

**EPISTEMIC NORMS FOR PRACTICAL REASONING, ASSERTION AND BELIEF:  
A FUNCTION-FIRST INTEGRATED ACCOUNT  
- Book Proposal -**

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## **1. State of the Art**

Epistemic notions such as knowledge or justified belief figure prominently both in philosophical theorizing and in our everyday evaluations of each other's actions and mental states. In the light of this, it comes as no surprise that epistemic normative constraints are of central concern in epistemological literature.

Now, say that it turns out that one of the extant accounts of the normativity of action, assertion or belief is correct; will that fully meet our concern with the relevant norm? The answer is 'no'. One crucial question still remains to be answered, i.e., the rationalisation question (RC): why that particular action/mental state is/should be governed by the respective epistemic norm in the first place.

As it turns out, with very few exceptions, RC is not addressed by contributors to the debate. However, in the absence of a rationalisation, it is not clear why a different norm might not have come to be governing the act/mental state in question. Since it is rather implausible that this might have occurred, the need for rationalisation is pressing in its own right, independently of finding a satisfactory account of what the correct norm is.

## **2. Objectives**

Here, I propose to take on the rationalization project; my primary aim is to develop a novel, function-first, integrated account of the normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief, in conjunction with a general account of etiological functions and their normative import. At the heart of this account is the thesis that practical reasoning, assertion and belief have etiological epistemic functions that give rise to prescriptive epistemic norms: a token of type T with the epistemic function of producing E will be functioning properly when it functions in the way in which it did back when it acquired its epistemic function by generating epistemic benefit. As such, the epistemic norms governing practical reasoning, assertion and belief are taken to spring right out

of their etiological epistemic functions in a unitary, integrated way.

The main objectives of this project are:

- 1) Providing a satisfactory answer to the rationalization question;
- 2) Developing a novel function-first integrated account of the normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief;
- 3) Defending the resulting epistemic norms against competing views on the market.

### **3. Background and Innovation**

The epistemic normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief has been at the forefront of recent epistemology. There are a number of well worked out accounts available for each (e.g. Williamson (2000), Douven (2006), Lackey (2007), Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), Littlejohn (2010), Graham (2012), Gibbons (2013), to name but a few).

At the same time, little has been done to explore the rationale behind one epistemic norm or another. Furthermore, to my knowledge, an integrated account that discusses the epistemic normativity of all three as nicely emerging out of the rationalization proposed is still missing on the market.

This book aims to supply this lack; it offers a novel, function-first integrated account of the epistemic normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief that satisfies a number of crucial desiderata for any such account, including naturalistic friendliness and fit with general normative landscape. At the same time, along the way, it also makes substantive original contributions to the debates on each sub-topic.

### **3. Research Methodology**

The general methodology this research project employs is a standard one in analytic philosophy. After having identified a set of related desiderata for an integrated account of the epistemic normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief, an investigation is launched into how well various accounts satisfy them. The aim is to show that account to be developed within this research project does better than its competitors when it comes to satisfying these desiderata.

The project falls into six stages, which will materialize in six chapters of the proposed monograph. At each stage the project makes substantive original contributions to the literature.

## **Research Stages/Chapter Summary**

### **Stage/Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION**

This chapter introduces the issue dealt with in the book, that is, the epistemic normativity of practical reasoning, assertion and belief. A set of desiderata for a satisfactory integrated account thereof is developed. These include provision of a solution to the rationalization problem, naturalistic friendliness, an answer to the commonality question – i.e. are the three governed by the same epistemic norm, and if yes/no, why? - and, last but not least, fit with a general theory of normativity.

The focal approach, function-first epistemic normativity, as well as its main motivations, are introduced and a first sketch of the view that the book ultimately aims to defend is provided. The chapter ends with an overview of the structure and contents of the remainder of the book.

### **Stage/Chapter 2: THE RATIONALIZATION QUESTION**

This chapter reviews the most prominent answers to the rationalization question in recent literature. A subchapter each is devoted to Timothy Williamson's (2000) and Igor Douven's (2006) accounts. The aim is to show that neither of these accounts is ultimately satisfactory.

#### *Chapter 2.1: Williamson's Constitutivity Claim*

This section starts with an outline of Williamson's (2000) answer to the rationalization question. According to Williamson, the knowledge norm (KNA)<sup>1</sup> is uniquely constitutive of assertion in much the same way in which norms of a game are constitutive of games. Moreover, Williamson argues, given that belief stands to assertion like inner to outer (the 'belief-assertion

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<sup>1</sup> One must: assert that p only if one knows that p.

parallel'),<sup>2</sup> we should expect belief to be governed by a knowledge norm also. This chapter takes issue with all the three claims above; it argues that:

(1) The constitutivity claim, such construed, fails to offer a satisfactory response to the rationalization question. That certain games, governed by certain constitutive rules, became popular, whilst others didn't, is plausibly a historical contingency. At the same time, it seems highly implausible that, in the case of assertion, it is a mere historical contingency that this speech act, constitutively governed by a particular epistemic norm, came to be widely used.

