (2016) *Stanford Encyclopedia* article on evidence, where he says it borders on platitudinous to say that "rationality is a matter of responding correctly to one's evidence." Cf. also Christensen (2010) on rational "toxicity"; it is seemingly because epistemic rationality incorporates both coherence and evidence-responsiveness that one can find oneself in certain dilemma-like situations.

rules or relations determining epistemic reasons on the basis of different bodies of evidence, or do our epistemic reasons always also depend on – roughly speaking – the ways that *we* are committed to interpreting and evaluating that evidence? Do epistemic reasons depend simply on evidence, or evidence-plus-subjects’-frameworks’?

This is distinct from the source question in being a question for normative epistemology rather than metaepistemology.¹⁴ The ‘subjectivist’ and ‘objectivist’ about epistemic reasons disagree on the supervenience base for those reasons. But they need not disagree about reasons’ source of normativity. For example, a subjectivist could agree with an objectivist in rejecting stance dependence, as briefly sketched in the Introduction. She might maintain that epistemic reasons are sensitive to agents’ frameworks *and* that we ought to each believe in accordance with our epistemic reasons because, ultimately, such believing-in-accord-with-one’s-framework-plus-evidence is (objectively) right or valuable.

Stance *independence*, then, is distinct from objectivism (i.e., the supervenience of epistemic reasons on evidence). The stance independent theorist, as such, is free to think epistemic reasons are sensitive to subjects’ frameworks; such a theorist is simply committed to a certain position on Euthyphro questions about the significance of frameworks: subjects’ individual frameworks matter to what they ought to believe *because* some external norm or value requires this.

Similarly, an objectivist might be a stance dependence theorist, if she thought that all believers as such shared a framework that would generate intersubjective or universal rules determining epistemic reasons. (Some constitutivists about epistemic normativity may hold such a view.¹⁵)

There are interesting relationships between the source question and the questions dividing subjectivists from objectivists on this supervenience question, to which we will return briefly later; yet these questions are distinct.

3.3. Practical source questions

The question most closely related to my metaepistemological source question is the source question for practical normativity, which has been addressed directly in contemporary literature by Chang (2013) as well as Korsgaard (1992, 1996). This is so, despite the fact that both are concerned with moral/practical rather than epistemic normativity.

Korsgaard sometimes glosses her source question as asking “what *justifies* the claims that morality makes on us” (1996: 9–10), or alternatively as what gives moral claims their “authority.” Chang (2013) is concerned perhaps more broadly with the question of what makes any consideration a normative reason to act. She writes:

This is a *prima facie* metaphysical or meta-normative question about the grounding of reasons for action and not a normative question about the circumstances or conditions under which, normatively speaking, one has a reason to do something. The normative question is answered by normative theory, as when one says that such-and-such feature of an action is a reason to perform that action because bringing about that feature would maximize happiness. The metaphysical question

¹⁴A similar question is more commonly framed in terms of epistemic *rationality*, as in e.g., White (2005, 2007), Boghossian (2006), Titelbaum (2010), Meacham (2013), and Schoenfield (2014, 2019).

¹⁵The most prominent form of epistemic constitutivism follows Shah and Velleman (2005), in thinking that the nature of *belief* sets a correctness condition (truth) and, derivatively, norms of evidence responsiveness which might necessarily be reflected in frameworks.

asks instead for the metaphysical determinant of something's being a reason. When we ask for the ground of a reason's normativity, we ask what metaphysically makes something have the action-guidingness of a reason: where does the normativity of a practical reason come from? As Christine Korsgaard puts it somewhat more poetically what is the 'source' of a reason's normativity? (Chang 2013: 163)

While Chang and Korsgaard offer different taxonomies of answers to the practical source question, their taxonomies are closely related. One important division for both Chang and Korsgaard concerns whether the source of normativity is "voluntarist" – roughly, will-based. (Korsgaard differs from Chang in more clearly separating theological voluntarisms from human will-based views and in considering the former in some depth.¹⁶)

But a second important difference among possible answers to the source question has to do with what we might call the *location* of the source of normativity. Is this source – whether will-based or not – to be found inside of subjects? Does it arise from our desires, wills, goals, etc.? Or is it external to us – perhaps seated in a divine will, or else some objective norms or values or brute reason facts?

