

Paper gist: If epistemic norms really don't countenance any tradeoffs, we should doubt two common assumptions: that epistemic value is what grounds their normativity and that they confer necessary normativity force.

Extended abstract: One of the most active contemporary debates in epistemology concerns the nature of epistemic norms – what explains their content and how they instruct believers. In particular, these debates have recently centered on whether or not epistemic norms are teleological.¹² In this paper, I want to look in detail at a few views that claim that an otherwise-appealing teleological understanding of our epistemic norms must be incorrect. My main interest lies in examining the repercussions of the resulting non-teleological views for our understanding of the normativity of the epistemic domain. Though the debate about teleological vs. non-teleological epistemic norms has begun to garner quite a bit of attention, we've yet to explore the ramifications of this debate for our account of the nature of epistemic value. I'm going to suggest here that those ramifications are striking. A close look at our epistemic judgments, and in particular, how these judgments compare to judgments in the moral domain, sheds light on the nature of epistemic value, and, ultimately, on how we should think about the fundamental contours that shape the epistemic domain.

My argument comes in five parts. First I begin by noting the frequency with which epistemologists begin discussions of epistemic normativity by comparing it to ethical normativity.³ In particular, I examine Berker's 2013 claim that the analogy between ethics and epistemology can teach us something important about epistemic norms. Teleological theories, he notes, require trading off values against one another in the determination of final value. Whereas consequentialists in ethics are often accused of violating the separateness of persons when they permit interpersonal tradeoffs, he claims that the possibility of inter-propositional tradeoffs spells doom for the epistemic consequentialist.

In Section 2, I explore in detail the relationship between interpersonal and inter-propositional tradeoffs and suggest that the differences in tradeoff permissibility in the epistemic and ethical cases deserves further scrutiny. I introduce a very ordinary kind of tradeoff, the *OCP tradeoff*, in which *A* incurs some small harm in order to promote a greater benefit (/prevent a greater harm) to *B*. By stipulation, OCP tradeoffs don't raise the separateness of person worry because the relevant sort of cross-person aggregation of consequences isn't taking place. More interesting to think about is a different kind of cross-personal tradeoff that more closely mirrors the structure of the tradeoffs Berker

¹ In the paper I propose a terminological distinction for how to use "teleological" and "consequentialist." For the abstract, I'll just use them synonymously.

² See, for instance, Jenkins 2007; Berker 2013a; Berker 2013b; Greaves 2013; Ahlstrom-Vij and Dunn 2014; Goldman 2015; Wrenn 2016; Friedman 2018.

³ See for instance Jaegwon Kim: "epistemology is a normative discipline as much as, and in the same sense as, normative ethics" (1988, 383). Similar claims that draw out the parallels between our talk about epistemic matters and ethical matters can be found in, to name a few, Feldman (2000), Alston (1988), Pollock (1987), Rinard (2017), and Schroeder (2014).

describes⁴, one in which some person incurs great (maybe even maximal) disvalue in order to benefit a great number of people. I call this kind of case a *threshold tradeoff*: great disvalue to *A*, very large benefit (/prevention of a very great harm) to a very large group of people. I go on to point out that not only do deontological ethical theories routinely permit OCPs, but in addition, virtually every deontological theorist permits threshold tradeoffs⁵ – in other words, they acknowledge thresholds beyond which deontological constraints may or should be violated/greater good ought to be promoted. The strikingly disanalogous feature of the epistemic domain is that it appears as if it licenses *no tradeoffs whatsoever*. Not only do our epistemic intuitions seem to mark epistemically unjustified the adoption of a particular belief for which we have insufficient evidence in order to secure great future epistemic gains, but they legislate against the epistemic version of the everyday OCP tradeoffs – say, the adoption of one evidentially unjustified belief in order to believe another more important true proposition.

Berker, then, characterizes epistemic consequentialism as falling prey to a problem analogous to one that plagues ethical consequentialism. Yet the kind of non-teleological theory that would correctly capture the received fundamental epistemic norm of believing the truth about a particular proposition is so extreme/absolute that it's doubtful whether any contemporary deontologist actually endorses such a view. In Section 3 I discuss why this is true.

