

On the Psychological Nature and Intersubjective Force of Epistemic Reasons

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Often discussions of the normative nature of epistemic behavior turn to questions about the psychological structure and causal import of epistemic reasons and how they acquire their normative force. I will sketch the rudiments of a new account of theoretical rationality that answers such questions more satisfactorily than existing theories. In Section I, I will critically evaluate two major views of theoretical rationality. In Section II, I will employ a distinction drawn in the ethical literature between internal and external reasons to get clear about what is at stake in an account of theoretical rationality. In Section III, I will motivate a category of reasons that goes beyond the internal/external distinction and suggest that they can provide the groundwork for a novel view of theoretical rationality because of their explanatory versatility. I will end by arguing that my account provides us with the resources to make sense of social epistemic practices like teaching, training, and advice-giving.

Section I – The competitors

Recently defended views on theoretical rationality can be roughly divided into two types: Instrumentalism¹ and purism². On instrumentalism, theoretical rationality is just a species of instrumental (i.e., means-ends) rationality. The idea is that assessments of what it is epistemically rational for one to believe will either implicitly or explicitly invoke the cognitive goals that she has. Instrumentalism appeals to naturalists, subjectivists, pragmatists, and neo-Humeans of various sorts. Purism is the position that theoretical rationality is not a species of instrumental rationality, but rather is rationality bound by categorical norms that are distinctly epistemic and are incommensurable with whatever moral, prudential, or aesthetic norms there may be.³ On this position, what it is rational to believe makes no reference to the content of an individual's goals. Purism is popular among those with an evidentialist bent, and this strikes me as no accident. The evidentialist wants evidence to have universally binding normative force, but also wants one's relation to the evidence to be internally accessible. One way to have both is to marry one's position on epistemic justification to one's view about epistemic rationality.⁴

1 What I am calling "instrumentalism" is what Thomas Kelly (2003) calls "the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality". My description of the view echoes his. Prominent contemporary proponents of this view are Richard Foley (1987), Hilary Kornblith (1993), and Bernard Williams (1981). Adam Leite, though not himself an instrumentalist, defends the tenability of instrumentalism in his (2007).

2 What I am calling "purism" is defended by Feldman (2000), Lam (2009), and Kelly (2003) and (2007).

3 Concerning the notion of the incommensurability of such norms, see Feldman (2000). The idea is roughly that epistemic norms apply in isolation from broader prudential considerations, and thus that there is no 'all things considered' mode of approach to substantive questions about what one ought to believe.

4 This is a big issue with an even bigger literature, so I will be forced to leave it almost completely alone. It should be clear enough anyway that which view of theoretical rationality is right will have massive consequences for the ethics of belief. For an interesting discussion of those consequences, see Huss (2009).

Each conception of theoretical rationality has its merits and demerits. First, instrumentalism has theoretical space to accommodate epistemic value pluralism, the view that we have multiple cognitive goals that are not inter-reducible and that normative epistemology should take this into account. An instrumentalist is in a position to say that one can be rational whether one pursues understanding, wisdom, coherence, systematicity, invulnerability to self-criticism, or whatever other epistemic values there may be, in forming one's beliefs.

A disadvantage of instrumentalism is that it can lead easily to subjectivism of a certain sort. This is because one's value selection is not criticizable under a purely instrumentalist framework.⁵ If you epistemically pursue coherence at the expense of systematicity, for instance, I can criticize *how* you go about doing so, but not *that* you go about doing so.⁶ On instrumentalism there would be no evaluable fact of the matter about what your epistemic values should be.⁷ This may not seem like a disadvantage to some, but I think most will want to say that if you have epistemic values outside a certain privileged range (and for veritists this range is very small indeed) then there is something epistemically wrong with you. Christine Korsgaard (2008) gives voice to this sort of worry as applied to practical reason:

[T]he instrumental principle cannot stand alone. Unless there are normative principles directing us to the adoption of certain ends, there can be no requirement to take the means to our ends. The familiar view that the instrumental principle is the only requirement of practical reason is incoherent (p. 32).

The point seems to be that for the very act of taking the means to one's ends to be positively evaluable at all, substantive normative claims must be made about the ends. The fact that instrumentalism *qua* instrumentalism is incapable of making such claims is troubling indeed.