This location question is the one that primarily interests me, in the present application to epistemic reasons. This is not at all because I think the question of voluntarism uninteresting in epistemology or voluntarist views unpromising.¹⁷ Rather, it would simply take more than a single paper to try to answer both questions for epistemic reasons. And it is the location dimension of the taxonomy that could relate most directly to normative epistemological questions about subjectivism/objectivism. So, for the sake of a slightly more manageable scope, I focus henceforth on the distinction between "stance dependent" (source is inside us) and "stance independent" (source is outside us) answers to the source question. (Unlike Chang's "internalism" and "externalism," my labels are meant to include both non-voluntarist and possible voluntarist versions of these views.)

Discussion of the practical source question has brought us back to the epistemic source question and the task at hand: namely, trying to offer a *plausible* or vindicatory answer to this (novel but interesting) source question for normativism about epistemic reasons. In the following section I explain my own "hybrid" proposal, relative to the stance dependent and stance independent answers just glossed. I also explain the form of the argument to be completed in the remainder of the paper.

4. The Dominance Argument for Hybrid Views

To recap and precisify: stance dependence theorists think epistemic reasons are (really) normative fundamentally in virtue of something about us or our perspectives – our own (idealized) epistemic dispositions, or (idealized) epistemic desires/values, or our commitments as to good ways of evaluating evidence. As with attitude-dependent metaethical views, there will be room for disagreement among stance dependent theorists in metaepistemology as to what exactly it is about subjects and their perspectives that gives rise to normativity. But, broadly, the stance dependent theorist thinks Lee really ought to believe climate change is occurring because – perhaps 'deep down' – something about his own desires or commitments as an epistemic agent pressures him to

¹⁶This is partly because Korsgaard organizes her consideration of answers in a historical dialog, and she begins with, e.g., Pufendorf and Hobbes. See Murphy (2019) for an overview of contemporary versions of theological voluntarism.

¹⁷See Callahan (2021) for a partly voluntarist view of epistemic *rationality*, which seems suggestive for epistemic reasons.

take this view. Stance independent theorists, on the other hand, think epistemic reasons are (really) normative fundamentally in virtue of *something else*, something external to us and our perspectives. Perhaps they are normative in virtue of objective epistemic values or norms; some externalists may also give the primitivist answer: epistemic reasons simply are normative, with no further explanation. The stance independent theorist thinks Lee really ought to believe climate change is occurring, because, fundamentally, something external to Lee's perspective enjoins him to do so.

Structurally, my hybrid proposal is superficially similar to Chang's: my positive view falls outside or between this initial taxonomy of answers to the source question. Yet my hybrid proposal viz. the source of epistemic reasons is no straightforward analog of Chang's "hybrid voluntarism." For one thing, as already mentioned, I won't focus here on the distinction between "given" and will-based normativity. The hybrid I have in mind is not, as with Chang, a blending of the given and the voluntarist, but rather a blending of stance dependent and stance independent elements. I propose that Lee ought to believe climate change is occurring because: his own perspective recommends this *and*, so to speak, his perspective latches onto objective, external normative reality. Perhaps both conditions together are what ground the normativity of epistemic reasons.

Officially, the *hybrid theorist* claims: epistemic reasons are (genuinely) normative for a subject because (i) the subject's own commitments (or desires, goals, etc.) pressure them to believe in accordance with said reasons; *and also* (ii) believing in accordance with epistemic reason is objectively good, right, or fitting.

