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In this paper, I criticize one of the core assumptions of “value-driven epistemology”: that a cognitive state of knowing is more valuable than the state of having just a true belief. This assumption is criticised in Section 2 mainly on the basis of a traditional view of rationality (rational choice theory), and reliabilism is defended against the argument that it fails to solve the so called “value problem”. As an alternative to the conception of cognitive states prevalent within value-driven epistemology, I defend in Section 3 an inferentialist view of the embeddedness of psychological states in a web of normative statuses, and show how this can lead to a vision of knowledge that lacks the problems identified in the first part of the paper.

Keywords

value-driven epistemology – reliabilism – inferentialism – knowledge vs. true belief – epistemic norms – epistemic institutions

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a booming literature trying to link epistemology with some branches of moral philosophy. Concepts such as “virtue”, “responsibility”, “justice”, or “value” attached to traditional epistemic terms are growingly common. This has in part been motivated by an uneasiness with the positivist ban of mixing “facts” and “values”, and some of the results of this literature have been very helpful indeed in making us more conscious of the ethical and social relevance -and embeddedness- of epistemic practices. Furthermore,
this “moral theory of knowledge” movement has also helped to recover some insights from classical philosophers that had tended to be ignored in the analytic epistemology tradition: the (Aristotelian) essential connections between “intellectual” and “moral” virtues, and the (Kantian) judiciary metaphors in the explication of epistemic justification. Though accepting the interest and the legitimacy of these goals, I am, however, rather skeptical about some of the assumptions made by many authors within this “value-driven epistemology” (vde). This may be partly due to a personal dissatisfaction with the type of moral philosophy that backs this trend (I tend to be an emotivist-relativist in ethics – or a kind of – and a libertarian in my own moral sympathies, whereas most of the authors in the “moral epistemology” camp apparently support some kind of objectivism about virtues and values, and tend to reveal strong communitarian feelings). Nevertheless, my main arguments will actually be based on the contrast between some of the most central claims of vde and some relatively well established ideas of other related fields, as philosophy of science, decision theory, and argumentation theory.

The structure of the rest of the paper is as follows. Section 2 presents what is perhaps my most controversial point: that, contrarily to what most authors within vde assert, knowledge as a cognitive state is not more valuable than true belief; as I will try to show, accepting this has no serious consequences for a reliablist approach to epistemology. Section 3 sketches an alternative approach, which is based on the idea that the object of epistemic practices are not directly our psychological states, like beliefs, but normative statuses, in particular, claims, as well as the commitments and entitlements deriving from those claims through the inferential norms accepted by the subjects.

2 Knowledge is Not More Valuable Than True Belief

2.1 Or, If it is, Then How Much?

One of the most important criticisms received by reliabilism in the last times has been the one illustrated by a classical example by Linda Zagzebski (1996): if what makes a cognitive state one of knowledge rather than one of mere true belief about the same proposition is that the former is assumed to have arisen out of a reliable process, though the latter is due to mere good luck, then, since the two states are intrinsically indistinguishable, and particularly since both are equally efficient in guiding our reasoning and action, then no real difference in value between both states can exist. Zagzebski’s example is that of two indistinguishable good cups of coffee, one of them produced by a reliable coffee machine, and the other produced “accidentally” by a different,
much lower quality device. Both cups of coffee are equally valuable, and so the processes by which the first one has been elaborated has added nothing to its value. Zagzebski’s argument is, then, the following: (1) the difference between knowledge and mere true belief is, intuitively, that the former is more valuable than the latter; (2) but her example shows that the reliability of the process by which something (say, a state of knowledge) is generated adds nothing to its value, which only depends on its intrinsic properties (in the case of beliefs, the truth of the believed proposition); so, in conclusion, (3) being produced by a reliable method is not what explains what “knowledge” consist in, as something that goes further than mere true belief. The question of why knowledge is more valuable than true belief has even been termed “the value problem” (cf. Brady, 2006).

