

The Construction of Epistemic Normativity

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Abstract

This paper aims to solve a puzzle for instrumental conceptions of epistemic normativity. The puzzle is this: if the usefulness of epistemic norms explains their normative grip on us, why does it seem improper to violate these norms even when doing so would benefit us? To solve this puzzle, we argue that epistemic instrumentalists must adopt a more social approach to normativity. In particular, they should not account for the nature of epistemic normativity by appealing to the goals of individual agents. Rather, they should appeal to norms or rules of inquiry that serve our collective goals. We argue that epistemic normativity grows out of our need to promote a deep kind of coordination in our basic epistemic practices. By subscribing to an appropriate system of norms, we can coordinate epistemic rule-following across the community. This makes testimony more trustworthy and reliable. This account not only solves a puzzle about epistemic instrumentalism but also sheds new light on the foundations of normativity and emphasizes the need for a truly social epistemology.

No society can get by...with a purely instrumental conception of the values of truth.

— Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness*

Introduction

We live by a variety of epistemic norms. These norms tell us how we ought to form and revise our beliefs. For example, we say things such as, “You shouldn’t believe everything you read on the internet,” “You ought to trust the experts,” “You should have known the jury would find him guilty,” “You had no right to believe the ship was seaworthy,” “Don’t be so dogmatic,” “You ought to be more open-minded,” “You shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” “Trust your instincts,” and so forth. As these examples show, our ordinary doxastic practices are infused with normative judgments. We criticize people who *believe badly* and encourage them to *believe responsibly*.¹

Philosophers also think and talk about epistemic norms, albeit of a more abstract variety. They say things like, “If it visually seems to you that p , then you are prima facie rationally permitted to believe that p ,” “You should match the level of credibility that you assign to a

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1. We will use ‘believe badly’ to refer to culpable violations of epistemic norms and ‘believe responsibly’ to refer to beliefs that comply with epistemic norms.

speaker to the evidence that they are telling the truth,” “You have reason to avoid believing things you recognize to be inconsistent,” “You should believe only what is supported by your other beliefs,” “You should only believe what your evidence supports,” “Only believe what you know,” and so on.²

How should we account for the nature of these norms? What explains why we ought to believe certain things but shouldn’t believe other things? According to one popular view, epistemic normativity is a species of instrumental normativity: the *usefulness* of epistemic norms is what explains their normative force (e.g., Foley 1987; Laudan 1990; Maffie 1990; Heil 1992; Kornblith 1993; Nozick 1993; Leite 2007; Schroeder 2007). If this view is correct, then we ought to—or have a reason to—adhere to epistemic norms because doing so will help us achieve our goals.³

Although we are sympathetic with epistemic instrumentalism, this view faces a well-known challenge. The challenge is to explain why, on the one hand, the usefulness of epistemic norms is what grounds their normativity and yet, on the other hand, it seems improper to violate these norms even when doing so would benefit us. To bring this objection into focus, consider someone who acquires strong evidence that his wife is having an affair, but who continues to believe she is faithful because it benefits him to do so. Intuitively, this person is not believing *as he (epistemically) ought*. What explains this fact? The stubborn husband does not seem to escape his epistemic duty even though it would benefit him to believe against the evidence. This suggests that instrumentalism is the wrong account of epistemic normativity, as it seems to give the contrary verdict.

In this paper, we try to respond to this challenge for instrumental conceptions of epistemic normativity. To answer the challenge, we argue that epistemic instrumentalists must adopt a more social approach to normativity. In particular, they should not account for the nature of epistemic normativity by appealing to the goals of *individual* agents. Rather, they should appeal to norms or rules of inquiry that serve our *collective* goals. We call this view *social epistemic instrumentalism*.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In §1, we outline epistemic instrumentalism in more detail as well as the most persuasive challenge to this view. In §2, we consider the most prominent instrumentalist responses to this challenge and argue that they fail. In §3–4, we develop our own version of epistemic instrumentalism and explain how it resolves this challenge. In §5, we offer concluding remarks.

1 Epistemic Instrumentalism and Its Critics

What can be said in favor of epistemic instrumentalism? Why should we think the authority of epistemic norms is best explained in terms of their practical utility?

2. These norms are defended, respectively, by Boghossian (2008), Conee and Feldman (2004), Fricker (2007), Harman (1986), Quine and Ullian (1970), and Williamson (2000).

3. In philosophy, it has become increasingly common to understand normative claims as claims about ‘reasons.’ We will sometimes use this vocabulary, especially when describing the views of others who use reasons-talk; however, we will primarily speak in terms of epistemic ‘norms,’ ‘oughts,’ and ‘obligations.’ The reason for this will become clear in §4, where we question the idea that we should understand normative claims in terms of reasons.

First, it is undeniable that conforming to epistemic norms *is* useful (Laudan 1990; Williams 2002; Alston 2005; Dyke 2021; Willoughby 2022). If we believe what the evidence supports, we are more likely to have accurate representations of the world, which promotes the functioning of nearly every human endeavor.⁴ Even non-instrumentalists tend to agree with this point. Second, it is easy to appreciate *why* the usefulness of epistemic norms might explain their normative force: we ought to conform to epistemic norms because it is practically advantageous to do so. Instrumentalism thus provides a straightforward reason to believe what the evidence supports, to avoid wishful thinking, and to form one’s beliefs in epistemically responsible ways. The non-instrumentalist, by contrast, cannot explain the normativity of epistemic norms by appealing to their utility. It is a *brutely epistemic* normative truth that one ought to believe in accordance with the evidence. The source of normativity, according to the non-instrumentalist, is some kind of *sui generis* normativity (Kelly 2003; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 1998; Wedgwood 2007).⁵

1.1 *The Main Challenge to Instrumentalism*

In his foundational critique of epistemic instrumentalism, Kelly (2003) argues that “what a person has reason to believe [or epistemically ought to believe] does not seem to depend on the content of his or her goals in the way that one would expect if the instrumentalist conception were correct” (p. 621). If the usefulness of epistemic norms explains their normativity, then the practical benefits of believing (or not believing) should presumably be relevant to whether an agent is obligated to comply with epistemic norms. Yet these norms seem to apply to agents *regardless of the goals they happen to hold*. As Railton (2003) puts it, “there are certain standards of belief, standards we should follow, even when they lead us to conclusions we don’t like” (p. 294). Our personal interests are simply irrelevant to our epistemic obligations.