(2) The constitutivity claim, in conjunction with the uniqueness claim, will not go through for assertion. It looks as if the following is true of unique constitutive norms: if activity *A* is constituted by only a single constitutive norm, *n*, and if one violates *n* with near maximal systematicity, then one does not count as engaging in *A*. Given, though, that it seems that one can lie – and thus break most norms of assertion put forth on the market – with near maximal systematicity and still count as asserting, the constitutivity claim fails.

(3) The belief-assertion parallel does not deliver the normative goods it is taken by Williamson to deliver. In its most plausible reading – also suggested by Williamson's own formulation – belief stands to assertion as inner *x* to outer *x*, where *x* stands for a more general type both belief and assertion are species of, call it affirmation, for instance. Notice, however, that on this construal normative transmission fails. After all, just because waltz and tango are species of dancing it hardly follows that if *N* is a norm for waltzing it also governs tango. Two alternative readings of the parallel are investigated and rejected on grounds of metaphysical implausibility.

### *Chapter 2.2: Douven's 'Zeroth Law of Rationality'*

Igor Douven (2006) argues that his favourite account of assertion, the rational credibility norm (RCNA)<sup>3</sup>, is but an extension of what he dubs 'the zeroth law of rationality' - (LR): Only  $\phi$  if it is rational for you to  $\phi$  - obtained via employing the belief-assertion parallel. By instantiation, we get RCNA: You must: assert *p* only if it is epistemically rational for you to believe *p*.

This chapter identifies one crucial missing link in Douven's argument which renders it incapable to offer support to his favourite account of assertion.

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<sup>2</sup> Most notably defended in Adler (2002)

<sup>3</sup> One must: assert that *p* only if *p* is rationally credible to one.

Douven wants rational credibility to stand for knowledge-level justification. Therefore, the claim Douven is making is actually stronger: RCNA\*: You must: assert p only if you have knowledge-level justification to believe p. However, the link between RCNA and RCNA\* is missing: what is needed is an argument to establish the equivalence between rational credibility and knowledge-level justification. In its absence, Douven's argument equally supports any competing norm of assertion that comes with a well-defended norm for rational belief.

*Chapter 2.3: Conclusion to chapter 2.*

### Stage/Chapter 3. **FUNCTION-FIRST EPISTEMIC NORMATIVITY**

With these predominantly negative results in play, I turn to the constructive part of this project: putting forth the functionalist normative machinery to be employed throughout the book (first subchapter) and showing how it meets the desiderata previously identified (subchapter 2).

#### *Chapter 3.1 Functions and Norms*

This chapter introduces some conceptual machinery. It first considers the following plausible account of etiological functions (e-functions for short): A token of type T has the e-function of producing effect E in system S iff (1) past tokens of T produced E in S's ancestors, (2) producing E benefitted S's ancestors and (3) producing E's having benefitted S's ancestors contributes to the explanation of why T exists in S.

Second, it is argued that once a token of a type has an e-function, this gives rise to prescriptive norms governing what it is for a token of its type to function properly. This is the way in which past tokens functioned when the type acquired its e-function, i.e. when they produced the benefit that made the contribution to the explanation of why the type still exists in the system.

In line with Graham (2012) this chapter construes a parallel account for epistemic normativity, as springing out of epistemic e-functional explanations. It argues that etiological epistemic functions give rise to prescriptive epistemic norms.

Against Graham, however, I employ a weak account of e-functions, in line with Buller (1998), which does not ask for selective history for function

acquisition. Furthermore, I draw on Simion (Forthcoming a) and argue, *contra* Graham, that e-functions and the relevant norms they give rise to should be typed by the produced benefit. As such, (1) I propose that a proper application of the etiological account of functions to epistemic normativity needs describe the relevant benefit in epistemic rather than biological terms.

### *Chapter 3.2 Revisiting the Desiderata*

This chapter argues, in turn, for:

- (1) The plausibility of the present response to RC
- (2) The naturalistic friendliness of the approach.
- (3) The fit with generally plausible claims in theory of normativity: the functional explanation, it is argued, rationalizes the widely employed distinction between respecting norms and blamelessly breaking them. A set of necessary and sufficient conditions for blameless breach of norms is being put forth as emerging right out of the present functionalist account.
- (4) An answer to the commonality question: it is argued that, given that they serve different epistemic functions, action, belief and assertion will not be governed by the same epistemic norm.

### *Chapter 3.3: Conclusion to chapter 3.*

## Stage/Chapter 4. **ACTION AND PRACTICAL REASONING**

Discussions about the epistemic norm of action and practical reasoning tend, with very few exceptions, to be lumped together in the literature; many prominent authors even use the two formulations interchangeably. This chapter argues this is a mistake that generates important theoretical costs. The two normative constraints are treated separately in two subchapters.

