Epistemic Practices: A unified account of epistemic and zetetic normativity

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Abstract

This paper presents the epistemic practices account, a theory about the nature of epistemic normativity. The account aims to explain how the pursuit of epistemic values such as truth and knowledge can give rise to epistemic norms. On this account, epistemic norms are the internal rules of epistemic social practices. The account explains four crucial features of epistemic normativity while dissolving some apparent tensions between them. The account also provides a unified theory of epistemic and zetetic normativity.

1 Introduction

When someone engages in wishful thinking, trusts irresponsibly, or jumps to a conclusion hastily, they fail in a distinctive way. On the other hand, when someone trusts responsibly, gathers evidence from a variety of sources, and bases their beliefs on good evidence, they succeed in a distinctive way. Evaluating people based on this specific kind of success and failure is familiar and ordinary. While the term "epistemic" is a philosophical term of art, it names this ordinary way of evaluating people's performances and attitudes. *Epistemic normativity* is the distinctive kind of normativity that we apply in making such evaluations.

I will offer a theory about the nature and purpose of epistemic normativity based on the idea that epistemic evaluation is grounded in social practices. According to this *epistemic practices account*, epistemic norms and standards are the internal norms and standards of epistemic practices: those social practices which aim at promoting epistemic values, and do so reliably enough. The epistemic practices account treats both traditional epistemic norms and norms of inquiry—i.e., *zetetic norms*—as being norms of epistemic social practices. One immediate benefit of the account is that it dissolves an apparent tension between zetetic norms and traditional epistemic norms.

The epistemic practices view is motivated by certain facts about epistemic normativity that need to be explained. First, epistemic norms are useful for obtaining epistemic values (and other values). Second, epistemic norms seem to apply to agents even when they don't personally care about epistemic goals. Third, not every epistemic performance that promotes epistemic values is epistemically permissible. Fourth, different research fields can permissibly employ different epistemic norms. These facts all need to be explained by an account of the nature of epistemic normativity, but they are in apparent tension. In addition, a theory of epistemic normativity should explain the connection between epistemic and zetetic norms, despite the apparent tension between these types of normativity.

In what follows, I will present and explain the epistemic practices account. Then, I will show how it satisfies the desiderata and dissolves the tensions between them. Finally, I will defend the view from some important objections.

2 The Epistemic Practices Account

The project of this paper is meta-epistemology. It concerns the nature of epistemic normativity, including questions about: whether epistemic rules, standards, and reasons are genuinely normative; in what sense they are normative; and why they are normative. The central issue of this paper is how epistemic values give rise to epistemic norms, standards, and reasons. The epistemic practices account aims to answer this question.

2.1 The Account

The epistemic practices account (EPA) can be summarized in terms of the following commitments[1]:

1. An **epistemic practice** is a social practice that is oriented toward epistemic values, has epistemic values as internal aims, and has internal rules that promote epistemic values in an adequate manner.

2. An **epistemic performance** is an act or state of an agent that counts as a part of an epistemic practice according to the rules and standards of that practice.[2]

3. An **epistemic norm** is a rule in the internal rule set of an epistemic practice.

[1] The EPA is compatible with treating these commitments as traditional biconditional definitions, or as weaker explanatory claims.

[2] The notion of "performance" here is meant to be neutral, so that it includes both performing actions and being in states. Thus, beliefs can count as performances, even if one is an involuntarist. Compare this to Sosa (e.g., in (Sosa 2015)). However, if you are uncomfortable with calling states "performances", you can simply substitute "performances or states" for any discussion in this paper that uses the former term.

4. An **epistemic standard** is a standard of excellence for evaluating performances within an epistemic practice, as determined by the internal rule set of the practice.

5. An **epistemic reason** is a reason that favors a performance because it promotes epistemic values in a way that satisfies the internal rules and standards of an epistemic practice.

This is a theory of epistemic normativity that explains epistemic norms, standards, and reasons in terms of value-oriented, rule-based social practices that promote epistemic values.

In the remainder of this section, I will unpack and explain each commitment. First, I will discuss a few preliminary clarifications. Then, I will explain the notion of a social practice that I am relying on (section 2.2), before explaining the particular features of (genuine) epistemic practices (section 2.3).

By *epistemic values*, I mean the valuable epistemic states or achievements that are the aims, goals, or ends of epistemic performances. The epistemic practices view is, strictly speaking, neutral about what the epistemic values are. The view is compatible with both monistic and pluralist views that include true belief, knowledge, understanding, or other achievements as being epistemic values.[3] Throughout the paper, I will use the term "epistemic value" as a neutral placeholder. I will assume that epistemic values include at least true belief, knowledge, and understanding. However, the epistemic practices view would be compatible with recognizing various other epistemic values, as additions or replacements. Making this assumption will simply make it easier to tackle the questions at issue in this paper.