To make this point vivid, consider the following examples:

Unfaithful Spouse. Alexei loves his wife Anna and values his marriage as highly as he values anything. He would be destroyed if they divorced. But he comes across very good evidence which indicates that Anna is having an affair. Alexei knows himself and his dispositions, and he knows that if he does not believe that Anna is faithful to him, he will not be able to prevent himself from behaving coldly towards her, which would precipitate a divorce. So, he

4. This is not to say that false beliefs are never useful. As Stich (1990) and Hazlett (2013) argue, false beliefs may sometimes promote our well-being. Nevertheless, this fact should not deter us from accepting the claim that true belief is usually better than ignorance. For a defense of this claim, see Foley (1987, p. 224), Craig (1990, pp. 132–3), Kornblith (1993, p. 371), Zagzebski (1996, p. 200), Lynch (2004, p. 48), Frankfurt (2006, pp. 15–16), Street (2009, p. 235), and Cowie (2014, p. 4007).

5. To save space, we have set aside a third view of epistemic normativity, called ‘constitutivism.’ According to constitutivists, epistemic norms necessarily have normative authority because belief constitutively aims at truth (see Côté-Bouchard 2016 for a discussion). One of the authors has elsewhere argued that belief does not necessarily aim at truth (Hannon and Ridder 2021); we also agree with Papineau (1999) and Côté-Bouchard (2016) that constitutivism is not a promising strategy for grounding epistemic normativity. That said, our argument needn’t presume that constitutivism is false. Our aim is to develop a version of epistemic instrumentalism that escapes the most common and persuasive objections to this view; we do not aim to demonstrate that instrumentalism is more plausible than constitutivism.

convinces himself that Anna is faithful to him.⁶

Spoiler Alert. Max missed the finale of his favorite television series, which aired last night. The episode revealed that Lucia, Max’s favorite character, ends up dying. Given his passion for the show, Max really wants to avoid learning this fact before he watches the rerun tonight after work. But to his dismay, one of his colleagues comes up to him in the morning shouting, “I knew it! I told you Lucia would die!”⁷

In these cases (and many others), epistemic and practical considerations pull in opposite directions. Alexei and Max have strong practical reasons for belief, but this does not give them *epistemic* reasons for belief. Although it is beneficial for them to believe against the evidence, this fact has no bearing on whether they *epistemically ought* to have such a belief. In fact, it is *epistemically irrational* to believe what goes against the evidence, even when it is practically advantageous to do so.

This seems incompatible with instrumentalism. According to the instrumentalist, facts about what we epistemically ought to believe—or what counts as an epistemic reason to believe—obtain at least partly in virtue of our goals or desires. Yet, as the above cases show, epistemic norms do not merely tell us how to form responsible beliefs *insofar as doing so is in our interest*. These norms apply to everyone, including those who do not care to discover the truth.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of this objection.⁸ It has been called the “too few reasons” objection (Schroeder 2007; Côté-Bouchard 2015), the “argument from the coherence of truth-avoidance” (Lockard 2013), the “universality challenge” (Sharadin 2018), the “problem of pointless or counterproductive beliefs” (Paakkunainen 2018), and the problem of “fickle reasons” (Willoughby 2022). Whatever we call it, the worry for instrumentalism is essentially this: *epistemic norms seem to have normative force even when conforming to them does not appear to promote one’s goals*. Put another way, we do not treat agents as able to dodge their epistemic obligations by citing their indifference to truth. That would make epistemic normativity too much a matter of personal preference. The normative force of epistemic norms seems to be *universal*.

The epistemic instrumentalist thus faces a dilemma:

The Instrumentalist’s Dilemma

Either conforming to epistemic norms is always useful or it is not. *The first horn:* If it is always useful to conform to epistemic norms, then the instrumentalist owes us an explanation for why it sometimes seems practically disadvantageous to conform to these norms. *The second horn:* If it is *not* always useful to conform to epistemic norms, then the instrumentalist must explain why epistemic norms seem to have universal normative force.

6. This is a modified example from Heil (1992, p. 50).

7. This is a modified example from Côté-Bouchard (2015), who is paraphrasing Kelly (2003).

8. For a discussion of this objection, see Côté-Bouchard (2015), Cuneo (2007), Dyke (2021), Feldman (2000), Grimm (2009), Kelly (2003), Kornblith (1993), Leite (2007), Lockard (2013), Owens (2003), Paakkunainen (2018), Papineau (1999), Schroeder (2007), Shah (2003), Sharadin (2018), Siegel (1996), Steglich-Petersen (2018), and Willoughby (2022).

In response to this dilemma, instrumentalists commonly take the first horn. They claim that epistemic norms exert universal normative force because it is *always* useful to conform to them. We will consider this view in §2 and ultimately reject it. Our goal in this paper is to explain why instrumentalists should instead take the second horn of the dilemma. This requires the instrumentalist to explain why epistemic normativity appears to be universal even when conforming to epistemic norms does not serve one’s practical goals. We will provide such an explanation in §3–4 of this paper. Before turning to our view, however, it will be instructive to look at where previous defenses of instrumentalism go wrong. In addition, we’ll see why the option of taking the second horn has been overlooked, namely because previous defenses of instrumentalism have taken an overly individualist approach to epistemic normativity.

2 Universal Epistemic Instrumentalism

In response to the Instrumentalist’s Dilemma, instrumentalists commonly argue that conforming to epistemic norms is *always* useful or valuable, despite appearances to the contrary.⁹ There are at least two ways to argue for this view. According to the first, it is always in an agent’s interest to believe the truth, for truth always has intrinsic value. According to the second, conforming to epistemic norms is required to achieve the rest of our aims, regardless of what those aims are. On both approaches, putative counterexamples such as *Unfaithful Spouse* and *Spoiler Alert* fail because they wrongly assume (or unfairly stipulate) that it is in the agent’s best interest to violate epistemic norms. However, we’ll argue that there are good reasons to reject these two approaches. Instead, one ought to accept the description of the cases and explain why epistemic norms are still in force, despite the fact that following them does not always benefit specific individuals at the time.

2.1 Truth as a Universal Goal

First, consider the view that true belief always has some *intrinsic* value (Kvanvig 2003; Lynch 2004). On this view, true beliefs always have *pro tanto* value, i.e., there is always some value in having true beliefs and avoiding false ones. Thus, one always has an epistemic reason to follow epistemic norms, since they promote an intrinsically valuable good.

This view is implausible for a number of reasons. First, philosophers have argued that many truths seem to have *no* value or are positively *disvaluable* (Goldman 1999; Grimm 2009; Kelly 2003; Piller 2009). While we may value some truths for their own sake, it is unclear why truth would *always* be valuable. Second, it is unlikely there will be some kind of truth goal that *all* agents desire to achieve. As Bondy (2017) writes, “it seems dogmatic and a little bit desperate to claim that everyone really does value having any given true belief, at least a little bit, just as long as it is true” (p. 115). More generally, it is implausible that there is *any* veristic or cognitive goal that all humans share (Kelly 2003; Kornblith 1993).