An analogy may help. Susan Wolf famously sloganized a popular thought about well-being or meaning in life, claiming, "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness" (Wolf 1997: 211).¹⁸ Something terribly special seems to happen when we want good things and get what we want. My hybrid proposal is that epistemic reasons are similar. Epistemic reasons are normative for us precisely because we are able to countenance for ourselves that which it would be epistemically good (in an objective, external sense) for us to believe.

This might sound crazy. (Surely we can't just mash together two standardly opposed metanormative views in a conjunction and get something independently attractive and tenable!) But, much as Chang surveys the existing categories of answers to the source question and finds each wanting, relative to some combination of answers from different categories, I will proceed in the remainder of the paper by surveying the natural problems for stance dependent views and stance independent views, arguing that a hybrid of the two will ultimately be preferable. I call this the dominance argument for hybrid views of the source of normativity for epistemic reasons:

1. Hybrid views avoid (some of) the problems of stance independent views.
2. Hybrid views avoid (some of) the problems of stance dependent views.
3. Hybrid views come with no further, major problems not shared by stance dependent or stance independent views.
4. Conclusion: Hybrid views of the source of normativity for epistemic reasons are most promising, for vindicating normativism.

¹⁸For structurally similar recent claims about the nature of well-being, see also, e.g., Parfit (1984: 501–2), Adams (1999), and Kagan (2009). The idea may also have an ancient pedigree. Cooper (2012: 34–5) claims that Socrates' character in the *Apology* and related dialogues held a similar view.

I'll proceed by reviewing some of the major, classic problems for stance dependent and stance independent views in the following section (drawing on the well-trodden discussion of such views in metaethics), then arguing for my premises.

5. Problems for Stance Dependence and Stance Independence

The first major problem for stance independence is its famous vulnerability to charges of 'mysteriousness', à la Hume or Mackie (1977). I'll assume familiarity with this critique.

A related problem for stance independence, as Korsgaard (1996: 37–42) points out in the practical case, is that while it might satisfy some who ask the source question, it would not satisfy those we might call earnest questioners. Say we want to know the source of normativity for epistemic reasons because we would rather *not* believe what our evidence suggests – we would rather it turn out that epistemic reasons are not normative after all. This is the three-year-old's version of a why question, but it seems to me it deserves to be taken seriously. ("Wash your hands," "Why?" is a common exchange in my household. The question is earnest and defiant.)

The stance independence theorist eventually answers the earnest, skeptical why question with the tired parent's "You just ought to." Sure – there are some other things to be said first. "Eating food with dirty hands can make you sick." "Updating on all your evidence seems to be your best strategy for having true beliefs." But eventually the questions devolve. "What if I want to be sick?" "What if I do not think believing in accord with epistemic reasons is the best way to get to true beliefs? What if I do not care about having true beliefs on this issue?" And the stance independence theorist's answer amounts to: *there just are* epistemic reasons, norms, and/or values that make it the case that you really ought to have certain attitudes, regardless of what you want or care about, and this cannot be further explained. If this is the true source of normativity for epistemic reasons, one might worry, the earnest source question cannot be answered.

Stance dependence seems more promising with respect to satisfying the earnest questioner. Recall Lee. If we could somehow get Lee to see that his *own* epistemic values or commitments put pressure on him to take the view that climate change is occurring, then it seems further why-questioning on his part really might be illegitimate.¹⁹

On the other hand, stance dependence theorists face their own difficulties. What if we tweak the case so that Lee's perspective – even 'deep down' – *does not* recommend belief that climate change is occurring? Stronger: what if Lee's perspective or stance actually *licenses* his current agnosticism? After all, people are capable of hosting impressively weird psychological states. What if Lee really just doesn't care about having true or reasonable beliefs, or what if he cares so much about avoiding error on this topic that his "best lights" recommend suspending judgment?