Most attempts of defending reliabilism from this apparently compelling argument have focussed on premise (2). For example, Duncan Pritchard (2005) has argued that the causal origin of an object can indeed add value to it; e.g., a true painting by an old master would be more valuable than an exact replica of it, and so perhaps knowledge is more valuable than true belief because of the “epistemic pedigree” of the former. Unfortunately, knowledge seems to be in this respect more similar to coffee cups than to old paintings: though both pieces of knowledge and works of art are basically valued for being “true”, only the “truth” of the latter really refers to the process that has produced them, whereas, unless you are a strong constructivist, the truth or the falsity of a proposition is independent of that process, and only depends on how the things the proposition is about really are. Perhaps a more favourable example for Pritchard’s argument would have been that of money: a molecule-by-molecule replica of an authentic 500€ bank note would really be false, even if it had been created by God, because what makes a note authentic is only its having being created by the institution legally authorised to do it, in this case the European Central Bank, and also following the legally authorised process to create it. (By the way, philosophers of religion might reflect on God’s inability to create anything but counterfeit money; cf. Martin 2002, p. 19). But the idea of a bank note being “true” or “false” can also be misleading for epistemologists: though we are entitled to say that the exact forge is “false”, this does not entail that in practice it would not have any value as money. The obvious point is that, since nobody might tell the difference, even with the most powerful technical means, theforge could circulate as a matter of fact exactly as well as the authentic note. So, if we do not understand the economic value of a note as referring to its “authenticity”, but as the economic valuation real people do of it, then “undetectable falsifications” are no less valuable than originals. In the case of knowledge, it also seems that we want it not because it has been
produced by reliable ("legitimate") means, but just because it is true, i.e., because it performs its "epistemic work" well enough.

My own defence of reliabilism from Zagzebski’s argument will consist in denying her apparently obvious premise (1). It is not so clear that an epistemic single state of knowledge is in any relevant sense better than the corresponding state of “mere” true belief in the same proposition. I admit that intuitions can differ regarding this point, but what I really hope is that my arguments will serve to change the intuitions of other epistemologists, or at least to lessen their strength. My strategy will mainly consist in showing what elements in our evaluation of epistemic matters, as well as what aspects of the received ontology of epistemic states, may have favoured a confusion about which values depend on which ones; realising what the sources of confusion are will probably help us to dissolve it. Let’s begin with a couple of counterexamples to Zagzebski’s argument; the first one refers to “practical” knowledge, i.e., information whose possession is good for us just because of the things it allows to do; the second example refers to “theoretical” knowledge, i.e., information we want at least in part because of the joy of having it. I shall present the first part of my argument under the framework of “rational choice theory”, i.e., I will assume that that obscure property called “value” can be fully operationalised through a mathematical description of people’s valuations, i.e., of the intensity of their preferences, so that we can make the assumption that people always choose those options they perceive to have the highest value for them (see also Sokoliowska in this volume). It can be the case that most “value driven epistemologists” do not accept that values can be represented in this way, but this would entail a much longer and deeper discussion, so I beg the reader the patience of following the argument under this framework, which has at least the virtue of greatly simplifying the problem.

Regarding the first case, let $p$ be a proposition telling the winning numbers in a lottery whose prize is 100€. In this case, surely any one of us will consider that knowing that $p$ is equally valuable than just truly believing that $p$; let $v(p)$ be a numerical representation of that value’s intensity. But assume, for the sake of the argument, that someone puts an extra worth in having knowledge instead of “mere” true belief. For that person, there will be a difference between $w(p)$ – the value she gives to just truly believing that $p$ – and $v(p)$ – the value of knowing that $p$ – in such a way that $w(p) < v(p)$. But, if this is true, then there will be some other lottery of value higher than 100€, such that the value of just truly believing that proposition $q$ tells its winning numbers (say, $w(q)$) is lower than $v(p)$, i.e., the value of really knowing the winning numbers of the first lottery (see fig. 8.1.a, where the price of the second lottery is assumed to be 200€). Stated differently, if knowledge of one proposition is more valuable for
our subject than the mere true belief in that proposition, then she may value more the *knowledge* a proposition that guarantees a *smaller* prize, than the *true belief* in other proposition that guarantees a *higher* prize (at least if the difference between both prizes is not too big). I can only say that this is not my case, and I guess that most people will have preferences similar to mine in this respect (i.e., those depicted in fig. 8.1.b).