9. Sharadin (2018) and Willoughby (2022) are exceptions.

2.2 Universal Epistemic Instrumentalism

The second view claims that conforming to epistemic norms is required to achieve the rest of our aims, regardless of what those aims are. This approach is *prima facie* more promising, since it avoids implausibly positing a universal cognitive goal; instead, it claims that *any* of our diverse ends will always be promoted by conforming to epistemic norms. This view is often called ‘universal epistemic instrumentalism,’ and it is most famously defended by Kornblith (1993).¹⁰ For ease of exposition, we will focus primarily on Kornblith’s account, but the objections to his view will apply to similar defenses of epistemic instrumentalism.

Instead of attempting to ground epistemic normativity in any *particular* goal that all people share (e.g., true belief), Kornblith argues that agents must engage in truth-conducive belief-forming practices because doing so will help them to achieve *whatever they desire*. The fact that we have desires *at all* is what “provides us with a reason to care about the truth whatever we may otherwise care about” (Kornblith 1993, p. 372). Kornblith’s argument is essentially this: whatever exactly one’s particular practical interests are, one will pursue these goals more effectively if one’s beliefs are reasonable and reliable, and indeed if one is acting on true belief rather than false belief. Thus, we always have epistemic reasons to conform to epistemic norms.

Despite the initial attractions of this view, we do not find it very plausible.¹¹ Indeed, it suffers from similar objections as above. While it is true that everyone has a *general* practical interest in believing truths, it is not *always* in our practical interest to believe the truth. Many truths are completely uninteresting to us and have no practical bearing on anything that matters to us. Moreover, there are numerous situations where flouting epistemic norms would promote one’s own interest, given one’s aims.¹² For Kornblith’s defense to succeed, it must be true that we have an interest in acquiring a belief in *any* given truth, which seems improbable. Consider someone who arbitrarily forms the belief that the number of stars is even or that the number of blades of grass in Central Park is 1,765,920, without any evidence or reasoning. We want to be able to criticize this agent for violating epistemic norms. However, in order to do so on Kornblith’s account, we must be able to tell some story about why the truth about the number of stars or blades of grass bears on something the agent cares about. For example, it would need to bear on a goal one has, such as buying a new sweater or taking a vacation (McPherson 2012). It is highly dubious that such a story can be told, or that it is relevant for explaining why an agent violated an epistemic norm. It is therefore unlikely that we can ground epistemic normativity in the idea that *any* false belief can lead to a series of errors that ultimately frustrate one’s goals or desires. The authority of epistemic norms does not seem purely instrumental in the way Kornblith describes.

More recent defenses of universal epistemic instrumentalism do not fare much better. For

10. This view is also defended by Côté-Bouchard (2015), Foley (1987), Heil (1992), Leite (2007), and Schroeder (2007).

11. For criticisms of universal epistemic instrumentalism, see Dyke (2021), Lockard (2013), Sharadin (2018), and Willoughby (2022).

12. See Dyke (2021, pp. 885–6) for some compelling examples.

example, some have argued that we should interpret Kornblith's view as a *rule-based* rather than *case-based* theory (see Côté-Bouchard 2015; Leite 2007). The case-based theory says that in every particular case where an agent has an evidential reason to ϕ , *that particular ϕ -ing* would promote a goal the agent has. According to the rule-based theory, by contrast, it is enough to show that *systematically* following evidential reasons (e.g., as a general rule or policy) would promote any particular agent's ends. The rule-based theory allows for particular cases in which obeying an evidential 'ought' does not promote any of one's ends, yet the agent continues to have genuinely normative reasons to believe what the evidence supports because evidential reasons inherit their normative force from the fact that the rule generally supports one's goals.

The problem with this view is that it succumbs to familiar worries about *rule fetishism* (Smart 1956). Although the rules may be generally reliable, it is unclear why one would have a genuinely normative reason to follow the rule in a situation where one reasonably believes the rule does nothing to support anyone's end. (It would be akin to arguing that one has a genuinely normative reason to follow a map that one reasonably believes will lead one astray, simply because the map is typically reliable.) However, once we allow such exceptions, the rule-based view threatens to collapse into the case-based view.

Finally, the proponent of universal epistemic instrumentalism might bite the bullet, claiming that our epistemic reasons for belief simply go away (or lose their force) when the agent has a strong practical interest to believe against the evidence. But this does not respect our intuitions about the cases. A mother who has much to gain from believing that her son is innocent of a crime is nevertheless violating an *epistemic* obligation by adopting a belief that is plainly contrary to her evidence. We can still epistemically criticize agents who have very weighty practical reasons to believe irresponsibly. Any reasonable defense of epistemic instrumentalism should explain this fact.

2.3 *An Alternative Approach*

In light of these objections, one might reject epistemic instrumentalism in favor of *non-instrumentalism*.¹³ According to non-instrumentalists, the practical value of true belief is not what explains why we ought to believe responsibly. The non-instrumentalist acknowledges that satisfying our epistemic obligations does generally contribute to achieving our goals, but this practical consideration is not what grounds the normative force of these epistemic 'oughts.' We have a reason to believe responsibly *irrespective of whether it is practically useful to do so*.

The main advantage of non-instrumentalism is that it vindicates the perceived universal authority of epistemic norms. As shown by examples such as *Unfaithful Spouse* and *Spoiler Alert*, what one epistemically ought to believe does not depend on how useful it is to believe responsibly. The usefulness of conforming to epistemic norms thus seems to give a poor foundation to explain the purported fact that epistemic norms have normative force *always and everywhere*. Our practice of evaluating the beliefs of others and ourselves is insensitive to variations in practical interests.

13. This view is sometimes called 'intrinsicist' (see Cowie 2014; Sharadin 2018), but we call it 'non-instrumentalism.' It is defended by Berker (2013), Cuneo (2007), and Kelly (2003), among others.

The non-instrumentalist may therefore appear to have the upper hand. But we will argue that this appearance is illusory. The main challenge for the instrumentalist is to explain why epistemic norms appear to have authority or normative force even when conforming to these norms does not promote one's interests or goals. We believe the instrumentalist can meet this challenge.

