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Article:

Hofmann, Frank and Piller, Christian Johannes orcid.org/0000-0001-9883-641X (2018)
Norm-reasons and evidentialism. Analysis. ISSN 0003-2638

<https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/any081>

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“Norm-reasons and evidentialism”

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1. *The argument against evidentialism and for norm-reasons*

It has been argued by Clayton Littlejohn that our epistemic reasons transcend our evidence.¹ More precisely, the claim is that our normative epistemic reasons that bear on whether to believe are not exhausted by the body of evidence that we possess. (Here we follow Littlejohn in putting pragmatic reasons for belief aside.) These epistemic reasons are normative because they determine or contribute to the determination of what we ought to believe or which beliefs are appropriate or correct to hold; the deontic status of doxastic attitudes is at stake. Call this ‘negative’ thesis the ‘*evidence transcendence thesis*’ about epistemic reasons (ETT, for short). In other words, ETT is the denial of the ‘*Reasons-Evidence Identification Thesis*’ (REI).

(REI) X is an epistemic reason (i.e., something that bears on whether to believe)
iff X is a piece of evidence. (Littlejohn 2018: 531)

The argument is highly relevant to the truth of *evidentialism*, since understood in a natural way, evidentialism is the claim that our epistemic reasons do not transcend our evidence (or so it seems). In other words, according to evidentialism, what doxastic attitude we ought to take is given by our evidence and nothing but our evidence.

¹ The most recent and detailed formulation can be found in Littlejohn (2018). A short version is given in Littlejohn (2012), p. 223. A slightly different formulation (that refers to reasons that “determine whether a belief is justified” instead of reasons that bear on whether to believe, as in REI) can be found in Littlejohn (2017), sc. 5. There, Littlejohn acknowledges that he owes the point to Owens (2000).

What else could provide (normative) epistemic reasons? – Clayton Littlejohn’s proposal is that it could be an *epistemic norm* or *epistemic norms*. So the positive claim – that complements the ‘negative’ ETT – is that *there are norm-reasons*, reasons that do not derive from (and are not identical to) one’s evidence but come from an epistemic norm. Following Littlejohn we can take the relevant norm to be the following:

(EN) You should not believe p without sufficient evidence.

Now, for the subject in the case of insufficient evidence

there’s a decisive reason to refrain from believing p (...). This reason is not a further piece of evidence, but it’s a reason that bears on whether to believe p. (...) If there are norms like EN that govern belief, we should recognize the distinction between evidential reasons from norm-reasons. The former are pieces of evidence and the latter are provided by norms like EN. (Littlejohn 2018: 539-40)

Let us call this ‘positive’ claim that norms like EN provide reasons of their own the ‘*norm-reasons thesis*’ (NRT, for short).

The crucial argument for the NRT is provided by *cases of insufficient evidence*. If one has sufficient evidence for p, believing p is what one ought to do. But if one *lacks* sufficient evidence for p, what is it that one ought to do doxastically? Intuitively, it is argued, we ought not to believe p (nor ought we to believe its negation). Call this the ‘*primary intuition*’ about cases of insufficient evidence. Now we can ask, if in this case there is any evidence for not believing p? Intuitively, it is clear that this need not be the case, and therefore the subject could have an epistemic reason which is not a piece of

evidence (since if one ought not to believe p , one has an epistemic reason not to believe p). Even if we have no evidence for not believing p , this is what we have epistemic reason to do – not believe p . (We want to leave it open whether the notion of ‘evidence for not believing’ makes sense. If it doesn’t, there couldn’t be any such evidence; if it does, there needn’t be such evidence.)

Littlejohn draws the conclusion that if we accept the primary intuition about cases of insufficient evidence, we should also accept a distinction between what he calls ‘evidential-reasons’ and ‘norm-reasons’. Pieces of evidence are *evidential-reasons*. A *norm-reason* is a reason for a certain doxastic attitude which comes from a norm that one is subject to, and not from a bit of evidence one possesses. If one lacks sufficient evidence, one is subject to EN and thereby has epistemic reason not to believe p . This is a norm-reason, and so not all epistemic reasons that bear on whether to believe are pieces of evidence. In other words, one has an epistemic reason not to believe p but ‘this is not just a further bit of evidence’, as Littlejohn puts it (Littlejohn 2012, n. 1). Evidentialism is thus refuted and norm-reasons are reified in order to fill the gap, or so Littlejohn claims.