For our second example, imagine two scientists, Carla and Alfred, independently pursuing the discovery of some empirical law or a mathematical theorem (say, \( t \)). Suppose that, after some laborious research, Carla ends knowing that \( t \), whereas Alfred just truly believes that \( t \). In this case, it seems that the cognitive state of Carla is intuitively more valuable than that of Alfred. But let’s submit this intuition to a couple of alternative scenarios. Imagine first that Carla and Alfred live the rest of their lives without acquiring any other new information that happens to change (directly or indirectly) their respective beliefs about \( t \); in particular, Alfred will never *realize* that he was believing \( t \)
“for the wrong reasons”. In this case, perhaps some can think that the “learned” condition of Carla is “objectively better” than the “ignorant” condition of Alfred, but the truth is that Alfred has absolutely no reason to think that he is in a worse cognitive state than Carla, and so his own state is not more valuable for him than the state of the true knower. In other words, Alfred does not value his state a single iota less than Carla values hers.

In order to defend the intuition that Carla’s cognitive state nevertheless has a bigger value for her than Alfred’s has for him, it would be necessary to support with some strong argument the thesis that there is an absolute ontological difference between values (as something objectively existing with independence of our subjective attitudes to them) and valuing (as the mere action or disposition to recognise our preferences for some things over others). I’m deeply skeptical about the possibility of drawing such a distinction, but for reasons of space the point in this paper is not whether it can or can’t be done, only to show that value-driven epistemologists need to resort to an ontological conjecture about the nature of values which is by no means commonly accepted by scholars. Once you start expressing doubts about the acceptability of that conjecture, or showing other possible explanations of our widespread value-talk, the argument leading to the “value problem” starts to melt away.

Our second scenario is more substantial, however: imagine that Alfred finally discovers that he was “right for the wrong reasons”, and then, comparing his own old state with that of Carla, he accepts that Carla’s state was, after all (or “all things considered”), better than his former one. But, we may ask, were they really in the same epistemic state to begin with? What Alfred now regrets is probably not only, nor mainly, just having believed that \( t \), but having committed some mistakes or having been too negligent in the process leading him to accept that \( t \). So, it is not simply that Carla and Alfred started by believing the same proposition, \( t \); this would be a naive and distorted representation of their cognitive states. Rather, what Carla believed would have been something like \( t_1 = “t, because of reasons R“, while Alfred believed something like \( t_2 = “t, because of reasons S“, and by assumption \( t_2 is false, whereas t, is true. This is particularly clear if we think of \( t \) as a mathematical theorem; Alfred’s story is only possible in this case if at least one of the steps in his proof was wrong. So, if, by the end of the day, just-truly-believing that \( t \) looks to him like to be less valuable than knowing that \( t \), this is just because being in the former cognitive state involved believing at least some additional false propositions, and it is the consideration of these additional false beliefs (not the consideration of the single true proposition \( t \) that Alfred happened to believe by luck) what reduces the value of the whole cognitive state of the agent that truly believes – but
without a sound epistemic foundation – some of the propositions belonging to that whole state.

Reliabilism, hence, cannot be blamed for being incapable of explaining something which is simply impossible, and hence, does not happen, i.e., that “the state of knowing a proposition is ceteris paribus more valuable than state of merely having a true belief in that same proposition”; for when we are in former of these states there must be other relevant differences with respect the latter cognitive state, and so, the ceteris just can’t be paribus. The “value problem” seems to arise just when we naively assume that epistemic states are like single atoms within our cognitive life, so that the “value” of being in a certain “global” cognitive state could be computed by aggregating the “values” of each single “cognitive atom”. Rather on the contrary, the value of having one single belief at a precise moment would depend a lot of what other beliefs are we having at that moment, as well as on which ones of those beliefs happen to be true or false. This systematic entanglement of epistemic states through inferential links will be more explicitly taken into account in Section 3. To close this reflection, I will simply add that all this does not mean, of course, that reliabilism has no account to offer about what is the nature of the value of knowledge (by the way, it also does not mean that reliabilism is problem free), but this leads us directly to the question of what is difference between evaluating epistemic states and epistemic practices.