To do so, we must first recognize a common flaw that is shared by previous versions of instrumentalism, namely: they focus on the ways that epistemic norms promote *the particular end(s) of some individual agent*. For example, Kornblith (1993) and Schroeder (2007) argue that any individual's arbitrarily chosen end will always be promoted by conforming to epistemic norms, whereas Côté-Bouchard (2015) and Foley (1987) argue that all people share some universal end that is always promoted by conformity to epistemic norms. In both cases, the focus is on how conforming is useful *to some particular agent*. The following quotations illustrate how common it is to characterize epistemic instrumentalism in individualistic terms:

“On an instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality, facts about what *I* have reason to believe are contingent on *my* possessing certain goals.” (Kelly 2003, 621, emphasis added)

“[E]pistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality: a belief is epistemically rational when (and because) holding it is instrumentally rational *given one's cognitive or epistemic goals*.” (Leite 2007, 456, emphasis added)

“[I]t is important to note that the aims, interests, and goals invoked by the instrumentalists are intentional, *person-level goals had by agents*.” (Buckley 2020, 9294, emphasis added)

This reflects too individualistic an epistemology. We should not account for the nature of epistemic normativity by appealing to the specific goals of individual agents, as this locates the basis of normativity in the wrong place. It also invites compelling objections to epistemic instrumentalism. By tying normativity to the cares and concerns of particular individuals, we implausibly render the force of these norms hostage to the whims of individual agents (see Chrisman 2022, p. 122).

In the next section, we will argue that we should trace the source of normativity to the goals of social collectives, not individuals. On this view, epistemic norms are instrumentally rational rules that serve the aims held by *communities*.¹⁴ We believe this theory best explains why epistemic normativity extends beyond the goals or desires of any specific individuals. It is the social utility of epistemic norms that explains why they have a grip on us. Thus, we will take up the second horn of the Instrumentalist's Dilemma (see §1.1). Instead of arguing that it is always useful to conform to epistemic norms, we will explain why epistemic norms seem to have normative force even when they do not serve an agent's individual goals, and even when the individual doesn't have a reason to comply with them (see §4). This discharges the explanatory burden in a more attractive way than the alternatives—or so we will argue.

14. Dyke (2021) makes a similar point, but we challenge her view in §4.4.

3 A Social Theory of Epistemic Normativity

In this section, we will outline what we regard as the most defensible version of epistemic instrumentalism. Here is a key premise in our overall argument:

The coordinative function of epistemic norms

Epistemic norms are social norms that arise to solve certain coordination problems for epistemically interdependent humans. In particular, we use norms to coordinate epistemic rule-following across the community in order to make testimony more trustworthy and reliable.¹⁵

This hypothesis is rooted in four basic ideas. First, we humans have a general need to form true beliefs and avoid false beliefs about the world. Second, we must rely on others to realize the benefits of pooling and sharing information. Third, we must coordinate epistemic rule-following across the community in order to make testimony more trustworthy. Fourth, to promote this kind of coordination, we must subscribe to an appropriate system of epistemic norms. On the basis of these four ideas, we'll argue for the following thesis: our collective need to subscribe to a system of epistemic norms is what gives rise to the seemingly universal force of epistemic normativity. This is only a brief sketch of our argument; the rest of this paper will develop and defend it.¹⁶

3.1 Our Epistemic Predicament

To meet our basic needs and achieve our goals, we need true beliefs. The functioning of nearly every human endeavor depends on having reasonably accurate representations of the world. This is not to imply that seeking the truth is always motivated by practical concerns, that false beliefs are never useful, or that truth is valuable only for the purpose of survival. We may want to know some things simply to satisfy our natural curiosity; false beliefs are sometimes biologically or psychologically adaptive; and accuracy is valuable not merely for survival but also because it allows us to pursue our distinctive conceptions of human flourishing. The point we want to emphasize, however, is that true beliefs are typically necessary to successfully navigate the world, at least in the long run. We therefore have a need to form true beliefs and avoid error.

15. See Dogramaci (2012).

16. There is already some precedent for the idea that epistemic norms are inherently social in this way. For example, Craig (1990) provides a social-functional account of the value of epistemic discourse; Gibbard (1990) says the function of evaluative discourse is to foster coordination; Williams (2002) argues that truth is socially valuable and thus we have a collective interest in cultivating the virtues of truthfulness; Grimm (2009) claims that we must adopt a more social view of the value of truth to make sense of our epistemically evaluative practices; Dogramaci (2012, 2015) argues that our practice of epistemic evaluation is instrumentally valuable for helping us get true beliefs; Graham (2015) and Henderson (2020) argue that epistemic norms are fundamentally social norms that solve coordination problems; Reed (2018) explains epistemic normativity as arising from our commitment to a social practice that is rooted in our need to share information; Dyke (2021) argues that our epistemic reasons are collective practical reasons; McCormick (2021) claims that our epistemic expectations are tied to social expectations; and Chrisman (2022) develops an account of the value of epistemic norm-compliance that is based on our membership in a community. In several publications over the last 10 years, one of us has also argued that our epistemic concepts, norms, and practices are best understood in terms of their social function or pragmatic purposes (e.g., Hannon 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019a,b).

To increase our stock of knowledge, we must rely on others. As fallible creatures with limited access to information, we cannot discover everything we want to know on our own. We need others to fill in the blanks. This encourages us to realize the benefits of pooling and sharing information. We share a stock of beliefs, coordinate in ongoing inquiries, and leverage our common knowledge. This improves our ability to navigate the world and achieve our goals, but it also exposes us to risk. When we rely on others, we put our welfare in their hands. We therefore want others to form their beliefs in responsible ways, otherwise it would be imprudent to trust their testimony. But how do we get others to believe responsibly? Let's call this 'the problem of irresponsible believers.'

In daily life, there are many temptations to believe irresponsibly. For example, the truth is sometimes complex or difficult to find, so we may be tempted to settle for less than adequate evidence. At other times, we may be tempted to engage in self-deception or wishful thinking—to let our wishes become beliefs. (Bernard Williams calls these 'external' and 'internal' sources of error, respectively.) When people succumb to these temptations, they become poor contributors to the general stock of information. They pollute the *epistemic commons*. It is crucial that we outsource our cognizing only if we can trust that others are forming, revising, and maintaining their beliefs in epistemically responsible ways. Thus, we must solve the problem of irresponsible believers. How can we accomplish this?