2. In defence of evidentialism

The case of insufficient evidence does not provide any argument against evidentialism, we submit. Littlejohn’s argument concerning insufficient evidence may or may not lead to acknowledging norms as ‘something that bears on whether to believe’, i.e., norm-reasons. But it does not show that evidentialism would be wrong. In what follows we distinguish two responses on behalf of the evidentialist.

According to the *conciliatory response*, an evidentialist can accept that there is a norm covering belief (and other attitudes) and that this norm bears on whether to believe, in a way different from how pieces of evidence bear on this question. The relevant norm may be the one that Feldman and Conee have described it in their classic paper "Evidentialism":

(FCE) [O]ne epistemically ought to have the doxastic attitudes that fit one's evidence. (Feldman, Conee 1985: 19)

The evidentialist can say that what determines whether we are to believe a certain proposition are two things: pieces of evidence and the general ought expressed by the norm (FCE). This norm contributes to the explanation of particular oughts that believers are subject to, for example, the believer in the case of insufficient evidence. Coming back to this case, we can say that the subject's body of evidence provides insufficient epistemic reason for believing *p*. One's body of evidence bears on whether to believe *p*, of course. But what also bears on whether to believe *p* is the norm, i.e., the fact that one ought to have the doxastic attitudes that fit one's evidence. Understood thusly, the norm also provides an epistemic reason. But it should be noted that the case of sufficient evidence is no different from the case of insufficient evidence in this respect. One's pieces of evidence – evidential reasons – determine that one ought to believe *p* when subject to the *norm FCE*. In other words, what *fully* explains that the subject which possesses sufficient evidence for *p* ought to believe *p* is not only the particular first-level bits of evidence in her possession but also, in addition, the norm (i.e., something on a higher level, not on a par with ordinary first-order facts). And this is so whether we are

dealing with insufficient or sufficient evidence. Focusing on the case of insufficient evidence, thus, is misleading.

According to this conciliatory response, evidentialists have no reason to deny the existence of norm-reasons if 'epistemic reasons' are defined as things that bear on whether to believe. Indeed, evidentialists have put forward their own proposal about what the right norm is. They are not committed to REI, and they can accept the evidence transcendence thesis, ETT. Plausible as it may initially seem, evidentialism should not be identified with REI or anything that entails REI. According to evidentialism, what attitudes one is to take is determined by the norm and by one's pieces of evidence.

There is, however, a different, more conservative response, which disputes Littlejohn's argument for the introduction of norm-reasons and ends up defending the original evidentialist position according to which the realm of epistemic reasons is exhausted by our evidence (REI). Evidentialist will claim that what one ought to believe is determined by one's epistemic reasons. If they are right, a normative fact, like that S ought to believe that p, is itself a consequence of which reasons apply in a situation: the epistemic ought is determined by epistemic reasons. If this is the right way to think about ought – as being determined by epistemic reasons – it cannot itself be a source of any additional reasons. And if evidence alone determines what one ought to believe, there won't be norm-reasons arising from what is thus determined. Do we, then, have reason not to believe that p when there is insufficient evidence for this belief? Yes, we do, and the reason is evidential in the same sense as all reasons are. If there is no reason which favours believing p over believing not-p, we should withhold and, thus, not believe that p. Withholding is an epistemic attitude which may, on occasion, best fit one's evidence. The question what is the reason for withholding will be answered by pointing to the evidential situation as a whole. (When we say, as we often do, that one

piece of evidence is *the* reason for believing that p, we pick out a salient feature of our evidential situation. However, all the reasons in play determine collectively what the epistemically appropriate response will be. This holds in the same way for believing and withholding.)

Epistemic norms, on this picture, simply reflect the force of epistemic reasons. The norm (FCE), one's epistemic attitudes ought to fit the evidence, shows how epistemic reasons work; it is not a source of any additional epistemic reasons. (A welfarist holds that only effects on people's welfare provide reasons for action. Welfare considerations determine in a certain way, let's say in the maximizing way, what one ought to do. The resulting norm, maximize welfare, shows us how reasons work; this norm doesn't provide any reasons in addition to welfare considerations.)

We have offered two answers to Littlejohn's criticism of evidentialism. Either evidentialism accepts its own norm-reasons and can, thereby, handle the case of insufficient evidence, or evidentialism rejects norm-reasons. Either way, evidentialism remains unrefuted.²

Funding:

This work was supported by the Luxembourg National Research Fund (FNR) within our Intermobility grant project *ENCODE (Epistemic Normativity: Configuring the Debate)* [grant number INTERMOBILITY/2017/11588078].

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² We are grateful for valuable comments and discussions to Hannes Fraissler, Chris Kelp, and Susanne Mantel.

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