2.2 Valuing Epistemic States vs. Valuing Epistemic Practices

One of the reasons why it may have seemed “obvious” that the value of single states of knowledge is higher than the value of mere true belief, is because of a confusion about what is exactly the dependence relation between the value of single cognitive states and the value of those epistemic practices of which the former are the product. I suggest that value really flows from states to practices: the rational thing is to value a procedure according to how much we value its products, not the other way around. For example, we value Zagzebski’s coffee machines according to how often they produce good coffee cups (and hence the reliable one will probably be much more expensive than the other). So, in a nutshell, we value epistemic states according basically to their truth, and we value epistemic practices simply according to how often they make us have true beliefs, and how many of them they produce (not according to whether they make us have “knowledge” instead of “merely true beliefs”). Of course, a lot of clarifications are needed when we go down into the details; for example, sometimes it can accidentally be more helpful for us having a particular false belief, but rational valuation criteria need to refer to what is more valuable in the average (this means that, if in a well defined context some types of false
beliefs are systematically, i.e., non accidentally, more valuable than the corresponding true ones, then a cognitive procedure leading to those false beliefs will be better in that specific context; furthermore, the evaluation of cognitive practices has to take into account that not all true beliefs have the same value (e.g., some are more relevant, more approximate, etc.), and not all epistemic practices have the same cost (e.g., some are more difficult to implement); but this does not affect the validity of the general principle, according to which the value of a cognitive procedure basically depends on the value of the epistemic states it makes us have, and not vice versa.

This is why critics of reliabilism such as Riggs (2007) misidentify the point: reliabilism, properly understood, does not attempt to “explain” the value of certain beliefs (those that are “justified”, and so can count as “knowledge”) as a result of their being the outcome a reliable process. The reason is that good epistemic procedures are not those that create the value of their outputs, but just those that help us to identify those outputs that are valuable (in particular, though not only, for being true).

Against this, some might say that we can also use the production process as a premise in the evaluation of the product; for example, we can attach more value to a piece of contemporary art just because of its author’s fame. But actually we tend to use this indirect method of evaluation particularly when we lack other relevant information about the properties of the product, or, expressed more clearly, just when we don’t know the value of the product.¹ This indirect method is by no means irrational, for, if we cannot directly experience how valuable an item is for us, then the reliability of the process leading to that product can be a good statistical estimator of that value. In the epistemic case, this amounts to saying that, though adding proposition p to our set of beliefs will make the value of this set higher if and only if p is true (at least on the average), it may happen that, if we don’t know whether p is true or false “just by its own properties” (i.e., just by thinking about it and feeling whether the tendency to believe it is irresistible?), then we will be forced to take into account whether p is the outcome of a reliable epistemic procedure. If it is, then it will be rational to accept p, simply because “being the outcome of a

¹ The obvious exception is when we sentimentally value the product just for having been produced by a particular person, in a particular time, etc. In cases like these, I would say that we consider the origin of the item as one of its “intrinsic” properties, i.e., we consider that the item is just a fragment of a bigger reality which is what we really value. But I don’t think that epistemic states are as a norm evaluated in such a way: do quantum physicists value the Schrödinger equation because they attach a sentimental value to the historical process through which its validity was established, or because (thanks to that process) they now think the equation is right to an extraordinarily high degree?
reliable procedure” means that the truth of \( p \) is likely enough, given all the other information we have taken into account in applying the procedure. Furthermore, this idea of using our knowledge of how we have come to believe \( p \) in order to decide how valuable that belief is, sounds a little weird, for after all, we should not believe \( p \) before knowing how likely its truth is. I think the source of the confusion lies in the fact that, though the value of a belief causally depends on its truth (in the sense that it is because the belief is true that it is also valuable), rather than on the method of its “production” (or better, its justification), it is also right to say that, nevertheless, having been “produced” by a reliable method is our reason for knowing the value of the belief (not the cause of this value).