By a *norm*, I mean a rule concerning what one ought to do (or believe), or concerning what one is permitted to do or believe.[4] Sometimes, norms of this sort are called *deontic norms*. In contrast, *evaluative standards* determine whether an object or performance is a good instance of its type.[5] There are epistemic standards for evaluating attitudes and performances that may be only indirectly relevant to epistemic permissions and obligations. However, where it won't cause confusion, I will often refer to both norms and standards as "norms".

Reasons are propositions (or facts) that favor undertaking actions or being in states.[6] Epistemic reasons are reasons that concern promoting the internal

[3]For defenses of true belief, knowledge, and understanding as epistemic values, see (Goldman 1999), (Williamson 2000), and (Dellsén 2018), respectively. I suspect that there is actually broad agreement about which things count as epistemic values. Disputes about epistemic value are most often about which values are fundamental or why some are more valuable than others (e.g., knowledge over truth) (Bondy n.d.; Greco & Pinto de Sa 2018).

[4]For discussion of rules see (Reiland 2024). The epistemic practices account is compatible with an imperatival view of rules, one that treats them as general, standing commands. It is also compatible with a propositional view of rules that treats them as propositions that ascribe a positive or negative property to actions.

[5]For a discussion of the relation between deontic and evaluative concepts, see (Berker 2022).

[6]The account is not meant to explain what reasons are, but to distinguish the epistemic reasons from the non-epistemic ones. The account is compatible with all the leading theories of reasons

aims of an epistemic practice. For instance, evidence is one kind of epistemic reason. A piece of evidence favors my believing a proposition because the evidence suggests that the proposition is more likely to be true (Kelly 2016). To count as a genuine epistemic reason, the *way* a reason favors (or disfavors) a performance must itself cohere with the internal rules and standards of the epistemic practice. (This point will be important for explaining wrong-kind reasons below).

2.2 Social Practices

Social practices, as I will understand them here, are patterns of activities people engage in together. Social practices can be simple, as in the practice of driving a car on the right-hand side of the road. They can also be complex, as in computer programming or gridiron football. Practices can be maintained by small groups, large organizations, or society as a whole. They can be frivolous, as in game-playing practices, or serious, as in oncology.

For the purposes of this paper, I will define social practices as follows:

Social practice: A set of activities that are interrelated and mutually responsive to one another, undertaken by a particular population of agents, with a specific history.[7]

Here, an activity is a repeated pattern of actions or performances. The actions involved are intentional actions, rather than mere behavior. Actions (and performances) are responsive to one another when the actions taken by one agent depend on what other agents are doing. For instance, when playing in a symphony orchestra, the actions of a violinist are responsive to the actions of their section, the other sections of the orchestra, and the conductor. And the actions of the other members of the orchestra depend on what the violinist is doing. Each member's actions are also responsive to the performances of symphony orchestras in the past. The symphony is a practice with a particular history, whose members are part of that history in virtue of the mutually responsive performances they engage in. While this example is of a cooperative activity, competitive activities can also count as mutually responsive.

and the favoring relation. For an overview of these, see (Alvarez 2017).

[7]This notion of social practices is inspired by work by various philosophers, many of whom draw on social scientific work. Those I am most influenced by are: Haslanger (2018), who defines practices for use in social philosophy; Riggle (2022, in press) and Lopes (2018), who offer similar views for analogous purposes in aesthetics; Rouse (2002, 2007), Chang (2012), and Longino (1990), who appeal to practices in philosophy of science; MacIntyre (1981) on practices and traditions; and Rawls (1955) and Hart (1959) on social practices of punishment. Much of the recent work on practices is also influenced by work on social norms (Bicchieri, Muldoon, & Sontuoso 2023). On responsiveness, I'm influenced by Bratman (2014) and Rouse. Other related appeals to practices in epistemology can be found in (Alston 1993, Ch. 4), (Bengson, Cuneo, & Shafer-Landau 2019), (Hookway 2006) and (Wei in press). Greco (2020) and Graham (2020) appeal to social norms to explain testimony and assertion in a way that is similar to, and largely compatible with, the EPA. Goldberg (2018) appeals to social practices and social roles to explain legitimate epistemic expectations people have about one another.

There isn't space here to give an exhaustive account of social practices.[8] Instead, I want to appeal to five features of social practices that are important for enabling the epistemic practices account to explain epistemic normativity.