3.2 *The Normative Solution*

To make testimony more trustworthy and reliable, we must coordinate epistemic rule-following across the community. Here we find it fruitful to draw on work by Dogramaci (2012, 2015), who argues that we must coordinate our belief-forming rules to promote reliable testimony. Dogramaci writes,

[B]y actively pressuring everyone to share belief-forming rules, we make testimony trustworthy in our epistemic community. Because we are each actively and constantly using 'rational' [and other normative judgments about belief] in a way that promotes that coordination, we can easily recognize that we are all following the same rules. And if we can recognize such coordination, then we have reason to trust each other's testimony. (Dogramaci 2012, p. 524)

The general idea is that we have a collective interest in encouraging others to form their beliefs in ways that are generally truth-conducive. To do this, we must subscribe to appropriate systems of norms. By sharing epistemic norms, we are able to cope with the problem of irresponsible believers. This allows us to extend our epistemic reach. When we play by the same set of epistemic rules, we are able to share beliefs without sharing all our evidence. As Dogramaci (2012) writes, "when we share rules, I can trust that *you will* draw the same conclusion from an evidential basis that *I would*" (524). If we did not coordinate our belief-forming rules, it would be difficult to collect every individual's evidence into a larger communal pool.

To bring this point into clearer view, imagine a community that does *not* share the same stock of epistemic rules. In such a community, we could not assume that any testimony we received would reflect an epistemic procedure that we endorsed. This would threaten our ability to be epistemically interdependent. In an epistemically fragmented community, we

would tend to selectively rely on those others who seem to share our ‘epistemic normative sensibilities’ (i.e., the rules by which we regulate our epistemic practices).¹⁷ This would radically shrink the set of people on whom we could reasonably rely as a trusted source of information. It would “compromise the quality of one’s own epistemic situation” to rely on others with radically different epistemic normative sensibilities (Henderson 2020, p. 285). It is therefore unsurprising that individuals come to join in a kind of cooperative evaluation of the worthiness of beliefs. Without a practice whereby we regulate the forming, revising, and maintaining of belief, we could not reasonably trust each other.

3.3 *Epistemology as Social Technology*

This view takes epistemic normativity to be a *problem-solving device*. We subscribe to a normative system involving epistemic rules as a coordinative tool for achieving our collective ends. This idea is the epistemic analogue of a moral theory proposed by J. L. Mackie. Following Hobbes and Hume, Mackie (1977) argues that morality is a “device” needed to solve “the problem” faced by humans because of “certain contingent features of the human condition” (p. 121).¹⁸ An analogous point can be made about epistemic norms: they come into existence for the same purpose as practical tools, namely, to help us cope with the world. (And we evaluate these norms not in terms of their representational accuracy but rather their *usefulness*. The question ‘Are these the *true* norms?’ is misguided.) This view accounts for the authority of epistemic norms in a broadly naturalistic manner, which allows us to secure the central normative role of epistemic discourse without appealing to irreducibly normative epistemic concepts or properties.

If this account is right, then epistemic normativity is a *cultural achievement*. Our epistemic duties are rooted in human concerns and values. Although many find this idea unpalatable, we are happy to endorse it.¹⁹ Epistemic normativity does not consist in obedience to eternal, ahistorical standards. Rather, we create and maintain epistemic normativity together by participating in a practice of mutual accountability. On this picture, epistemic normativity grows out of our needs and social conditions. This means that epistemic norms are human inventions, but not arbitrary ones. They are grounded in facts about ways to ameliorate certain generic problems faced by virtually all humans in the ordinary circumstances of life.²⁰

3.4 *Epistemic Accountability*

To cooperate and flourish as a species, it is vital that we collectively subscribe to a system of epistemic norms. It is therefore crucial that others abide by such norms. But how do we encourage everyone to play by the same epistemic rules?

17. We borrow the term ‘epistemic normative sensibilities’ from Henderson (2020).

18. Copp (2009) generalizes this theory to all of normativity.

19. Many think that anything less than an objective, non-instrumental foundation for our epistemic (and moral) obligations would be too flimsy to support their normative weight. In §4, we will argue that the social foundation of our epistemic commitments is sturdy enough to bear the weight of their normativity.

20. There is no guarantee that these norms are not ultimately in tension. As a human construction, they are liable to imperfection. Thus, there may be epistemic dilemmas (see Hughes 2019).

We acquire much of our epistemic normative sensibilities by interacting with others. It is through the influence of our parents, peers, and teachers that we learn the epistemic norms and standards of those in our community. As Henderson (2020) writes, “agents not only acquire information from others” but also “learn from others how to inquire” (286). This is achieved in several ways. Sometimes we learn via explicit instruction. For example, we articulate rules of epistemic practice such as, “You need to provide more evidence for this.” We also learn by example, where this involves not just observing others but joining them in a collective practice that they model for us. As a result of socialization and acculturation, we come to regulate our belief-forming and updating practices.

We also use sanctions to inculcate these epistemic normative sensibilities in others. Here we use ‘sanction’ broadly for any kind of potentially effective positive or negative response to a perceived norm violation (cf. Kauppinen 2018, p. 4). For example, we let others know when they have not formed their beliefs correctly, and we marginalize those who refuse to conform. When someone violates an epistemic norm, we no longer trust their testimony, or we subtract credibility points from them. As Fricker (2007)’s work on epistemic injustice shows, the loss of credibility is undesirable and harmful for a person, and it therefore can function as a form of punishment. Although Fricker is focused primarily on epistemic injustices, a lack of credibility has many potentially bad consequences whether those judgments are unjust or not.²¹

To promote epistemic rule-following, we also use epistemic language to perform normative work for us. We call people ‘irrational’ or ‘unjustified’ when they believe irresponsibly, and we call them ‘rational’ or ‘justified’ when they follow the endorsed rules (Dogramaci 2012). Likewise, we tell people they ‘ought’ to believe some things and ‘shouldn’t’ believe other things. We criticize them for believing badly and we praise them for believing responsibly. These judgments about belief serve a vital role in our epistemic economy: they bring about changes in the epistemic rule-following behavior of others. In this way, our practice of epistemic evaluation is a powerful tool to influence our audience. By holding each other mutually accountable to a set of epistemic standards, we promote coordination among our belief-forming rules.

3.5 *Returning to the Challenge for Instrumentalism*

Now let’s return to the main challenge for epistemic instrumentalism. The challenge was to explain how the normativity in question does not depend on the practical benefits of belief even though the usefulness of epistemic norms is what grounds their normative force. The worry for instrumentalism is that usefulness is too capricious a property to ground the authority of epistemic normativity.

We hope it is becoming clear how a social version of epistemic instrumentalism can answer this challenge. On our view, it is not the particular interests or goals of any believer that give rise to an obligation to comply with epistemic norms. Our epistemic obligations arise from a less personal, more intersubjective perspective. More specifically, we are

21. As Kauppinen (2018) observes, “epistemic accountability may also be first-personal: we may decrease or increase epistemic *self-trust*” (p. 7).

bound by the norms and expectations that structure a practice of mutual epistemic accountability, which promotes epistemic rule-following across the community. To flourish in a society, people need to cooperate in joint activities and coordinate expectations; in order to achieve these ends, we need to be able to expect others to keep agreements and comply with social conventions around which we can coordinate behavior. We thus hold each other accountable to certain norms or standards. In doing so, we imply that we think there is good reason for others to accept the relevant norm or standard. Moreover, we are justified in holding each other to these standards because they structure our *legitimate* social practice of epistemic accountability. This is why epistemic norms “apply to” or “bind” us all.