### *Chapter 4.1: Action*

A central debate in recent literature concerns the epistemic norm for action. (see, e.g., Hawthorne and Stanley (2008)). This chapter argues that this debate is afflicted by a category mistake: strictly speaking, there is no epistemic norm for action. To this effect, drawing on Simion (Under Review b) I introduce a distinction that has been overlooked in the relevant literature, between

epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content. I argue that, while it is plausible that norms of the latter type will govern action in general, epistemic norms will only govern actions characteristically associated with delivering epistemic goods.

#### *Chapter 4.2: Practical Reasoning*

In spite of the above, what remains of epistemological interest is the epistemic norm of practical reasoning. The point of departure in this chapter is identifying a genuinely epistemic function of practical reasoning; I argue that the epistemic function in question is knowing what one ought to do. If that is the case, though, the borders between the epistemic normativity of practical and theoretical reasoning fade away: after all, arguably, in both cases, the function consists in getting to know the conclusion.

#### *Chapter 4.3: Conclusion to chapter 4.*

### Stage/Chapter 5. **ASSERTION**

In this chapter I offer a defense of a biconditional knowledge norm of assertion, as associated with the epistemic function of assertion of generating knowledge in hearers. The first subchapter is concerned with putting the functionalist machinery to work in deriving the relevant norm. The second and third defend the view against most prominent objections targeting its necessity (KNA-Nec) and, respectively, its sufficiency direction (KNA-Suff).

#### *Chapter 5.1 Assertion and Testimony*

Plausibly, the epistemic function of assertion is generating testimonial knowledge in the hearer; fairly uncontroversially, in the vast majority of cases, knowledge is both necessary and sufficient for fulfilling this function. Therefore, I argue, asserting from knowledge is a reliable way to insure function fulfillment. As such, I put forth a biconditional knowledge norm of assertion. Furthermore, I argue, the biconditional version of KNA proposed here has two major advantages over the extant KNA accounts: (1) it is independently theoretically motivated and (2) nicely fits within a classical invariantist framework.

### *Chapter 5.2 Necessity*

This chapter defends KNA-Nec against objections coming from the champions of its main competitor, the RCNA (Douven (2006), Lackey (2007)). It is argued here that: (1) KNA scores better at accommodating linguistic data; (2) KNA and RCNA are shoulder to shoulder when it comes to explaining blamelessness of speakers in breach of the norm and (3) KNA fares better than RCNA in terms of a posteriori simplicity.

### *Chapter 5.3 Sufficiency*

This chapter looks at two prominent objections to KNA-Suff, due to Brown (2010) and Lackey (2011), and, drawing on Simion (Under Review b) argues that they miss their target due to value-theoretic inaccuracies. It is argued that (1) the intuitive need for more than knowledge in Brown's high-stakes contexts does not come from the epistemic norm governing assertion, but from further norms stepping in and raising the bar, and (2) Lackey's purported quality-driven case against KNA-Suff boils down to a quantitative objection. If that is the case, Lackey's argument is vulnerable to the same objections as Brown's.

### *Chapter 5.3: Conclusion to chapter 5.*

## Stage/Chapter 6. **BELIEF**

This chapter is concerned with defending an externalist justification norm of belief. It begins with an outline of the debate between internalists about the norm of belief and defenders of a knowledge norm (subchapter 1). Further on, in subchapter 2, the view proposed by this book is developed and defended.

### *Chapter 6.1 Internalism and the Knowledge Norm*

It is argued that externalism holds the upper hand due to better fit with general normativity theory. However, given that, plausibly, the epistemic e-function of belief is accurately representing the world, it is argued that the only way to make sense of a knowledge norm of belief is if what we are talking about is an evaluative norm, concerned with attributive goodness. However, I argue, what



we are interested in is a prescriptive norm, i.e. a norm governing belief formation, rather than an evaluative norm; that is, an ought-to-do rather than an ought-to-be.

### *Chapter 6.2 Knowledge First Functionalism*

This chapter employs, once again, the e-functional machine and puts forth a prescriptive, knowledge first proper functionalist norm for belief. The account it is proper functionalist in that it takes the epistemic normativity of belief to drop out of the epistemic function of our cognitive systems. It is knowledge-first epistemological in that, unlike traditional proper functionalism, it unpacks the function at issue here in terms of knowledge. Its advantages vis-à-vis competing views are outlined.

### *Chapter 6.3: Conclusion to chapter 6.*

## **4. Market**

As explained above, there is no direct competition for this book, and yet there is substantial interest in the ideas that it explores. There are volumes currently in production or recently published which explore different accounts of epistemic normativity (e.g. Littlejohn and Turri (eds.) 2014, Grajner and Schmechtig (Under Contract)) and there has been a great deal of interest in the recent literature in the central topics covered by this book. There is thus a clear market for a text of this sort, particularly when it comes to those researchers working in relevant areas of philosophy (especially epistemology and philosophy of language).

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