First, a practice is value-oriented when it functions in a community to promote specific values. For instance, games and sports function to promote values of social cohesion and the pleasure of the participants or spectators. The values promoted by a value-oriented practice may serve to justify the practice, and may also help to explain why it arose and persists (Lopes 2018; MacIntyre 1981; Riggle in press). Note that these values may diverge from the internal aims of the practice: the goals for which participants of the practice act or perform (Riggle in press). In games, for example, the internal aims of the practice will typically involve winning, or achievement, rather than the values the practice functions to promote. However, epistemic practices as I understand them will typically have internal aims that include the epistemic values that the practices are oriented toward.

Second, social practices are rule-governed when practitioners follow, obey, or are otherwise sensitive to a set of rules associated with the practice. Moreover, the rules are part of what explains the patterns that make participants' repeated actions into mutually responsive activities. The most commonly discussed examples of rule-governed practices are games and sports. The rules determine which performances are permissible/impermissible in a practice, and also establish standards of correctness and excellence for evaluating performances.[9]

Rules are enacted socially in virtue of people's acceptance of them. Rules can be accepted either implicitly or explicitly. The form of this acceptance, and the relationship between the rules and the patterned activities they govern, can come in several varieties. In some practices, participants typically follow the rules. This leads to patterns of activity that we might call *well-respected social norms*.[10] In other practices, the actual patterns of activity diverge quite significantly from what the rules prescribe. However, as suggested by Rouse (2007), practitioners exhibit their acceptance of the rules by holding each other accountable to them, and by evaluating each other in light of them. This evaluative activity can be enough to establish that a rule is in force, and provide social pressure to keep it in force, even where the activity doesn't follow the rule well enough to count as a well-respected social norm. These rules, as implemented by the evaluative behavior, then help explain the actual patterns of activity, even when they are divergent from what is prescribed by the norms.[11] This is a crucial feature of social practices for the epistemic practices account. Rules can often—or even typically—be violated. Thus, not every common pat-

[8] For detailed discussions about the nature of social practices aimed at philosophers, see Haslanger (2018); Lopes (2018); Riggle (in press).

[9] As noted above, the EPA is compatible with either an imperatival or propositional account of the nature of rules Reiland (2024).

[10] See (Bicchieri et al. 2023) for a discussion of the kind of social norms I have in mind here.

[11] For further discussion of the idea of rules which are established by the activity of holding accountable or evaluating, see (Haslanger 2018; Rouse 2002, 2007).

tern of behavior by practitioners will count as permissible by the rules of the practice.

Third, a social practice is conventional when its internal aims, rules, and standards are partially determined by the previous partially arbitrary choices of individuals. To be conventional, a choice must be partially arbitrary. The canonical example of conventionality is the social practice of driving on a particular side of the road (Lewis 1969). It doesn't matter which side of the road is selected for driving, only that everyone sticks with a single choice. The internal rules of a social practice can be conventional; though not just any rule set will do for promoting a set of values, there are multiple acceptable options. A social practice coordinates on a specific rule set.

Fourth, practices involve and promote specialization. Practitioners can do better at promoting the values of a practice if they take particular, specialized roles within the practice (Lopes 2018, Ch. 6). We can also think of activities or performances themselves as being specialized within a practice. For instance, in hockey, making a save is an activity for a specialist goaltender. All players engage in other performance types, but these types are clearly distinguishable. Every hockey player should know how to pass and shoot, but these are different performance types, governed by different rules.

Fifth, practices can be related to one another. One important kind of relation is nesting, i.e., when practices have sub- and super-relationships.[12] Goaltending is a social practice itself, but it is also a sub-practice of hockey, which is a sub-practice of sport. A sub-practice can be considered (and evaluated) independently from its super-practice, though it may also inherit its value orientation or some of its rules from the super-practice.

Crucially, research fields provide useful examples of nested epistemic practices. Oncology is a sub-practice of medicine, which is a sub-practice of science. In addition, a given practice can be a sub-practice of distinct super-practices. For example, the U.S. judicial system has specific epistemic sub-practices. The epistemic sub-practices will also be sub-practices of a broader epistemic practice, even though the judicial system is not in a nested relationship with the broader epistemic practice.

2.3 Epistemic Practices

Recall the EPA's description of epistemic practices:

> **Epistemic practices** are social practices that are oriented toward epistemic values, have epistemic values as internal aims, and have internal rules that adequately promote epistemic values.

What makes an epistemic practice *epistemic* is that it adequately aims at a genuine epistemic value. As explained above, I assume epistemic values include true belief, knowledge, and understanding.

[12] Riggle (in press) suggests something similar in different terms.

Adequacy is a matter of meeting some threshold of reliability in promoting epistemic values. A practice must produce epistemic value well enough to count as epistemic. Otherwise, it is either not epistemic or it is defective in a way that makes it inadequate for generating genuine epistemic norms, and so is not the kind of practice at issue for the epistemic practices account.[13] Determining what degree of reliability is required for adequacy will require thinking about specific epistemic practices. Since different research fields aim to answer different questions, they require different degrees of reliability from their methods. Some questions require more precision, are harder to answer, or involve greater time pressure. Thus, there is not a one-size-fits-all answer about the degree of reliability required for adequacy. Given this contextual sensitivity, determining whether a practice is adequate requires specific, in-context judgments about that practice in particular. (I will return to this idea below in section 5).