We will further develop this idea in the next section. In particular, we will explain why epistemic norms have normative authority over us even when conforming to them would not promote the satisfaction of any individual end. If this account is correct, then the instrumentalist can escape the most common and powerful objection to their view, namely that it cannot account for the seemingly *categorical* force of epistemic norms.

4 The Authority of Epistemic Normativity

It is often said that epistemic norms are ‘categorical’ rather than ‘hypothetical.’²² To call a norm, rule, requirement, or imperative ‘categorical’ is to say, roughly, that it is accompanied by a sense of *requiredness* that is not shared by hypothetical norms. A categorical norm is a rule of conduct that is not contingent upon one’s desires or goals. A hypothetical norm, in contrast, applies only if one desires a certain end and has chosen to act on that desire.

It is widely assumed that *if* epistemic instrumentalism is true, then epistemic norms must be hypothetical. This point is emphasized by both friends and foes of instrumentalism. In his defense of instrumentalism, Kornblith (1993) writes: “[instrumental] accounts seeking to ground epistemic norms in our desires...make epistemic norms a variety of hypothetical imperative” (p. 357). In his critique of instrumentalism, Kelly (2003) writes: “An instrumental reason is a *hypothetical* reason, in the sense that it depends for its existence on the fact that the individual for whom it is a reason possesses a certain goal or goals” (p. 621). However, this way of characterizing instrumentalism is highly misleading. To say that epistemic norms are ‘hypothetical’ implies that such norms apply only to agents who have some relevant goal or desire. Those who lack the relevant ends would therefore fall outside the scope of the ‘ought,’ which is tantamount to escaping one’s obligations.

In what follows, we will argue that instrumentalists needn’t assume that epistemic norms are hypothetical in this way. If an instrumental norm were a hypothetical norm in the aforementioned sense, then instrumentalism would rightly invite compelling objections. We will argue, however, that social epistemic instrumentalism can account for the categorical force of epistemic normativity, properly understood.

22. See Berker (2013), Kelly (2003), Railton (1997), and Siegel (1990).

4.1 *The Inescapability of Epistemic Normativity*

What exactly does it mean to say that a norm, rule, requirement, or imperative is ‘categorical’? According to Mackie (1977), a categorical imperative is “unconditional in the sense of not being contingent upon any present desire of the agent” (p. 29). Railton (2003) echoes this idea, stating that a categorical norm “would necessarily apply to any agent as such, regardless of her contingent personal ends” (p. 298). In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1785) says that hypothetical imperatives are “a means to achieving something else which one desires,” whereas categorical imperatives present “an action as of itself objectively necessary, without regard to any other end” (§39).

As these quotations make clear, the normative force of categorical norms is characteristically *not contingent upon one having a certain goal or end*. A categorical requirement is *in force* even when one would rather not comply. When we say that a norm is ‘in force’ or ‘applies’ to an individual, we mean that the individual can appropriately be held accountable for complying or failing to comply with the norm. This view can explain why epistemic normativity is *inescapable* in Foot (1972)’s sense: the behavior “does not cease to offend...because the agent is indifferent to their purposes and to the disapproval he will incur by flouting them” (p. 311). An upshot is that we cannot escape our epistemic obligations even when it is in our own personal practical interest to believe irresponsibly. The normativity applies regardless of our desires or goals.

To see why, it will be helpful to return to our practices of epistemic blame and accountability. We criticize agents for violating epistemic norms even when conforming to them is not in the agent’s practical interest. In this respect, such norms *are* binding or inescapable: whether someone conforms to (or violates) a norm does not depend on their goals or desires. Given the social account outlined above, it should be easy to see why: if epistemic norms are to play a coordinative social function, we need to be able to sanction individuals who violate them. Given society’s interest in reliable testimony, epistemic norms have to be treated as compulsory. In a slogan, epistemic norms are *in force* because they are *enforced*.

We enforce epistemic norms in several ways. First, we sanction individuals for violating them (see §3.4). For example, we reduce our trust in people who believe badly (Boult 2021; Flores and Woodard *forthcoming*; Kauppinen 2018).²³ Such agents are also subject to an array of negative emotional responses, such as blame, reproach, disapproval, indignation, guilt, and shame (Boult 2021; Brown 2020; Piovarchy 2021; Schmidt 2021; Tollefsen 2017).²⁴ More positively, we praise people who form their beliefs responsibly—e.g., when they gather evidence carefully, scrutinize beliefs for subtle tensions, and tease out the

23. To reduce epistemic trust is, roughly, to give a lower credence in someone’s testimony, and to be less willing to regard them as a potential partner in cooperative inquiry (Kauppinen 2018, p. 1). According to Kauppinen, this response is fitting when an epistemic norm is violated. Thus, we can use this reactive attitude to identify distinctively epistemic norms. (Kauppinen also argues that epistemic accountability does not involve blame, but we’ll set this point aside. All that matters for our account is that believing badly warrants epistemic reactive attitudes of some type.)

24. Three qualifications are needed. First, not all epistemic norm violations justify criticism. Some are excused. Second, there are instances of ‘affectless blame,’ where we blame someone without feeling any negative emotions—e.g., blaming dead people in the distant past (Sher 2006). Third, epistemic norm violations rarely arouse intense negative feelings in the same way that moral norm violations do. This suggests there is an

logical implications of their beliefs. We react in these ways because we desire that these standards *have currency* in our society (Copp 1995). It is through these practices of praise and blame that we enforce and transmit codes of behavior (and belief) that we endorse. Beyond praise and blame, we also seek to instill and inculcate certain virtues, such as honesty, curiosity, and intellectual integrity (Williams 2002), which further ensures conformity to epistemic norms.

Second, our practices of epistemic blame and praise give agents a practical reason to conform to these norms. Knowing that you will be subject to criticism for failing to abide by norms will often motivate you to comply with them. This is so even if you disagree with the norms in question. The desire to be a respected member of one's community gives each of us a practical reason to conform our beliefs to epistemic norms, even when it may be in our practical interest to engage in wishful thinking, self-deception, or evidence-denial. Moreover, the utility of epistemic norms gives us practical reason to uphold this system. For one, we improve our own ability to arrive at truth by downgrading our trust in unreliable believers. We also promote our common interests by reinforcing a commitment to living by useful epistemic standards. In these ways, the enforcement of epistemic norms is tied to our own individual and collective interests.