The first advantage of purism is that it can explain the intersubjective force of epistemic reasons.⁸ That is to say, purism can explain why a reason for me to ϕ is a reason for anyone else in my position to ϕ . Clearly, epistemic reasons are trotted out in the course of arguments and treated as normatively significant for all parties involved. This is a deep and obvious fact about our

5 In fact, Warren Quinn thinks that it is an *essential* feature of instrumentalism that "a person's ultimate preferences are uncriticizable (except by reference to their compatibility)" (1993a: 238).

6 According to Quinn, the upshot of this is that if instrumentalism is true there would be no reason to pursue either the goals or any of the individual steps needed to reach them (1993a: 238). If this is so, it points to a deep problem for instrumentalism.

7 Quinn thinks that this sort of rationality, in exhibiting indifference to what one's ends are, is implicated by way of this indifference in the badness of the ends of which it allows pursuit (Quinn 1993b: 215). He cleverly distills his point as follows: "A rationality that is indifferent to the nastiness of our pleasures is to that extent a nasty form of rationality" (Quinn 1993b: 216).

8 "The intersubjectivity of epistemic reasons" is Kelly's (2003) phrase. In his paper, he gives a clever argument that instrumentalism cannot account for the intersubjectivity of epistemic reasons. I refer readers to his paper for an explanation of this rather intricate line.

experience, and it registers in our intuitive suspicion that epistemic reasons do in fact have (and ought to have) intersubjective force.⁹

Second, purism can explain how one can have reasons to adopt or change one's values. If one's values do not accord with the maxims of epistemic value (e.g., if one finds oneself inclined to believe *p* on insufficient evidence), then the fact that (on purism) it is irrational to do this will give one an impetus to reformat one's epistemic pursuits. I believe it is perfectly clear that one can have reasons to adopt or change one's values, but this may be due to certain cognitivist proclivities. The real point, I think, is that purism can explain this phenomenon if indeed it occurs, though it is not committed to its occurrence.

A major disadvantage of purism is that a strong case can be made that the type of reasons admissible on purist accounts *cannot* factor into a correct psychological or causal explanation of agents' epistemic behavior. This point requires elucidation, and in the next section we will be equipped with the resources to fill it out.

In this section I have briefly cited a few merits and demerits of both instrumentalism and purism. An account of theoretical rationality that brought together the advantages and eliminated the defects would clearly be preferable. With this in mind, let us do some conceptual groundwork.

Section II – Internal and External Reasons

To aid in laying the foundation for my view of theoretical rationality, I will employ some concepts and distinctions from the ethical literature. After all, instrumentalism and purism in epistemology have ethical analogs. I believe that the structure of moral reasons and the structure of epistemic reasons are similar, though this is not obvious and will require certain assumptions the defense of which is beyond the scope of this paper.

The primary distinction I will employ will be that drawn by Bernard Williams (1981) between internal and external reasons. Roughly, the difference is that internal reasons always make reference to an agent's actual desires, values, plans, and commitments, whereas external reasons never do. Though Williams discussed internal and external reasons in the moral domain, I believe that the distinction sheds light on the differences between instrumentalist and purist accounts of theoretical rationality. Instrumentalism treats all epistemic reasons as internal reasons. What an agent has reason to do will be a function of her actual desires, values, etc. By contrast, on purist views what an agent has reason to do will not make reference to such features of the agent. That is, epistemic reasons are external reasons on such views.

Recalling the claim in the previous section that the type of reasons admissible on purist accounts (external reasons) *cannot* factor into a correct psychological or causal explanation of agents' epistemic behavior, let us consider what Williams says about external reasons:

⁹ It may be easier to read "categorical force" here, though there are certain subtleties that would not survive the substitution.

The whole point of external reason statements is that they can be true independently of the agent's motivations. But nothing can explain an agent's (intentional) actions except something that motivates him so to act. So something else is needed besides the truth of the external reason statement to explain action, some psychological link; (1981: 107).

External reason claims, Williams says, if true at all are true independently of anyone's being motivated by them. But a correct explanation of an agent's behavior should feature reasons, and how could anything feature in the explanation that wasn't a part of the agent's motivational structure? The quick answer is that it cannot, but we will return to this later. The point for now is that purism appears to have a rather substantial explanatory problem.