What we can say in general, however, is that the adequacy condition rules out, as non-epistemic, social practices that (purport to) aim at epistemic values, but which fail to promote those values in an acceptable way. One way that such practices can be unacceptable is if there are alternative rules that are significantly better at promoting epistemic values, and practitioners are in a position to know this. We can also recognize when practices are deeply internally incoherent, such that their rules cannot be consistently followed.[14] These methods allow us to identify purportedly epistemic practices that are thoroughly unreliable due to pernicious ignorance or bias.

Epistemic practices are characterized by all of the important features of social practices discussed above. I will discuss how each feature applies in turn.

First, epistemic practices are value-oriented. Specifically, they are oriented toward the epistemic values of truth, knowledge, and understanding. This is the justification for engaging in them and helps to explain why they persist. When we rely on a particular scientific field, it is because we expect practitioners in that field to engage in activities of inquiry that reliably achieve these epistemic values. The epistemic values are also the internal aims of epistemic practices. Subjects engaged in ordinary testimony, criminal investigations, or scientific inquiry will typically explicitly tell you they aim at achieving truth, knowledge, or understanding. Even when practitioners themselves don't explicitly take on these aims, their performances function to promote them.

Second, epistemic practices are rule-governed. A practice's rules govern evidence possession, evidential favoring relations, and thresholds of evidence required for performances such as belief, acceptance, and theory pursuit. These rules are different for different epistemic practices, as they aim to answer different questions using different resources. The rules in an epistemic practice are constrained by the adequate promotion requirement—otherwise, the practice won't count as genuinely epistemic. So, a genuine epistemic practice will

[13] Compare this to how Lopes (2018) and Riggle (in press) demarcate aesthetic practices.

[14] Compare (Bengson, Cuneo, & Shafer-Landau 2023) on internal consistency.

have rules that prescribe (some) valid inferences and proscribe invalid ones.

Third, epistemic practices are conventional. Adequate promotion is permissive: the adequacy constraints on which rules are in force will only rarely (if ever) narrow down the set of rules to a single permissible set. Any group that aims at achieving epistemic values regarding a particular topic area will be faced with a set of permissible but mutually inconsistent sets of rules. To have a coherent and cooperative practice, members must responsively support each other in promoting epistemic values, rather than interfere with one another. To that end, epistemic practices must conventionally determine a rule set from among the set of permissible rule sets. This is the only way to solve the coordination problems inherent to social epistemic activities.[15]

Inference rules illustrate these coordination problems. Not all valid deductive inferences are epistemically rational. That is, we have specific rules for which *immediate* valid inferences are rational. Other deductive derivations are valid but not rational as immediate inferences: we require further proof before we accept their validity. For instance, consider Dogramaci's *Fermat's Rule*, which is an inference rule that licenses an immediate inference from the basic axioms of arithmetic to Fermat's last theorem (without any intermediate steps or proof) (2013, p. 777). Fermat's rule is valid but not rationally permissible. The rules for rational immediate deductive inference only permit clear cases of valid inference that everyone can employ, and on which everyone is coordinated. As Dogramaci argues, this coordination ensures that each of us can trust that the inferences made by everyone can be collected together in a consistent and coherent whole that the community accepts.

Of course, the same considerations apply concerning collecting evidence and making inductive inferences. Not all strong inductive inferences are rational. We must agree on our standards for what counts as evidence, what sorts of evidential favoring relations we take to be reasonable, and what threshold of evidence is required before we accept a conclusion. As noted above, the answers to these questions are different in different scientific fields. However, any particular research field needs to coordinate on a set of rules. Otherwise, there will be incoherence in the way evidence is collected and treated which will undermine the value of testimony in the field. And the importance of coordination is not exhausted by considerations of testimony. Similar points apply to other kinds of coordinated and joint actions undertaken during inquiry, e.g., running experiments, co-authoring, or grant distribution.

On my account, epistemic social practices determine the specific set of rules communities should follow for inference and evidence evaluation—selected from the permissible set of rule sets for promoting epistemic values. The acceptance of the rules by members of the practice, and their actions of holding each other accountable to those rules, determines a specific rule set. Not every social practice will be coordinated and coherent enough to determine a specific

[15] My discussion here is heavily influenced by Dogramaci's epistemic communitarianism (2012; 2013). Other recent discussions of similar ideas about epistemic coordination as the ground of epistemic norms can be found in (Dyke 2021; Hannon & Woodard 2023).

rule set, but some clearly do so, as illustrated by games and legal systems.