Finally, partly as a result of these practices, agents will *internalize* epistemic norms. Hence, they will *experience* them as having binding or inescapable force. Agents will therefore be motivated to conform to the norms even when it goes against their own individual practical interests. As Graham (2015) writes, "When internalized, I conform to the norm *because it's the right thing to do*, because I positively value compliance, not (normally or just) because of the consequences of my actions or because of my other aims or desires" (p. 253). As we saw above and in §3.4, agents internalize these norms via socialization, acculturation, and practices of accountability. When a person endorses these norms and subscribes to a normative system, they tend to respond negatively to people who fail to conform to the relevant standard and positively to people who do conform. For example, we (the authors) might feel *shameful* upon realizing that we have not anticipated obvious objections to our argument that are raised by a referee for this journal, and the referee might be *disappointed* by our inability to anticipate such objections.

4.2 *The Instrumental Value of Non-Instrumental Thought*

Although our practice of epistemic evaluation is a tool serving practical needs, we needn't think of this practice in purely instrumental terms. In fact, the utility of epistemic normativity might be *better served* if we come to think of our epistemic obligations *non-instrumentally*. We take this idea from Williams (2002), who highlights *the instrumental value of non-instrumental thought*.²⁵

In *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams argues that truthfulness is required to make testimony reliable. We therefore need people to cultivate qualities that make them good contributors

important difference between epistemic norms and moral norms. Here's our hypothesis: we take moral norms to be *more important* to the well-being of society, so we enforce them more strongly and treat their violation more seriously.

25. See Queloz (2021) for an insightful discussion of this idea.

to the common stock of information. In particular, we must inculcate people with a desire to find the truth, even when it is difficult (i.e., the virtue of accuracy); we must also encourage others to say what they mean and resist the temptation to deceive (i.e., the virtue of sincerity). Crucially, Williams says that we must come to see these dispositions as valuable *for their own sake*. To sustain a cooperative practice of pooling reliable information, people must come to regard accuracy and sincerity—the two virtues of truthfulness—as intrinsically valuable. In other words, Williams argues that *for truthfulness to serve its function, we must not value it for purely instrumental reasons*. This is why, according to Williams (2002), “no society can get by...with a purely instrumental conception of the values of truth” (p. 59).²⁶

We suggest that the instrumental value of epistemic normativity be understood in a similar way. We come to think of our epistemic obligations in non-instrumental terms, and it serves the utility of the practice to do so. We cultivate in others (and ourselves) the dispositions required to conform to epistemic norms irrespective of whether it serves any individual’s goals or desires to do so. As a result of internalizing these dispositions, our motivation to conform to epistemic norms is not conditional on them fulfilling their instrumental function. Even stronger, perhaps it is *only because* we conceive of our epistemic obligations in this way that epistemic normativity is able to fulfill its instrumental function. If correct, this account would illustrate why, on purely instrumental grounds, we come to regard epistemic norms as categorical norms.

If instrumentalists had to explain the grip of epistemic norms by appealing to an *individual agent’s* practical interests, then this view would fail to capture the ways in which ordinary epistemic normative evaluations go *beyond* the desires and goals of individual believers. However, the social instrumentalist picture can capture the categorical force of these norms: epistemic norms are inescapable because agents who violate them will still be subject to criticism. Moreover, the social instrumentalist picture explains why these norms will be internalized by most agents. If, as Kant (1785) claimed, categorical norms “present an act as of itself objectively necessary without regard to any end” (§39), then epistemic norms are indeed categorical.

4.3 *Is Epistemic Normativity Strongly Categorical?*

Epistemic normativity is categorical in the following sense: whether someone conforms to (or violates) the norm does not depend on that individual’s goals or desires. However, there are weaker and stronger ways of capturing this idea (Foot 1972). According to the weaker version, categorical norms (reasons, imperatives) *apply* to agents, regardless of their goals or desires, without necessarily giving them *reasons*. According to the stronger version, which Foot finds in Kant’s writings, categorical imperatives do not merely *apply* to people but rather imply that persons have *reasons* to act regardless of their goals or desires. Following Hazlett (2013), we will call the first type of normativity ‘inescapable’ and the second type ‘strongly categorical.’ A norm is *inescapable* if and only if it applies

26. A similar point will apply to moral norms: we come to regard moral claims as having a grip on us *irrespective of our goals and desires*, simply because we come to regard adherence to moral norms as good for their own sake, given the relative stringency of our teaching and practices of accountability (Foot 1972; Hume 1739; Nietzsche 1979; Williams 2002).

to you, regardless of your aims or desires; in contrast, a norm is *strongly categorical* if and only if it gives you a reason to ϕ , no matter what your aims or desires.²⁷

According to the view we favor, epistemic normativity is inescapable but not strongly categorical. We find this combination of views attractive. It allows us to vindicate the universal force of epistemic normativity—thereby respecting the intuition that epistemic norms are, in some sense, ‘categorical’—without requiring us to assume that epistemic norms have automatic reason-giving force. This proposal has additional virtues. For one, it is controversial whether *any* strongly categorical norms or reasons exist.²⁸ Moreover, we can say much of what we want by merely positing that epistemic norms are inescapable; for example, we can criticize agents for violating norms and explain why these norms are experienced as having binding force, independent of agents’ practical interests.

What is lost by claiming that epistemic norms are merely inescapable but not strongly categorical? The answer is that we cannot say that an agent has a reason to ϕ just because the norm applies to them. Recall that when a norm applies to an agent, she can be criticized for culpably violating it. Let’s say this is sufficient to generate a claim that the agent ought to ϕ . If this is right, then we must reject the following, seemingly analytic inference: If S ought to ϕ , then S has a reason to ϕ .

We are willing to deny that ‘oughts’ entail reasons, but many find this implication unsatisfying. They are left with a desire to say that an agent who ought to ϕ *has a reason* to ϕ . Why hanker after this stronger sense of normativity?

According to Parfit (2011), “We cannot criticize or blame people for failing to do what we believe they have no reason to do” (p. 442). It is often assumed that to be able to criticize agents for failing to ϕ , then we must be able to say that *they* had a reason to ϕ . Consider a case where an agent truly has *no reason* to abide by epistemic norms, given their interests and goals. If the above bridge principle were correct, then we could not criticize such an agent; thus, epistemic norms would not impose genuinely authoritative demands on them. For example, when your uncle forms his political beliefs solely on the basis of his “gut feelings,” it would allegedly be inappropriate to blame or reproach him for believing on such a basis, if he truly had no reason to form his beliefs responsibly. This seems hard to accept. Don’t we want to be able to criticize or even condemn people who believe (and behave) badly?

