

Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions*

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1. Introduction

In this paper we propose to argue for two claims. The first is that a sizeable group of epistemological projects – a group which includes much of what has been done in epistemology in the analytic tradition – would be seriously undermined if one or more of a cluster of empirical hypotheses about epistemic intuitions turns out to be true. The basis for this claim will be set out in Section 2. The second claim is that, while the jury is still out, there is now a substantial body of evidence suggesting that some of those empirical hypotheses are true. Much of this evidence derives from an ongoing series of experimental studies of epistemic intuitions that we have been conducting. A preliminary report on these studies will be presented in Section 3. In light of these studies, we think it is incumbent on those who pursue the epistemological projects in question to either explain why the truth of the hypotheses does not undermine their projects, or to say why, in light of the evidence we will present, they nonetheless assume that the hypotheses are false. In Section 4, which is devoted to Objections and Replies, we'll consider some of the ways in which defenders of the projects we are criticizing might reply to our challenge. Our goal, in all of this, is not to offer a conclusive argument demonstrating that the epistemological projects we will be criticizing are untenable. Rather, our aim is to shift the burden of argument.

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For far too long, epistemologists who rely heavily on epistemic intuitions have proceeded as though they could simply ignore the empirical hypotheses we will set out. We will be well satisfied if we succeed in making a plausible case for the claim that this approach is no longer acceptable.

To start, it will be useful to sketch a brief – and perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic – taxonomy of epistemological projects. With the aid of this taxonomy we will try to “locate in philosophical space” (as Wilfrid Sellars used to say) those epistemological projects which, we maintain, are threatened by the evidence we will present. There are at least four distinct, though related, projects that have occupied the attention of epistemologists. Following Richard Samuels,¹ we’ll call them the Normative Project, the Descriptive Project, the Evaluative Project and the Ameliorative Project.

The Normative Project, which we’re inclined to think is the most philosophically central of the four, attempts to establish norms to guide our epistemic efforts. Some of these norms may be explicitly regulative, specifying which ways of going about the quest for knowledge should be pursued and which should not. This articulation of regulative norms is one of the more venerable of philosophical undertakings, going back at least to Descartes’s *Regulae* and evident in the work of Mill, Popper and many other important figures in the history of philosophy; and it continues in philosophy today. For example, when Alvin Goldman chastises internalism for being unable to provide us with “Doxastic Decision Principles,” he is challenging the ability of internalism to pull its weight in this aspect of the Normative Project.² The Normative Project also aims to articulate what might be called valuational norms, which attempt to answer questions like: What is our epistemic good? and How should we prefer to structure our doxastic lives? One may not be able to generate regulative principles from the answers provided; rather, the answers tell us at what target the regulative principles should aim.

The Descriptive Project can have a variety of targets, the two most common being epistemic concepts and epistemic language. When concepts are the target, the goal is to describe (or “analyze”) the epistemic concepts that some group of people actually invoke. When pursued by epistemologists (rather than linguists or anthropologists), the group in question is typically characterized rather vaguely by using the first person plural. They are “our” concepts, the ones

1 Samuels (in preparation).

2 Goldman (1980).

that “we” use. Work in this tradition has led to a large literature attempting to analyze concepts like knowledge, justification, warrant, and rationality.³ When language is the focus of the Descriptive project, the goal is to describe the way some group of people use epistemic language or to analyze the meaning of their epistemic terms. Here again, the group is almost invariably “us”.

Many epistemologists think that there are important links between the Normative and Descriptive Projects. Indeed, we suspect that these (putative) links go a long way toward explaining why philosophers think the Descriptive Project is so important. In epistemology, knowledge is “the good stuff” and to call a belief an instance of knowledge is to pay it one of the highest compliments an epistemologist can bestow.⁴ Thus terms like ‘knowledge,’ ‘justification,’ ‘warrant’ etc. and the concepts they express are themselves plausibly regarded as implicitly normative. Moreover, many philosophers hold that sentences invoking epistemic terms have explicitly normative consequences. So, for example, ‘S’s belief that p is an instance of knowledge’ might plausibly be taken to entail ‘Ceteris paribus, S ought to believe that p’ or perhaps ‘Ceteris paribus, it is a good thing for S to believe that p’.⁵ For reasons that will emerge, we are more than a bit skeptical about the alleged links between the Descriptive and Normative Projects. For the time being, however, we will leave the claim that the two projects are connected unchallenged.

The Evaluative Project tries to assess how well or poorly people’s actual belief forming practices accord with the norms specified in the Normative Project. To do this, of course, another sort of descriptive effort is required. Before we can say how well or poorly people are doing at the business of belief formation and revision, we have to say in some detail how they

3 The literature on conceptual analysis in epistemology is vast. For an elite selection, see the essays assembled in Sosa (1994).