It seems the stance dependence theorist would have to retract the claim that Lee really ought to believe climate change is occurring. And indeed, they may have to claim instead that Lee really ought *not* to believe climate change is occurring (and instead ought to suspend judgment). This is because stance dependence, while officially a metanormative or metaepistemological position, has what we might call extensional consequences – it may force a kind of permissivism, when combined with certain

¹⁹More promising, but admittedly not totally unproblematic. Perhaps some will support the legitimacy of the question: "why should I believe in accordance with my own framework?"

plausible, psychological assumptions. The stance dependence theorist maintains the reason a subject really ought to believe in accordance with epistemic reason is that she herself is somehow committed to (or desires, or has goals that are furthered by, etc.) believing in accordance with epistemic reason. Such internal stances give rise to normativity. But this explanatory claim suggests (despite not *strictly* implying): (I) if a subject is *not* somehow committed to believing in accordance with epistemic reason, they must lack (genuinely) normative epistemic reasons, and (II) if a subject is somehow committed to believing in accordance with a *different* set of what we might call epistemic pseudo-reasons, then they (genuinely) ought to believe in accordance with those pseudo-reasons; the pseudo-reasons are then genuinely normative.

Depending on the details, these extensional issues may threaten normativism. Consider what one should say about a deviant agent, for whom on this view standard epistemic reasons (such as the reason to believe in climate change provided by meteorological records) are not genuinely normative. If we say that these reasons really are epistemic reasons, though they do not bind deviant agents, then we have given up on the strongest form of normativism. If on the other hand, we say that these *cease* to be epistemic reasons, when considered in relation to deviant agents, we must adopt a rather revisionary view of epistemic reasons.

Now some stance dependence theorists might insist that these extensional issues simply do not arise. *Everyone* has the commitments, goals, or whatnot to make epistemic reasons normative. Perhaps we all, *qua* believing agents, aim at truth and hence really ought to abide by epistemic reasons (which, presumably, have some connection to truth²⁰).²¹ But the challenges for such a position will be familiar from the practical domain. Just as it seems in principle possible for a subject to have coherently eccentric desires,²² it seems in principle possible for a subject to have coherently eccentric epistemic goals or commitments as to how to form beliefs. Suppose, e.g., that all Lee really cares about is avoiding error and not believing truth. Or suppose he thinks he ought to form beliefs – *epistemically* ought – according to his intuitions and what feels good, without paying attention to his evidence. Of course much will depend on the details of the stance dependence theorist's view, as to what internal state exactly is to ground the normativity of epistemic reasons. But given the flexibility of human psychology, it seems difficult to guarantee that every subject as such satisfies a particular set of internal commitments, goals, desires, or dispositions.

These are nowhere near decisive criticisms; I call them only *challenges* for stance independent and stance dependent views. But it is time to argue for the premises above, starting with the claim that *hybrid* views partly avoid or have better responses to these challenges.

6. Hybrid Views Avoid Some Problems of Stance Independence and Stance Dependence

Recall that the hybrid theorist thinks epistemic reasons are normative for us precisely because we are able to countenance for ourselves that which it would be epistemically good (in an objective, external sense) for us to believe. Recall moreover the challenges for stance independence above: “mysteriousness” and the problem of the earnest questioner.

²⁰Whether that be an instrumental, promoting relation or something more like a respect relation. Cf. Kelly (2003), Sylvan (2020).

²¹Cf. discussion in Cowie and Greenberg (2018), Flowerree (2018), and Nolfi (2021: 6723–6).

²²Cf. Street (2009).

I claim hybrid theorists fare (just) a bit better in defending against mysteriousness objections. This may seem implausible. After all, the hybrid theorist refers to objective, external epistemic goodness in describing the source of normativity, just as does the stance independence theorist.