To make this point more vivid, consider Williams (1995)’s example of a man who is nasty to his wife. If this man is sufficiently nasty, he will be completely unmotivated to treat his wife better, even following a thorough attempt to convince him to behave otherwise. Are we willing to say that this man has *no reason* to be nicer to his wife, given that he lacks a suitable motivational propensity to be nicer? Analogously, imagine someone who is

27. Other labels used in the literature for this distinction include: rule-implying versus reason-implying normativity (Parfit 2011), formal versus robust normativity (McPherson 2011), weak versus strong categoricity (Joyce 2001), mere requirements versus normative requirements (Broome 2013), and reducible versus irreducible normativity (Olson 2014).

28. For arguments against the existence of strongly categorical reasons, see Joyce (2001, pp. 39–42), Cote-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018, pp. 159–160), Woods (2018), Cowie (2019, p. 59), Mantel (2019, p. 215), Maguire and Woods (2020, §4).

entirely indifferent to epistemic goods, rejects the value of truth, and criticizes cleaving to the evidence. They are like the “anti-epistemologist” imagined by Railton (1997, pp. 54–59). Are we willing to say that the anti-epistemologist has *no reason* to follow the evidence?

We can say several things in response to this worry. First, it is important to note that such cases will be extremely rare (cf. Sharadin 2018; Willoughby 2022). In the case of the anti-epistemologist, we need to imagine someone whose belief is sufficiently quarantined that it will not thwart their goals, whose irresponsible belief-forming practices will not generate bad epistemic habits where it *does* matter, and who has no practical interest in upholding norms governing testimony.

We can also explain away the seeming counterintuitiveness of denying that certain reasons exist. This can be done in at least three ways. First, as Williams observes, we can adequately criticize incorrigibly nasty people who, because of their nastiness, lack certain reasons we wish they had. We can criticize them and their actions without appealing to alleged normative reasons (Manne 2014; Street 2009; Williams 1981). The same holds for epistemic normativity. If we are told that someone ignores the evidence, forms their belief in a lazy way, and engages in wishful thinking, then from the epistemic point of view we have all the information we need to criticize them for not believing as they ought. We can criticize the anti-epistemologist for lacking reasons we wish they had. There is no further need to investigate their desires or goals. It is part of our epistemic framework that everyone is bound by these norms, irrespective of whether they have reasons to or take themselves to have a reason to abide by these norms.

Second, we might be perfectly justified in *saying* that the anti-epistemologist has a normative reason to believe responsibly, even if this is strictly speaking false.²⁹ This might be justified in roughly the same way that one might be justified in telling a nervous student that they will do well on their exam, even if one regards this as strictly speaking false. What matters in such cases, as Street (2009) points out, is what we hope to do or encourage or express with our words, not what is strictly speaking true. When you blame your uncle for forming his political beliefs on the basis of his gut feelings, you express your hope that he will believe more responsibly in the future, and you try to bring this about, in part, through his recognition of your disapproval. As Hazlett (2013, p. 266) argues, epistemic blame may function as a “proleptic mechanism”: the expression of disapproval aimed at epistemically improving the offender. As long as the anti-epistemologist is not indifferent to recognition and approval, our approbation may encourage epistemic rule-following. Yet even if our anti-epistemologist is indifferent to these social goods, we can still criticize him without assuming that he must have a strongly categorical reason to believe responsibly (Hazlett 2013, pp. 266–7). Again, if the social picture we’ve sketched is right, such cases where an agent *doesn’t* have such reasons will be extremely rare. But insofar as they are *conceptually possible*, our view still avoids unintuitive verdicts.

Third, as Joyce (2001, pp. 39–41) observes, it may be legitimate for an onlooker to say “A ought not ϕ ” as well as “A has a reason not to ϕ ,” as they are both ways of expressing endorsement of a normative system. One who speaks this way is speaking from “inside the institution” (Joyce 2001, p. 99), in which case one can be taken to endorse its rules. It

29. Street (2009) makes the same point about ideally coherent immoral agents.

is a way of expressing the fact that the rules of the epistemic system forbid the forming of belief in particular ways. Whenever one is speaking from within a normative system, a willingness to say “A ought to ϕ ” will license saying “A has a reason to ϕ .” But all of this only concerns what one might legitimately *say* without violating any rules of linguistic conduct. It does not follow that A actually *has* a reason to ϕ , nor does it provide him with one.

4.4 Are Epistemic Reasons Collective Practical Reasons?

What is gained by denying that epistemic norms are *strongly categorical*? By rejecting the view that epistemic norms must be reason-giving, we avoid the most pressing objection posed to other accounts of social epistemic instrumentalism. In a recent paper, Michelle Dyke (2021) proposes a social view on which epistemic reasons are collective instrumental reasons, i.e., reasons that derive from what would best satisfy the aims of groups of people. In her words, “epistemic rationality is indeed instrumental in nature but the aims that account for our epistemic reasons are not our own individual aims, but are instead aims attributable directly to epistemic communities” (p. 847). Though we are largely sympathetic with Dyke’s proposal, it has been forcefully criticized for failing to explain why being a part of a community with certain goals would give an individual reasons to achieve those goals (cf. Chrisman 2022; Willoughby 2022). More worryingly, sometimes community goals don’t seem to give rise to reasons (Willoughby 2022). According to Dyke, our epistemic reasons for belief derive from our membership in a group which has aims that would be advanced by our believing well. But how and why should a community’s goals give rise to individual epistemic reasons?

Our view avoids this challenge. We can explain why epistemic norms are still in force, even when community goals *fail* to give rise to an individual’s epistemic reasons. Thus, while we agree with Dyke (2021) that “to ignore the clear body of evidence would violate socially entrenched standards of everyday reasoning” (p. 857), we disagree that this entails that an agent must have a reason to form their beliefs in this way. Instead of claiming that people who lack the relevant goal nevertheless have a reason, we should instead say that the norms apply to these individuals *irrespective of whether they have a reason* to believe responsibly.

5 Conclusion

By capturing the force of epistemic norms in terms of inescapability rather than strong categoricity, we arrive at an attractive picture of epistemic normativity. We can explain why epistemic norms are in force even when the agent has a strong practical interest in violating them. Moreover, we can do this without making unnecessary or controversial assumptions about certain normative categories. In addition, we escape central objections to other ways of developing a social-epistemological framework and avoid proliferating reasons when there are none. Still, we can legitimately criticize agents even in the rare cases where they lack any reason to follow the epistemic norms.

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