The apparent fact that epistemic normativity does not countenance tradeoffs should have direct implications for our conception of epistemic value. My thought is that there is a general relationship between countenancing tradeoffs and value. It's a simple one: tradeoffs are licensed in light of reasonable responses to value. The idea in broad form is that there is a range of reasonable responses to value in a normative domain. We might think (in keeping with moderate deontology) that norms can be directed toward the promotion of value in some cases (and respect constraints on value promotion in other cases) or, in keeping with maximizing consequentialism, that they can be directed toward the promotion of value in all cases, but we can't take them to be directed toward the promotion of value *in no cases*. For if that were the case, I claim, we would be mistaken to think of what explains or grounds the normativity as value to begin with.

Almost every plausible non-teleological ethical theory, then, countenances some kinds of cross-personal tradeoffs. I try to make plausible the claim that even non-teleological views in ethics, when they recommend tradeoffs, do so in light of what they take to be the proper response to great value promotion or harm prevention.⁶ But when we learn, as in the case of the epistemic domain, that there are no tradeoffs that are deemed acceptable in determining whether one ought to believe some proposition for which one has insufficient evidence, we learn that there's no possible amount of epistemic value the promotion of which would make it that we ought to believe *p*. We have the same

⁴ E.g. Jane, who has no evidence that God exists, but would go on to believe many more true propositions if she could believe in God, thereby making it more likely that she'd win a research grant from a religiously affiliated funding agency.

⁵ I call deontologists who permit threshold tradeoffs *moderate* deontologists. I suggest that virtually all well-known deontologists (with the exception of certain characterizations of Kant) appear to be moderate deontologists.

⁶ I do this by re-describing the standard description of the difference between a non-consequentialist and a maximizing consequentialist as better understood as a difference in *methodology*. Even Kant's Categorical Imperative is best seen, I think, as a proper response to the fundamental value of the good will.

absolute obligation towards each and every proposition, no matter how insignificant it is or how much value is at stake. If in every instance in which it would be possible to secure a great amount of value in some domain through a single norm infringement, the norms of that domain instruct us to proceed so as not to secure that value, I claim we have reason to conclude that the relevant value isn't behaving like value at all – most likely we were wrong to think that that domain was normatively governed by value to begin with. After all, if one conceives of something as valuable, it seems that what *makes it a value* is that it is desired or desirable. But what we see in the epistemic domain is that no amount of value of the thing that's supposed to ground the value could dictate that we should secure that value.

How are we left to think about the normativity of the epistemic domain? In Section 4, I argue for a necessary connection between normativity and value.⁷ Since we're exploring the contents of epistemic norms, we might have taken it as a given that epistemic norms are *normative* – in other words that they give rise to reasons or oughts that govern what we should do or how we should be. I appeal, though, to Broome's and Côté-Bouchard's distinctions between "genuine" or necessary normativity and mere norm-relativity. When we consider the picture of non-tradeoff-countenancing, absolutist non-teleology that Berker thinks characterizes the epistemic domain, we see a picture on which there's a rule to believe the truth for every proposition we consider – regardless of whether it's an utterly insignificant proposition that has no value for us and which could be sacrificed for a great number of truths that have great significance for us. This suggests that if epistemic norms in fact countenance no tradeoffs, they're merely rule-implying, not reason-implying, and that they confer no necessary normativity.

In Section 5, I respond to a few pressing objections and take stock of what to make of these startling implications for epistemic value and normativity. I suggest that they're in part a response to conceiving of epistemology's fundamental norm as an answer to epistemology's assumed fundamental question, "What should I believe?"⁸ Ultimately I sketch a proposal for a revised conception of the epistemic domain that loosens its grip on the fundamentality of that particular norm and recognizes teleological norms that provide recommendations for methods of inquiry or pursuit of significant truth or knowledge.

⁷ See for discussion Zimmerman 2015. At first glance, we might think this view prejudices us toward the family of teleological or consequentialist views. But in the paper I argue that it's best to avoid "value-grounding" characterizations of teleology (like for example Friedman's 2018) because both teleological and non-teleological views can be taken to be grounded in value, and instead think that it's the instrumentalist or promotional relation to value that best defines the teleological position. On my view, the normativity of deontological/non-teleological and teleological norms alike comes about in relation to the value that undergirds the domain. In the ethical domain we might take this to be the value (broadly construed) of pleasure, or a more nuanced notion of wellbeing, or the good will. In the epistemic domain, the veritist tells us to conceive of true belief as the fundamental epistemic value that is supposed to give rise to and explain the content of our epistemic norms.

⁸ (and as analogous to ethics' fundamental question: "What should I do?")

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