Epistemic practices also have the fourth and fifth features of social practices: they allow for specialization (Goldberg 2018), and they can be interrelated, particularly in sub- and super-practice relations. Concerning the latter point, I suspect that social communities have an overriding, super-epistemic practice of which all other epistemic practices are sub-practices. But that isn't a commitment of the account. All that is required is that we have epistemic practices that we are members of (or should be members of) by which we can be evaluated when engaged in typical epistemic performances of inquiry and doxastic attitude formation.

Not all practices with epistemic aims are genuine epistemic practices, by the lights of the epistemic practices account. Some practices will do an inadequate job of promoting epistemic values, and so will fail to count as generating epistemic norms, standards, and reasons. This might be because the practice includes non-epistemic aims in a way that undercuts its ability to promote its epistemic aims. Or it might be deficient for some other reason. Thus, the account might alternatively be called the *authentic* epistemic practices account: only the authentic epistemic practices play a role in grounding genuine epistemic normativity.

3 Advantages of the Account

The primary justification for the epistemic practices account is that it does the best job of explaining the features of epistemic normativity. In particular, it satisfies several desiderata for a theory of epistemic normativity that have stymied other accounts, in part due to the apparent tension between the features in question. In this section, I will discuss four of these desiderata and argue that the EPA explains them in a way that dissolves their apparent tension.

3.1 Instrumentalist Motivations

We care about epistemic norms because they are useful. Following epistemic norms is a crucially important means for obtaining truth, knowledge, and understanding. These epistemic values are also instrumentally valuable for achieving other ends. But following epistemic norms is useful *for obtaining epistemic values*. For instance, believing only things that fit your evidence will make it more likely that you believe the truth. So, the first desideratum for a theory of epistemic normativity is that it coheres with, and explains, this instrumental value of epistemic norms for obtaining epistemic values.

Instrumentalism is a theory about epistemic normativity based on the idea that the usefulness of epistemic norms is their fundamental feature.[16] According to instrumentalism, the normativity of epistemic norms, standards, and

[16]For helpful recent discussions of instrumentalism, see (Bondy 2017; Côté-Bouchard 2019; Dyke 2021; Hannon & Woodard 2023; Steglich-Petersen 2021; Willoughby 2022).

reasons reduces to ordinary instrumental or "means-end" rationality. Instrumental rationality is simply a matter of taking actions that promote your own goals given what you know. The normativity here is generated simply by an individual's interest in taking useful actions to achieve their own desires. For the instrumentalist, epistemic normativity is just a particular kind of instrumental rationality, where the desires or goals in question are epistemic values.

Instrumentalism has a lot going for it. It captures the evident fact that epistemic norms are instrumentally valuable for obtaining epistemic values. It is also very lightweight in its ontological commitments. It reduces epistemic normativity to an easily naturalizable form: instrumental rationality is explained in terms of reliably or efficiently promoting a goal or desire, which in turn can be explained in non-normative terms. All the normativity results from the goals or desires of agents. If epistemic normativity is instrumentalist, then we get it for free with instrumental rationality more generally. Instrumentalism also provides a highly unified account of rationality: epistemic rationality and practical rationality are both explained in instrumental terms (Bondy 2017). Moreover, the view easily explains intuitively rational cases of pragmatic reasons for belief (Reisner 2018; Rinard 2015).

The first desideratum, then, is to offer an account that respects these instrumentalist motivations.

3.2 Categorical force of epistemic norms

Despite all the advantages of instrumentalism, it seems to get something wrong about the nature of epistemic normativity. Epistemic norms appear to have *categorical force*: they apply to people whether they care about epistemic values or not. Intuitively, we think that your beliefs should fit your evidence even if you personally do not have epistemic goals. It is irrational to have beliefs that do not fit your evidence, regardless of your preferences on the matter, and regardless of your own desires.

One influential argument for the categorical force of epistemic norms is the so-called "too few reasons objection" stemming from cases provided by Heil (1992) and Kelly (2003).[17] In these cases, a subject does not desire or aim at a true belief about a particular question, but we still negatively epistemically evaluate their performance.

Consider a case inspired by Kelly (2003):

> **Spoiled** Sara is excited to see a new movie, but can't make it on opening weekend. She does not want to know the movie's ending because she wants to experience the story for herself. In order to avoid spoilers, she attempts to avoid talking with her friend Larry who saw the movie. Larry is honest, reliable, and talkative. Unfortunately, he catches up to her, and blurts out "I was so surprised

[17] This objection has inspired a great deal of discussion, sometimes under different terms. Hannon and Woodard point out that it is "difficult to overstate the influence of this objection"(2023, p. 4). See also (Côté-Bouchard 2015) and (Willoughby 2022) for recent discussions.

that the villain turned out to be the hero's father!".