The moral of this section is that epistemology should not be worried about “explaining the value of knowledge”, if by this we mean something like “explaining why single states of knowledge are more valuable than the corresponding mere true beliefs” (which they are not), but it should try instead to illuminate the value of specific epistemic practices. Of course, this also demands to examine what is what makes the beliefs that are the output of those practices valuable, but epistemic justification has not to be seen as something that “adds” value to epistemic states, for justification is just the process by which we discover that value, or, stated differently, justification is the process by which we certify whether a proposition deserves to be accepted. Assuming that truth is what explains the major part (but not necessarily all) of the value of worthy beliefs (like purchasing power is what the value of a bank note consists in), the position defended in this paper is that good epistemic practices are those that lead you to have many valuable beliefs, or a highly valuable set of beliefs, in exactly the same way as good jobs are (ceteris paribus) those that make you have more money, not those that serve to “explain” why the money you have is true money.

Attempts as those by Wayne Riggs or Michael Brady of defining the presumed “extra” value of knowledge through the non-accidentality of its generating process (Riggs, 2002), or through the difference between knowledge as something we can rationally pursue and mere true belief as something that we cannot (Brady, 2006), may have some appeal, but they are better addressed to explaining the “merit” or “satisfaction” derived from mastering a cognitive procedure, than to explaining the presumed extra value of single realisations of that procedure. The reason is that, for most of the single beliefs we have, their value does not depend at all on whether we have acquired them by chance or by a virtuous method (as we saw in the examples given in Section 2.1), whereas

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2 A good example of this kind of epistemology would be Goldman (1999).
non-accidentality is obviously crucial for judging the value of having certain cognitive capacities (just because having the capacity amounts to being capable of performing it in a non-accidental way). Brady’s argument in particular fails because the fact that you cannot intentionally pursue some goals (e.g., you cannot have rationally the intention of finding by chance a 500€ note next morning) does not entail that the things you attain in an unintentional way are of no value to you: what gives something its value is not only our intentions, but also our desires and preferences (and I can obviously have the desire of being so lucky). In a similar way, though it is true that I may get a correct belief just by chance, it is not less true that I can also attain real knowledge by sheer luck (for example, I can discover a supernova in a far galaxy in my first time looking through a telescope); it is not clear for me why I may deserve merit for such a chance discovery, and not deserve it just because of some minimal, but fortunate mistake in the application of my cognitive capacities when I happen to have the belief “accidentally” (as has been defended by Greco 2004). Lastly, we have to take into account that the use of moral concepts as merit, justice (e.g., Fricker 2006), or trust, as an explanation of the value of knowledge becomes particularly unintuitive in those cases where knowledge is gained through plainly illegitimate means (e.g., torture).

3 An Inferentialist Theory of Epistemic Institutions

3.1 The Embeddedness of the Psychological and the Normative

In this last section I shall propose an alternative framework for the study of epistemic value. This framework is mainly inspired by a bunch of approaches to the pragmatic aspects of language (argumentation theory and inferentialism), and because of this, language will be very important in my schema, though it is not a merely “linguistic” analysis of knowledge, for other cognitive and social elements will also be essential. I want to start by proposing a framework in which some non-psychological entities (claims, considered as public, and normatively constituted events) play a central role. Combining the Sellarsian metaphor of rationality as the ability of being a player in the space of reasons, with David Lewis’ reading of Wittgensteinian language games as governed by a set of scorekeeping rules, and with the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (see van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004)), we can conceptualise deliberations (both individual and collective) as processes governed by inferential norms, in which each speaker becomes committed to some claims because of the other claims she has made, because of the happening of some other publicly observable facts (including the assertions of some other people), or
because of the way the relevant inferential rules govern how some previous commitments give place to others. Actually, what transforms the making of some noises or ink marks (or by the way, certain configuration of neurons’ firings) into a claim, i.e., into a public commitment, is just this network of inferential rules, which define what are the obligations or entitlements each agent has depending (in part) on what she or others have said. The obligations and entitlements a speaker has in a certain moment constitute her deontic score, and this not only includes the propositions she must or can assert, but also the actions she must or is allowed to perform.