4 This is a view with a venerable history. In Plato’s *Protagoras*, Socrates says that “knowledge is a noble and commanding thing,” and Protagoras, not to be out done, replies that “wisdom and knowledge are the highest of human things.” (1892/1937, 352)

5 Perhaps the most important advocate of extracting normative principles from analyses of our epistemic terms is Roderick Chisolm (1977). This approach is shared in projects as otherwise dissimilar as Bonjour (1985) and Pollock & Cruz (1999).

actually go about the process of belief formation and revision.⁶ The Ameliorative Project presupposes that we don't all come out with the highest possible score in the assessment produced by the Evaluative Project, and asks how we can improve the way we go about the business of belief formation. In this paper our primary focus will be on the Normative Project and on versions of the Descriptive Project which assume that the Descriptive and Normative Projects are linked in something like the way sketched above.

2. Intuition Driven Romanticism and The Normativity Problem

2.1 Epistemic Romanticism & Intuition Driven Romanticism

A central question that the Normative Project tries to answer is: How ought we to go about the business of belief formation and revision? How are we to go about finding an answer to this question? And once an answer has been proposed, how are we to assess it? If two theorists offer different answers, how can we determine which one is better? Philosophers who have pursued the Normative Project have used a variety of methods or strategies. In this section we want to begin by describing one very influential family of strategies.

The family we have in mind belongs to a larger group of strategies which (just to be provocative) we propose to call Epistemic Romanticism. One central idea of 19th century Romanticism was that our real selves, the essence of our identity, is implanted within us, and that to discover who we really are we need but let that real identity emerge. Epistemic Romanticism assumes something rather similar about epistemic norms. According to Epistemic Romanticism, knowledge of the correct epistemic norms (or information that can lead to knowledge of the correct norms) is implanted within us in some way, and with the proper process of self-exploration we can discover them. As we read him, Plato was an early exponent of this kind of Romanticism about matters normative (and about much else besides). So Epistemic Platonism might be another (perhaps equally provocative) label for this group of strategies for discovering or testing epistemic norms.

⁶ For further discussion of the Evaluative Project, see Samuels, Stich & Tremoulet (1999); Samuels, Stich & Bishop (in press); Samuels, Stich & Faucher (in press). These papers are available on the web site of the Rutgers University Research Group on Evolution & Higher Cognition: <http://rucss.rutgers.edu/ArchiveFolder/Research%20Group/research.html>

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2.2 The Normativity Problem

Reflective equilibrium strategies and other Romantic strategies all yield as outputs claims that putatively have normative force. These outputs tell us how people ought to go about forming and revising their beliefs, which belief forming strategies yield genuinely justified beliefs, which beliefs are warranted, which count as real knowledge rather than mere opinion, etc. But there is a problem lurking here – we’ll call it the Normativity Problem: What reason is there to think that the output of one or another of these Romantic strategies has real (as opposed to putative) normative force? Why should we care about the normative pronouncements produced by these strategies? Why should we try to do what these outputs claim we ought to do in matters epistemic? Why, in short, should we take any of this stuff seriously?

We don’t think that there is any good solution to the Normativity Problem for any version of Romanticism in epistemology. And because there is no solution to the Normativity Problem, we think that the entire tradition of Epistemic Romanticism has been a very bad idea. These, obviously, are very big claims and this is not the place to mount a detailed argument for all of them. We do, however, want to rehearse one consideration, first raised in Stich’s book, *The Fragmentation of Reason*. We think it lends some plausibility to the claim that satisfying solutions to the Normativity Problem for Romanticism are going to be hard to find. It will also help to motivate the empirical studies we will recount in the section to follow.

What Stich noted is that the following situation seems perfectly possible. There might be a group of people who reason and form beliefs in ways that are significantly different from the way we do. Moreover, these people might also have epistemic intuitions that are significantly different from ours. More specifically, they might have epistemic intuitions which, when plugged into your favorite Romantic black box yield the conclusion that their strategies of reasoning and belief formation lead to epistemic states that are rational (or justified, or of the sort that yield genuine knowledge – pick your favorite normative epistemic notion here). If this is right, then it looks like the Romantic strategy for answering normative epistemic questions might sanction any of a wide variety of regulative and valuational norms. And that sounds like bad news for an advocate of the Romantic strategy, since the strategy doesn’t tell us what we really want to know. It doesn’t tell us how we should go about the business of forming and revising our beliefs. One might, of course, insist that the normative principles that should be followed are the ones that are generated when we put our intuitions

into the Romantic black box. But it is less than obvious (to put it mildly) how this move could be defended. Why should we privilege our intuitions rather than the intuitions of some other group?