The point of this case is to show that epistemic norms and standards still apply to Sara's attitudes concerning the movie's ending, even though she does not desire to know the movie's ending. She would prefer to remain ignorant so she can enjoy the movie. However, if she does form a belief regarding the main character's father, it should be the belief that his father is the villain. Forming such a belief is rationally required—i.e., obligatory by the epistemic norms—even though it undermines her goals. If she forms another belief, she would be irrational. Thus, the epistemic norms apply to Sara regardless of her personal goals and desires.

It is easy to create cases like *spoiled*. Hence, it seems that epistemic norms (at least sometimes) have categorical force. They apply regardless of our individual goals. This is a problem for epistemic instrumentalism. Instrumentalists must either argue that the intuitions concerning this case are misguided, or argue that there is some way for instrumentalism to make sense of the categorical or universal force of epistemic norms.

One instrumentalist response is to suggest that everyone shares specific epistemic goals, even if they conflict with some of their other goals (as in the cases in question).[18] Perhaps epistemic goals help promote so many of our other goals that they serve as a general goal for everyone in every case. This option requires a complicated error theory given the many cases like *spoiled*, and the many agents who don't seem to have epistemic goals. Another option is to suggest that epistemic norms are social or collective in some way and that this allows them to be instrumental but have a more universal seeming force (Dyke 2021). That is, Sara might not have a goal of truth, but her community does, and this is what allows us to epistemically evaluate her. However, extant versions of this social strategy require improvement. For one thing, social instrumentalist accounts require an explanation of why the social goals are binding on individual agents (Hannon & Woodard 2023; Willoughby 2022). Thus far, no suggested solution has resulted in general assent even among instrumentalists, let alone convinced those who press the objection.[19]

One might take the too few reasons problem as a knock-down objection to instrumentalism. However, this is too fast. The alternatives to instrumentalism suffer from their own problems. Most pressingly, any alternative view that suggests that epistemic normativity is a non-instrumental, *sui generis* form of normativity has a serious overdetermination or *coincidence* problem (Cowie 2014; Willoughby 2022). It is absolutely clear that epistemic norms *are* instrumentally valuable for achieving epistemic values. Believing according to the evidence, for instance, is an excellent way of obtaining epistemic values. This provides an explanation for the existence of such epistemic norms, and for why they should be expected to develop, through biological or cultural evolution.[20]

[18]For discussion of this kind of response, see (Willoughby 2022) and Friedman (2024).

[19]For further discussion see Côté-Bouchard (2019); Friedman (2024); Hannon and Woodard (2023); Willoughby (2022).

[20]For discussion of the evolutionary and ontogenetic development of epistemic norms, see

A non-instrumental account of epistemic normativity owes us an explanation for the connection between the existence of the norms and their usefulness. Otherwise, it appears to be a strange coincidence that the *sui generis* norms would be so useful.

So, the second desideratum is an explanation of the apparent categorical force of epistemic normativity. The first two desiderata for an account of epistemic normativity are thus in apparent conflict.

3.3 Explaining the first two desiderata

One of the main benefits of practice-based views, in general, is that they allow us to distinguish what is required for justifying a practice from what is required for justifying a particular performance within the practice.[21]

For example, Rawls (1955, p. 13) suggests that the social practice of promising is justified by its utilitarian value. However, when determining whether to keep a promise, one cannot simply compare the action of keeping or breaking the promise in terms of its expected value. Doing so would violate the internal rules and standards of the practice of promising. And given the nature of promising, making a habit of such deliberation would undermine the practice. If I am deliberating about whether to fulfill a promise to repay you a debt, the reasons I am allowed to consider, by the lights of the practice of promising, do not include whether paying you back would lead to the best downstream consequences. It would be a violation of the internal rules of promising for me to instead give the money to charity because doing so would better increase aggregate welfare. The reasons that are appropriate to consider concern only what would count as keeping the promise. Indeed, this is part of the whole purpose of the practice: to bind individuals to courses of action despite what other reasons might arise.[22]

The epistemic practices account appeals to the same kind of distinction in making sense of the first two desiderata. The justification for having epistemic practices is instrumentalist: they help us obtain epistemic values such as truth, knowledge, and understanding. Epistemic practices help us better promote epistemic values because practices allow us to effectively coordinate our social action so that we gain more epistemic values collectively, and so that we can more effectively and securely transmit those values to other members of our

(Tomasello 2020).