I don’t think this approach needs, in order to work properly, some proof of how its basic normative entities (claims, obligations, entitlements, and inferential norms) can be derived from a physicalist description of the brain, or something like that, as the traditional ontology of beliefs and values does not need it either in order to be fruitful, but I also think it would not be fair to demand that this ontology of commitments has to be derived from the traditional ontology of mental states (for probably both are just useful inventions). Some authors (e.g., Brandom 1994) have indeed the project of replacing all talk about beliefs and preferences by normative concepts like doxastic and practical commitments, but I will not go so far, for I want to retain both ontologies: as we shall see, a nice understanding of the working of our epistemic practices arises out of the way in which the psychological and the normative interact. The situation here is similar to that in many areas of natural science, where the reducibility of a phenomenological theory that works empirically well (say, classical thermodynamics) to a more “fundamental” theory (say, statistical mechanics) can be seen as a point in favour of the latter, but not something necessary for the success of the former. So, I would like that the approach I am sketching here were assessed more as a phenomenological systematisation of our understanding of epistemic practices, than as an ontological explanation of their emergence, or something like that. If someone is able to show that the normative ontology is reducible to the traditional cognitive one, I shall celebrate it, but that is not my goal in this paper.

Figure 8.2 depicts the basic elements of the theory. An individual’s epistemic state in a given moment is described by two elements: her deontic score (i.e. the claims and actions she is committed or entitled to; or, more exactly, an indication of how much committed or entitled she is to each possible relevant claim or action; these claims include not only factual statements, but also

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3 A similar scheme, specifically applied to the case of science, was developed in Zamora-Bonilla (2006). See also González de Prado and Zamora-Bonilla (2015) for a more detailed discussion.
judgments of preference, or value judgments), plus her psychological state (i.e. her beliefs and desires, which don’t need to coincide with her deontic score). Epistemic states evolve, they can change both by their internal dynamics or by the influence of external events (or, more frequently, by both), though their two constitutive elements change according to their own laws; your deontic score evolves according to the inferential norms you are submitted to, but your beliefs and desires change according to psychological regularities or tendencies, which lack any normative content (though can lead you to states more or less acceptable from a normative point of view). It may happen that a process of deliberation starts with your beliefs nicely aligned with your doxastic commitments, but ends in a conclusion you simply don’t believe, even if you fail to identify some wrong step in your reasoning. Obviously, the same misalignment can exist between your practical commitments and your desires.

This does not mean that deontic scores and psychological states are completely independent from each other. After all, deontic scores come from somewhere, and though many of them are inherited by you from the commitments of other agents or social groups, in the end they must be grounded on some beliefs and desires you have, psychological states that the inferential norms can take as “external events”, in such a way that, ceteris paribus, the more intense a belief or desire of yours is, the more committed you will be to the corresponding claim or action. In a parallel way, we can assume that there must be some psychological mechanism which takes your realisation of your normative commitments as “external events” and makes it that, again ceteris
paribus, the more strongly committed you are to a claim or action, the more intensely you will believe it or desire it. The ceteris paribus condition is essential in both directions, because the most usual situation is that of having more or less conflicting commitments, conflicting beliefs, and conflicting desires, and in those circumstances no transparent relation can be found between your deontic score and you psychological state (one can even believe that one has a different deontic score from the one she really has, e.g., by making some mistake in the application of the inferential norms). The final element in the figure shows that some epistemic states will be followed by actions (including verbal actions), which in principle can coincide with the action you are more strongly committed to perform, with the one you most intensely desire, or with some other. Lastly, any action can constitute an external event for other agents as well as for yourself, and, of course, actions can trigger, due to natural processes of causation, other external events that will affect the epistemic states of the agents. Rationality would consist, hence, in our capacity of navigating in a satisfactory way this web of inferential links between psychological states and normative statuses. Compared to the traditional “rational choice model” prevalent in the social sciences, this view of rationality has the virtue of including as an unavoidable, non-accidental aspect of rational beings their use of reasons, i.e., of processes of reasoning, argumentation, and deliberation, as well as their use of language as the main cognitive tool to carry out those processes, and in particular the relevance of normative reasons as different from reasons based on other volitional states.