Yet notice that, like the stance dependence theorist, the hybrid theorist denies that facts about objective relations to epistemic values/norms *alone* are ever sufficient to generate real normative pressure. Thus the hybrid theorist could actually agree with Mackie when he claims that an “objective” value or good – i.e., an “intrinsically prescriptive” entity that “would be sought by anyone who was acquainted with it”²³ – would be too metaphysically and epistemologically mysterious. For the hybrid theorist does not believe in any objective epistemic values or rules for good thinking that *intrinsically* prescribe. She believes attitude-independent facts about epistemic goodness are only sufficient to ground the normativity of epistemic reasons in conjunction with subjects’ actually caring about or being able to countenance such goodness.

Could hybrid theory fare better than stance independence in satisfying an earnest questioner? It seems so, although the hybrid theorist may have different stories to tell about different earnest questioners. Consider defiant Lee – a Lee who demands to know the source of normativity for epistemic reasons because Lee would rather not have reasonable beliefs. Either Lee’s subjective stance really does, perhaps “deep down,” enjoin him to be reasonable, or it does not. (Some hybrid theorists, like some stance dependence theorists, may deny the latter possibility.)

In the *former* case at least, defiant Lee needn’t be met with the tired parent’s, “You just ought to (believe in climate change)!” The hybrid theorist can retain whatever advantages the stance dependence theorist had in answering his earnest question, and perhaps even improve on the latter’s answer. For Lee himself endorses rules of thinking that bind him to accept that climate change is occurring, which in theory he might be brought to acknowledge. Moreover, those rules are *objectively good ones*. Lee really should believe in climate change because he *knows* it would be good to do so.²⁴

Now it’s true that, supposing Lee’s stance doesn’t enjoin him to believe climate change is occurring, the hybrid theorist will admit that Lee doesn’t have a genuine normative reason for this belief. One might worry that this leaves hybrid theory vulnerable to exactly the same major challenge as stance dependence: namely, that in making normativity depend on individual stances we give up on a normativism worthy of the name.

But the hybrid theorist doesn’t have *quite* as difficult a problem as the stance dependence theorist. Stance dependence suggested: (I) if a subject is *not* somehow committed to believing in accordance with epistemic reason, they must lack (genuinely) normative epistemic reasons, and (II) if a subject is somehow committed to believing in accordance with a *different* set of what we might call epistemic pseudo-reasons, then they (genuinely) ought to believe in accordance with those pseudo-reasons; the pseudo-reasons are then genuinely normative. Hybrid theory similarly suggests I, and this is the sense in which it doesn’t vindicate *quite* the letter of normativism – this is the caveat mentioned in the Introduction. But notice that hybrid theory, unlike stance dependence, does not suggest II.

This is a substantial improvement. For there is something actually intuitive about claim I, the idea that very deeply confused individuals are not subject to (genuinely

²³Mackie (1977, Part I, Section 9).

²⁴More carefully, his stance somehow acknowledges the goodness of doing so, and it is *true* that it would be good. I take no stand on whether he must strictly satisfy the knowledge relation.

normative) epistemic reasons. On the other hand, there is – to my mind – nothing very intuitive about claim II, or that for such individuals there are (equally, genuinely normative) alternative epistemic reasons that determine what they ought to believe.

Consider the committed flat-earthier who, let us suppose, has a wacky perspective and set of epistemic commitments that really, deeply support their geological views. *Given that this is truly the way of going about their epistemic business that fundamentally seems best to them*, it seems to me no attitude they could now take toward the proposition, “The earth is round (spherical),” would be epistemically reasonable. Either they would be flagrantly disregarding their own best lights, or they would be responding to kooky clues and employing methods that do not remotely conduce to epistemically valuable states.

The hybrid verdict in this case actually seems right to me – it is not the case that such individuals ought to believe the world is round, but this is only because they (perhaps reprehensibly) are entirely ineligible for epistemic reasons on this issue. Switching examples now and returning to Lee – whereas the stance dependence theorist must admit the possibility that Lee is believing as he epistemically ought, when he suspends judgment on whether climate change is occurring, the hybrid theorist can (rightly) deny this. The hybrid theorist can say that Lee must either be flouting genuinely normative reasons or else be totally ineligible for epistemic reasons, by virtue of his wacky stance.