To recap what we have said thus far, instrumentalism and purism are deadlocked for the following reasons: If epistemic reasons are internal (as on instrumentalism), then epistemic reasons would appear to have little to no intersubjective force. If epistemic reasons are external (as on purism), then their causal efficacy is mysterious at best. Both of these results are intuitively unacceptable. To make progress in assessing the nature and structure of epistemic reasons, we need to be able to move beyond this impasse.

Section III – Dispositional Reasons

I propose that the internal/external taxonomy is not the whole story. Rather, there are reasons of a special sort that take on the theoretical roles that internal and external reasons were supposed to play in instrumentalist and objectivist views, respectively. I shall call these *dispositional reasons*. If a plausible case can be made for the existence of such reasons, then internal and external reasons will be less explanatorily important, perhaps even explanatorily unnecessary, for our account of theoretical rationality. In this way, we will have rid ourselves of the shortcomings, yet brought together the advantages, of both instrumentalism and purism. Thus, in this section my aim will be to show what dispositional reasons are and what they can contribute to an account of epistemic rationality. I shall begin by discussing their ontological status, afterward describing their explanatory function.

A dispositional reason is a regulative connection between an agent and her latent or implicit disposition to be motivated by the furtherance of a certain end. It should be clear from even this brief description that I mean them to have both normative clout and motive force, at least potentially. After all, this hybrid nature of dispositional reasons is what will allow us the resources to circumvent the instrumentalist/purist dispute.

I take as my intuitive starting point the notion that most of our dispositions, and even perhaps some of the most important ones, are non-occurrent. To use a trivial example, I am strongly disposed to not be hit by a bus the next time I walk across a street. This is certainly not a disposition I consciously entertain in most of my deliberations, but is instead a latent component of my motivational structure. It is implied by the fact that I have this disposition that when I act in accordance with this disposition I am acting for the furtherance of a certain end, namely, the preservation of my life. This is the type of end I am interested in, one that is implied by the very

existence of dispositions common to human beings because of facts about their nature. This is the sort of end that Linda Zagzebski calls a “natural end” in her (2002). These are contrasted with “intentional ends”, which are “what we consciously aim at” (p. 140).

The prime example of such an end, for our purposes at least, is truth.¹⁰ Notice that the claim that one has reason to believe *p* because it is true invokes what has been traditionally labeled as an external reason. In fact, it is the primary (if not the only) reason that purists typically endorse. Instrumentalism falters, the purist contends, precisely because the former cannot accommodate *p*'s being true as a reason for believing *p*. The view I am suggesting can. As Hilary Kornblith (1993) has said, accuracy in belief-formation is necessary for reliably carrying out any means-ends reasoning at all. We all have projects that require deliberation and action, and believing truly is pre-supposed by one's very efforts. As Wedgwood (2002) and Zagzebski (2002) would put it, beliefs “aim at truth”. This is a slightly different point than Kornblith is making, but I think that the upshot for the current project is this: In actively seeking to further any of our ends as the sorts of agents that we are, we are implicitly valuing truth. Some agents consciously recognize this, and some do not. However, all whom we would call epistemic agents have a latent disposition to be motivated to believe truly.¹¹

Having briefly commented on the ontological status of dispositional reasons, I will now offer some remarks about the theoretical space I mean them to occupy. Dispositional reasons are deliberatively accessible from, though not an occurrent or operational element within, an agent's motivational structure. Strictly speaking, they are *included in* an agent's motivational structure, but for most agents they exist only latently or implicitly. Thus, they are distinct from what we have been calling internal and external reasons.

Like internal reasons, they are possibly accessed by agents from a first-person deliberative perspective. This requires explanation, for Aristotle famously says that “we deliberate not about ends, but about means” (*NE* 3.3,11).¹² This seems *prima facie* to present a challenge to how I am characterizing dispositional reasons, for I am claiming that they are in principle accessible from a first-person deliberative perspective.¹³ We should recognize, however, that Aristotle could mean a couple of different things by “deliberate not about”. On the one hand, he could mean “choose after reflection”. If this is what he intends, then his claim seems clearly right, but is unproblematic for my view. In fact, I think we will see later in this section that it supports my view. On the other hand, Aristotle could mean “consciously access and employ in the act of reasoning”. If this is what he intends, it does seem problematic for my view. I think, though, that there is a case to be made both that this is not what Aristotle intended, and that if it were it would render false his statement that we do not deliberate about ends. Let us look at the examples Aristotle employs in service of this point:

10 Zagzebski (2002) agrees that truth is, as she calls it, a natural end.

11 Consider, if possible, an individual who we would think lacks this disposition. I am inclined to agree with the Davidsonian line that we would not be able to relate to such an individual in anything like the typical discursive fashion. Thus, I suspect that we would not consider him or her an epistemic agent.