By an institution I mean a particular set of interrelated inferential norms connecting the normative scores of a group of agents. Hence, an epistemic institution will be one whose output is mainly constituted by doxastic commitments (more than by practical obligations). Some authors (e.g., Kusch (2009), Faulkner (2007)) have defended a communitarian view according to which epistemic practices only make sense within groups or communities. The schema depicted in the past paragraph is agnostic about this question, for the inferential norms can be interpreted as either “private” or “public”. My own opinion is that humans can only master a rich and meaningful system of inferential rules by learning it from others, but this is only possible thanks to the individual’s ability to interpret the behavior she is observing in others according to some patterns of information processing she must already have in her brain (although the process of learning can substitute those patterns for others). The behaviour of other agents is always an “external event” for you, and you cannot see the inferential norms your neighbours are following; the only thing you can do about it is to guess what norms they are, but in order to make sense of the others’ behavior as governed by some norms, you must first be able to discern
whether your predictions about others’ behavior are fulfilled or not (e.g., how do you learn that “no” means no?), and this ability is basically the same one that allows you to find out physical regularities in your environment and becoming angry or surprised when your predictions fail. Your guessing the rules followed by others proceeds by trial and error, not necessarily till when the actual inferential norms you master happen to be identical with those of your neighbours, but only till the moment when you have no further reason to revise them (i.e., when people reach a state of “reflective equilibrium”), and this can happen in a social state in which each individual has some slightly different interpretation of the inferential norms from the one other members of the group may have. This view of inferential norms as more or less variable is consistent with the observation that communities do not constitute completely homogeneous clusters with immense differences with other communities, but more or less diffuse sets with gradual differences. Lastly, this view of epistemic practices as variable and subjected to a process of transmission by imitation suggests a mechanism through which the inferential norms can evolve, which I shall employ in the next section. Hence, epistemic institutions are more an idealised description of social epistemic practices that are perceived as similar by us, than some monolithic collective entity which exists independently of individuals. Nevertheless, our schema does not only allow to describe epistemic institutions as constituted by the interrelated norms of single individuals, but it also permits to describe other institutions as collective agents which have their own deontic scores and inferential norms (what, by the way, is more palatable than claiming that these agents have “collective psychological states”). Institutions in the first sense are collective practices, whereas in the second sense they are collective bodies (see again González de Prado and Zamora-Bonilla (2015); see also Hetmański; Barbara Trybulec in this volume). An example of what I mean by an “epistemic institution” could be the system of inferential practices associated to a particular scientific discipline, or even a subset thereof, which has particular norms about what types of experiments are appropriate, how they must be performed, what kinds of arguments must count as persuasive, etc. Different judicial systems, or police research methods, would also clearly count as “epistemic institutions” in a more or less formal sense. But in reality, all ways in which a social group decides that some way of reaching and defending a certain type of conclusion is a legitimate one, would also be examples of epistemic practices.

3.2 The Value of Knowledge, and the Attribution of Deontic Scores
The view of knowledge that immediately derives from this description of epistemic practices is just the set of claims an individual or a group is committed
to, by the working of the inferential norms they have, and of the events and actions that have affected the evolution of their epistemic states. This is what the individual or the group takes as knowledge, something that can either be contested by other individual or groups, and that obviously can be false just in not a few cases. The obvious question, hence, from the point of view of value driven epistemology, is how to assess this “knowledge” and the epistemic practices involved in it. An epistemic institution will tend to produce doxastic commitments with some properties rather than ones lacking those properties; I suggest calling implicit epistemic values those goals that an epistemic institution seems to be promoting. Of course, the agents can also have themselves an explicit view of which ones are the goals they are promoting through the application of their inferential norms. From a more or less simplistic perspective, we could say that, for the considered individual or group, those claims are just the ones they must make, and so they don’t need any further assessment than the one that is implicit in the constitution of that stock of knowledge (i.e., the assessment implicit in their inferential norms). This view would be simplistic because agents can reach a non-optimal situation even according to their own standards (e.g., they can have misapplied the inferential norms, according to their own interpretation of them). A normative assessment of the set of claims attained by those agents could consist, then, in showing what other claims would have been better according to their own standards. But there is still a further step we can take, for we can make an assessment of the inferential norms themselves; after all, some norms can conflict with others, pull into different directions, so to say, and we can try to identify in the set of criteria employed by the agents some “metanorms” that would help to solve this tension. Or we can find out some argument showing that some goals the agents actually endorse would be promoted much more efficiently with a different set of inferential norms. Naturally, all this applies as well to the assessment of our own epistemic practices (see also Silva in this volume).