Hybrid theory thus vindicates that view that epistemic reasons are genuinely normative for some broad class of (roughly normal) agents – and also that no epistemic pseudo-reasons are similarly normative for other, wackier agents – which is arguably the strongest version of normativism we ought to have hoped for in the first place.

7. Challenges for Hybrid Theory

I’ve suggested that hybrid theory actually walks a nice line between the mysterious or unsatisfying character of stance independence and the loosey-gooseyness of stance dependence. So much for premises 1 and 2 of the dominance argument for hybrid theories. It remains to address the concern that there are other, significant drawbacks to the view. I will address two major concerns here.

First, one might worry that the view is awkward – or gangly, or just aesthetically overly complex. Why should we accept a clunky, conjunctive analysis of something as interesting as the normativity of epistemic reasons? Epistemologists in particular, gun-shy after Gettier, are justifiably wary of conjunctive analyses of important phenomena.

I think different hybrid theorists might give different answers to this worry. Some might place additional conditions on the alignment of a subjective stance and objective epistemic values, changing the conjunction of the two elements to something essentially tighter. Perhaps one’s stance must align with objective epistemic norms or values *because* of those very values, for example.

Other hybrid theorists, on the other hand, might simply question an overreliance on such aesthetic guidance, in our theorizing. Or they might question whether a two-place conjunction *is* awkward or gangly in the first place. (We’re still a far way from the complexity of some post-Gettier analyses of knowledge.) In general, this seems to me no damning critique; hybrid theorists have various plausible means of responding.

The second concern I’ll mention is that one might have expected the normativity of epistemic reasons to be of-a-piece with the normativity of practical reasons. And a hybrid theory – in the present sense – of the normativity of practical reasons may seem foreign or unpopular.

This may be – although I do think one can find in Adams (1999) a good basis for something like a hybrid theory for practical reasons. But again, various hybrid theorists could respond in a variety of ways, either questioning the importance of conformity with practical theorizing or questioning the status quo in the practical domain.

Indeed, judging by the state of the literature, it would seem far from settled that we ought to give similar theories of the source of normativity for practical and epistemic reasons. For one thing, people who are interested in the practical source question often just ignore the epistemic question. And again, as recent debates over normativism in epistemology prove, even those who are happy to admit the normativity of practical reasons may be sceptical of normativism about epistemic reasons in the first place.²⁵

If the worst that can be said of hybrid theories is that they are gangly or mismatched with extant answers in the practical domain, then premise 3 seems to stand: no *major* additional problems are accrued when we move from pure stance (in)dependence to a hybrid theory.

8. Conclusion

I have been at pains to argue that hybrid theories are generally, schematically attractive as views of the source of normativity for epistemic reasons. We really ought to believe what our epistemic reasons support (when and) because we are, deep down, correctly committed to the epistemic goodness of believing in these ways. But of course the hybrid theorist faces not only objections to her view in general but also the familiar challenge of crafting a specific, defensible version of a plausible general idea. First, hybrid theorists – like stance dependence theorists and, indeed, all subjectivists – need a specific and defensible story about what it is for a subject to have a stance. (One question that will arise here is whether there is any voluntarist element to our stances or whether they are passive, non-willed aspects of our selves.) Second, hybrid theorists need a story about what it takes for a subject's stance to be objectively good, right, or fitting. (Commitments here may further commit one to, e.g., either permissivism or uniqueness.) I certainly cannot attempt to meet this challenge here, but I hope to have established that both hybrid theories and the metaepistemological source question for epistemic reasons deserve further attention.

Normativism about epistemic reasons will be all the stronger and more defensible if it is paired with a satisfying answer to the source question. And of course, on the flip side, if hybrid theories really are the most promising answers to that source question, normativists had better hope they are good enough to ward off the challenge that an unanswered source question poses.²⁶

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²⁵Rinard (2017) is a good example here.

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