12 All quotations from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are from H. Rackham's translation.

13 Notice that I am not making any claims concerning when or even if they are deliberatively accessed.

A doctor does not deliberate whether he is to cure his patient, nor an orator whether he is to convince his audience, nor a statesman whether he is to secure good government, nor does anyone else debate about the end of his profession or calling; they take *some end* for granted, and consider how and by what means *it* can be achieved (*NE* 3.3,11, emphases added).

Surely Aristotle does not mean to say that doctors, orators, and statesmen do not consciously access and employ their ends in the act of reasoning. Rather, I think he means that *in the course of performing* the characteristic acts that they do (*qua* professionals of the sort that they are), they do not choose to be motivated by their ends. This is consistent with the first reading I suggested, which makes it unproblematic for my view.

I think this brief interaction with Aristotle's *Ethics* is instructive, for it has helped us to get clear what it would mean for an end to be deliberately accessible at all. My proposal is that to be deliberately accessible, the end need not be consciously chosen in direct fashion. Rather, it seems more plausible that in reflecting on the scope and character of our dispositions themselves, we could come to see the ends whose pursuit these very dispositions imply. To return to earlier examples, when I think about why I am disposed to not be hit by a bus when crossing the street, I can come to see that my disposition implies an end that I have – the preservation of my life. In a similar but more significant and more complicated way, when I take reflective stock of my belief-forming practices (perhaps diachronically and across domains), it is possible for me to become aware that my dispositions reveal truth as my end.

Here I want to reiterate the claim that though dispositional reasons are in principle deliberately accessible, they are not an occurrent or operational element within an agent's motivational structure. This is important, for if they were an occurrent or operational element within an agent's motivational structure they would be no different from what we have been calling "internal reasons". Part of my motivation for believing that there *is* a category of reasons distinct from both internal and external reasons is that it seems that much of the actual rationale for actions either occurs in or makes reference to features of an agent's cognitive apparatus that operate merely in the background. We have latent dispositions to be motivated in certain ways, so we might as well put them to explanatory use in an account of theoretical rationality.

It will help to be a bit more precise about what I mean by "occurrent" and "operational". The basic idea is that dispositional reasons are currently phenomenologically opaque to the agent or at least are not likely to be explicitly captured by an agent's listing her first-order desires, plans, etc. Rather, they are implicit in the very structure of the desires/plans and how the agent's desiring/planning faculties are constituted.

So far in this section, I have submitted that like internal reasons, dispositional reasons are possibly accessed by agents from a first-person deliberative perspective (though they are not an occurrent or operational element within agents' motivational structures). Because of this, they can factor easily into correct psychological and causal explanations of agents' epistemic behavior. Although the following is not an example of epistemic behavior, the point will be easily transferable. If I were ever asked (for some strange reason) why I did not cross the street

in front of an oncoming bus, my first response would be that I did not want to be hit by the bus. This would be my disposition, which I think would have been latent prior to my being prodded into offering it as an explanation for my behavior. To identify it as the relevant disposition is not, I think, tantamount to identifying it as the *efficient cause* of my not crossing the street. This is part of what I meant when I said that dispositional reasons are not operational elements within agents' motivational structures. If I were further pressed to give an account of the *disposition* I had just cited as a reason for my behavior, I would respond that I had been disposed in the way that I was because I had a certain end, the preservation of my life. Since this is the sort of end that is implied by a great many dispositions on the part of a great many agents, we would likely think it obnoxious and silly for our interrogator to fail to give this end weight. That is, if our interrogator evaluated us negatively for having this end and acting for its furtherance, we would be inclined to ignore him because something about his agency seems suspect. I take it that this would become yet more obvious if we were to consider examples involving other ends, like that of truth.

Thus far in this section, I have remarked on the ontology and functional importance of dispositional reasons, and have described the similarities they bear to internal reasons. At this point, we are able to see how dispositional reasons are like external reasons. Given what we have said so far, this point will not take very much work to make. I submit that like external reasons, dispositional reasons explain the possibility of the deliberative revision of values, preferences, plans, and commitments, and are intersubjectively evaluable.¹⁴ Furthermore, a plausible case can be made that they are shared by everyone we would intuitively consider a member of the epistemic community. This makes them at least seem as if they possess categorical force.