However, the evaluation of epistemic practices and inferential norms only makes sense, in general, if it is possible to change them. But, is it? There is no single answer to this question. In one extreme, from the point of view on an individual agent, the inferential norms she is subjected to are the rules that constitute what she understands when making or hearing a judgment, and so a change in those norms might even be unintelligible for her. But probably this unintelligibility comes in degrees, and some inferential norms are more subjected to voluntary change than others. In the other extreme, some epistemic institutions simply determine what must be published (and so, only much more indirectly what must be believed), and in these cases it is very easy to imagine ways in which a change in the relevant norms could be carried out. I shall not
devote much space here to discuss how the evaluation of inferential norms can proceed, nor about the mechanisms through which they can be transformed (see Zamora Bonilla 2006, Secs. 5–6). I shall only say that the process of imitation with errors described above makes it reasonable to expect that the most widespread inferential norms will be relatively efficient in fulfilling the agents’ actual desires, as well as those generating a high degree of coherence between the doxastic claims determined by the norms and the agents’ actual beliefs, particularly the coherence between claims about future events and beliefs perceptually generated out of those events. Those norms that don’t help the agents in this way, will most likely tend to be replaced by more successful “versions” (in this sense, and not only in the sense that the working of these norms and institutions counts as a type of “reasoning” practice, we can claim that it is legitimate to call rationality to the kind of capacity this working endows its practitioners). I admit this is not a complete evolutionary explanation (a lot of things should be added regarding the mechanisms of modification, transmission, and selection), but I think it is enough for justifying our taking as a default assumption something like a “charity principle” when considering the agents’ inferential norms. Criticism of prevailing inferential norms will not be excluded, but it must have some previous justification.

So, the argument with which I want to close this section refers to the use that the agents themselves make of epistemic notions. My basic assumption is that terms like “knowledge”, “belief”, and the like, are employed (as Brandom would put it) to make it explicit the deontic statuses implicit in having certain epistemic commitments and entitlements. I don’t think we can trust too much in the conclusions drawn from “genealogical” approaches attaining to explain our use of epistemic terms (e.g., Craig (1990), Kusch (2009)), for the evolution of inferential norms is probably too fortuitous, and no attempt to reconstruct the “true” history of those notions is very likely to hit the nail on the head. Rather, those fictional genealogies are more profitably read as “rational reconstructions” of our current use of those notions, especially if they were combined with a study about how children learn the use of those terms, and with how different languages diverge in the use of related expressions. Actually, I think that the present normative uses of terms like “knowing” and “believing” constitutes enough evidence for the type of conclusions that Craig, Kusch, and others are trying to reach.

What the inferential approach depicted above suggest is that, in order to understand the role of a term like “knowing”, we have just to describe how its use affects the allocation of rights and responsibilities of the agents. The inferential norms that constitute deliberational or testimonial practices establish what are the claims an agent is entitled or committed to make, according to
the evidence she has, and also how her deontic score can modify the commitments and entitlements of other agents. For example, the (misguiding) intuition that knowledge is more valuable than true belief may arise because attributions of knowledge to an agent attach to her deontic score a stronger entitlement to the relevant claims (as well as a stronger entitlement to pass on other agents an obligation of accepting those claims) than attributions of belief. Even if the belief happens to be true (or is accepted as true by some third agent), the simple fact that it is true does not provide the believer with a stronger entitlement to the claim, for the inferential norms will probably make this entitlement depend on the evidence the first agent had for the claim, not on its truth. But the epistemic institutions involved in these processes are very different from context to context: the ways how entitlements are constituted, and how they generate commitments in other subjects (e.g., in testimony), are very different in trials, in a scientific lab, in the torture chamber, in a commercial firm, or in a pub conversation, and for sensible reasons. Probably there is little that all these “institutions” have in common, save that some inferential norms determine how entitlements and commitments are constituted and transferred, and that the goal of reaching true claims and beliefs is essential for the evaluation of these norms. Each epistemic institution will probably exist because the way it handles deontic scores satisfies relatively well the goals of the agents in the relevant context, though this does not mean that attempts to improve those norms will always be pointless.

References