[21] This is one of the primary motivations for practice-based accounts generally, going back at least to Rawls' (1955) and Hart's (1959) use of the idea to distinguish reasons for punishing from reasons for having a specific practice of punishment. (Rawls cites Pickard-Cambridge (1932) as the earliest version of the move he was aware of). Maguire and Woods (2020) also appeal to this main benefit in their game-based account of epistemic normativity for belief. Wei (in press) offers a practice-based account of the truth norm for belief with a similar aim. Lopes (2018) and Riggle (in press), cited previously, offer practice-based accounts of aesthetic normativity and appeal to this same benefit. (Cowie 2014, p. 4011) briefly considers a view that is *very* similar to the EPA, which he takes to a form of "constitutivism", which is motivated by this benefit.

[22] Of course, actual practices of promising in real societies are more complicated than this simple picture just sketched.

epistemic practice and broader community.[23] This also helps to explain their persistence. In sum, the EPA accommodates instrumentalist motivations for epistemic normativity at the level of evaluation and justification of epistemic practices. This explains how the usefulness of epistemic norms is relevant to generating epistemic normativity.

Epistemic norms and standards are ultimately justified in virtue of being part of epistemic practices. However, the content of these norms need not directly reflect the instrumentalist justification for having the practice. Indeed, having explicitly instrumentalist rules may be inimical to an epistemic practice in just the same way that they would be inimical to effective promising. That is, the best way to collectively obtain epistemic values will typically involve having rules that refer to things other than maximizing expected epistemic utility for an individual participant (Hare 1981). Instead, their content will involve things such as believing according to the evidence, asserting knowledgeably, and gathering evidence responsibly. For instance, the most effective rules for structuring collective action in an epistemic practice might exclude individuals from taking epistemic bribes, as doing so may result in better collective results. These rules may also exclude some valid inferences, and some strong inductive inferences, in order to achieve coordination among practitioners. An epistemic practice with norms like these will be more instrumentally valuable, as a social practice.

At the same time, the internal rules of a practice are applicable to performances within the practice, *regardless of whether the agent performing desires the goals of the practice themselves*. The internal rules of the practice are normatively independent of more general norms governing agents' behavior. Moreover, they are in force within the practice regardless of whether an agent cares about satisfying them. This is important for making sense of the second desideratum, the seeming categorical force of epistemic rules and evaluations.

The rules for a social practice determine which performances count as taking place within the practice. An agent need not care about the practice's internal aims and rules for their performance to be evaluated by practitioners according to the rules of the practice. If I sign up for a bowling league, show up for my assigned game time, and start rolling balls down the lane, those performances are genuine bowling performances and can be evaluated as such. This is true even if I don't care at all about bowling and am only there to make a friend happy, or to mock the sport. What makes these evaluations appropriate is the existence of the social practice and its internal rules and standards.

Evaluations within a practice thus display a kind of categoricity: they are independent of individual motivations. They are not merely hypothetical imperatives, in that they apply to performances even where agents do not have a goal of conforming to the rules of the practice.

As a result, the epistemic practices account can accommodate our intuitions in cases like *Spoiled* from section 3.2. In that case, Sara has no desire to learn

[23] For the notion of transmission, and discussion of transmission within a community, see Greco (2020).

the ending of a movie. But upon being presented with testimony about it, she is plausibly governed by epistemic norms in forming attitudes about the matter. This is true regardless of her actual desire to avoid gaining epistemic values regarding the movie's ending. The epistemic practices account explains how we can still evaluate her: her belief-formation (or suspension) on the movie's ending is an epistemic performance. It is governed by the internal rules of the general epistemic practice of her society. These rules require forming beliefs according to your evidence, and forming beliefs when you have totally compelling evidence on a topic of conversation. If Sara fails to do either of those things, she violates the rules of the practice.

Of course, that a performance is evaluable by the standards of a social practice might not matter at all to the agent. It could even be irrelevant to what the agent should do, all things considered. Or it could simply be outweighed by more important considerations. Just as sometimes it is appropriate to break promises, it can sometimes be appropriate to violate epistemic norms. If one is moved by the cases of pragmatic reasons for belief, this is how the epistemic practices account can accommodate such cases. If believing that I will get better improves my chances of surviving an illness, then I have good practical reason to believe in my eventual recovery. All things considered, I am better off so believing. However, I can still be evaluated epistemically, by the lights of the relevant epistemic practice (perhaps, in this case, the general epistemic practice of my society). The independence of epistemic norms, and the fact that epistemic evaluations are appropriate according to practices we (the evaluators) participate in, helps to explain our intuitions in cases like *spoiled*.

At the same time, people typically *do* have very good reason to take part in epistemic practices. Epistemic values are useful for individuals and societies to have. Failure to take part in practices that function to produce these individual and social goods will often be individually irrational and socially irresponsible. In many cases, participation in epistemic practices may even be morally obligatory. Hence, in addition to the normative independence of rules internal to a practice, the EPA also explains another reason why we should have strong intuitions in cases like *spoiled*: agents who fail to take part in a practice (or to abide by its rules) are very often either socially irresponsible or individually irrational.