First, consider what it would mean for the deliberative revision of values etc. to be *impossible*. This would mean that one would simply find oneself motivated in certain ways, and would never be able to change this. I take it that such would only occur (under normal circumstances, and given the way we are constituted) if one's ends were not ever deliberatively accessible. However, we have seen already that certain ends *can be* deliberatively accessible to agents because what is latent can, through a certain amount of reflection, become occurrent. An agent can be brought to see what is motivating her, and can assess whether this coheres with the ends implied by the very ways in which her deliberative faculties themselves are structured. It is this assessment that can generate new dispositions to be motivated in new ways that track the revised values.

In addition, we have hinted previously at how my dispositional account can explain the intersubjective evaluability of epistemic reasons. As I remarked earlier, in actively seeking to further any of our ends as the sorts of agents that we are, we are implicitly valuing truth. Different epistemic agents can be brought to see this to differing degrees. If it is the case that any act of reasoning at all requires a commitment to the end of truth, or at least that beliefs aim at truth, it would seem unproblematic to say that epistemic agents could be legitimately critiqued from a first-person, second-person, or third-person standpoint. This is what is needed to explain how epistemic reasons could have the intersubjective force that they intuitively appear to.

¹⁴ Actually, I only mean to imply here that external reasons are *supposed* to be able to do this. I think instrumental reasons *actually* do, but I am not sure that external reasons enjoy the same success. I will not discuss this here, though, as my argument does not require it.

One of the most interesting advantages of the theory I have sketched is that it allows us to make sense of the social epistemic practices of teaching, training, and advice-giving better than we could were we to countenance internal or external reasons only.¹⁵ First, these practices seem to assume that reasons can (eventually) be available to agents. When a master security consultant is training her protégé, she wants the protégé, as a direct result of the training, to one day be able to access on her own the same sorts of reasons that she does for forming judgments of the vocationally relevant sort. If all the relevant reasons were external reasons, this would seem hopeless. It would not be psychologically feasible for the protégé to rationally act in the desired ways without there being some sort of bridge between whatever external reasons might be relevant and her own internal, motivationally operative, reasons.

However, the very fact that we have practices of teaching, training, and advice-giving is good evidence that we think having internal reasons is not good enough for being a rational agent. It is precisely because one knows one's internal reasons might not line up with one's external reasons that one feels the need for instruction, training, and advice, but the only thing one can do is connect with reasons one already has, step by step. One can only approach rationality from one's own starting point, but we still want to affirm that each step along the way has normative status. This is precisely the sort of thing that my dispositional account is designed to explain.

Consider the following example, which I hope will render more perspicuous the way my account is supposed to bear on the practices of teaching, training, and advice-giving: Suppose a student in your logic class affirms the consequent, but you are eventually able to teach him that this is bad. Clearly, the student had a disposition to be motivated in a certain way. If the student were absolutely unable to get it into his head that affirming the consequent is bad (i.e., if he just did not have the latent disposition to be motivated in a non-consequent-affirming way), then he is not privy to the intersubjective force of epistemic reasons, and we should just accept this. The fact that we often tend to blame teachers for students' failures to learn is actually evidence that we believe most if not all students have latent dispositions to be motivated in certain ways, and furthermore that we believe that these dispositions carry normative weight.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, I have outlined two competing views of theoretical rationality, instrumentalism and purism, and have cited advantages and disadvantages of each. To gain perspective on these views, I imported a distinction from the ethical literature between internal and external reasons. After this, I introduced a new category of reasons, dispositional reasons, that I believe are the explanatory key to a more plausible view of theoretical rationality than those that are currently available. We have seen that dispositional reasons are like internal reasons in how they are psychologically and causally situated, and like external reasons in their content and intersubjective import, or scope of applicability. In addition, I have argued that dispositional reasons can explain the significance of social epistemic practices like teaching, training, and advice-giving. Given that my dispositional account captures the advantages of instrumentalism

¹⁵ Much of what I have to say about this is due to conversations I have had with Linda Zagzebski regarding the present account.

and purism with the disadvantages of neither, I believe it is to be preferred over each of these as an explanation of the nature and force of epistemic reasons.

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