The epistemic practices account thus explains the apparent categorical force of epistemic evaluation. The force of such norms doesn't rise to the level of a fully categorical norm, in that there are some cases where people can be perfectly reasonable in ignoring or not caring about epistemic norms. But the independent nature of the normativity of social practices explains the fact that we can evaluate agents by appeal to epistemic norms, even where they don't care at all for the epistemic norms or values themselves. And since epistemic values—and epistemic practices—are very useful, we should expect that agents morally and prudentially ought to follow epistemic norms most of the time.

3.4 Wrong-kind reasons

Another desideratum for a theory of epistemic normativity is explaining wrong-kind reasons for belief. Wrong-kind reasons for belief are reasons for an agent to believe but are (intuitively) not genuine epistemic reasons to believe (Hieronymi 2005; Schroeder 2010). One sort of wrong-kind reason is familiar from another common objection to epistemic instrumentalism: epistemic bribery.[24]

In epistemic bribery cases, an agent has an opportunity to act in a way that will strongly promote their epistemic goals—or as it's usually put in this discussion, greatly increase their epistemic utility—but where the act is intuitively epistemically impermissible. Here is one such case (loosely inspired by Firth's original discussion (1981)):

> **Atheist scientist** Viola is a scientist who is (or takes herself to be) justified in being an atheist. She has been offered a grant to conduct research that will allow her to gain many true (and interesting) beliefs. However, the grant is offered by a religious organization that only offers grants to theists. Moreover, Viola is terrible at lying, and so the only way she can get the grant is to actually believe in theism.

The intuition this case is meant to elicit is that Viola would be epistemically irrational or unjustified in forming a theistic belief here. That is, it would be irrational for her to form a theistic belief *based on* the fact that doing so would lead to other true beliefs. This is a *prima facie* problem for instrumentalism. If epistemic norms are simply ordinary instrumental rationality, then it should be rational for Viola to form a theistic belief, since doing so would best promote her epistemic goals—it would, for instance, maximize her epistemic utility, understood in terms of true and interesting beliefs (Pettigrew 2016).

Bribery cases illustrate wrong-kind reasons for belief. A wrong-kind reason is a reason that favors an act (or state), but which does not suggest that the act would meet the standards of correctness for that kind of act (Maguire & Woods 2020; Schroeder 2010). If I'm bowling, and I'm offered a monetary bribe to throw a gutter ball, the bribe constitutes a (practical) reason to throw a gutter ball. But that doesn't make the throw a good one, *considered as a bowling throw*. Similarly, the fact that she will get many other true beliefs later is a reason for Viola to believe in theism. But it is not a reason that shows that her theistic belief would be a good belief, according to the standards of correctness for believing.

Wrong-kind reasons for belief are not epistemic reasons in good standing. They do not contribute to epistemic justification for beliefs (nor do they epistemically justify acts of inquiry). A theory of epistemic normativity should explain this. Instrumentalism struggles to do so.

[24]Bribery cases are also objections to epistemic consequentialism, a closely related though distinct view. In the original paper introducing epistemic bribery cases, Firth treats the two views together (Firth 1981). See also (Berker 2013; Greaves 2013; Jenkins 2007).

The epistemic practices account explains why wrong-kind reasons for belief fail to be epistemic reasons: they violate the internal rules and standards of epistemic practices. Specifically, they violate the rules regarding belief performances. These rules specify that evidence is the only kind of reason that may justify a belief—specifically, evidence for the believed proposition.[25]

Practical reasons for belief are wrong-kind reasons: they do not favor the belief in virtue of how the belief would promote epistemic values. Instead, they concern other values. If I am ill, and a belief that I will get better makes it more likely that I will get better, then I have good reason to form that belief. But this is the wrong kind of reason to count as epistemic. It violates the internal standards of epistemic practices because it concerns promoting health rather than promoting truth.

Epistemic bribes are also wrong-kind reasons for belief. The atheist scientist takes on a false belief in theism for the reason that *believing theism (falsely) will result in many other interesting true beliefs*. This is a wrong-kind reason because it violates the rules *for believing*. Specifically, it violates the requirement that limits reasons for believing to evidence *for the believed proposition*.[26] Note that this is a rule that applies to a specific kind of performance within the practice: believing. There are other performances for which these kinds of consequentialist trade-offs might be appropriate. For instance, choices to pursue a theory, to take a non-belief attitude of commitment toward a theory, or to assert a proposition during inquiry.[27]

Thus, according to the epistemic practices account, neither kind of wrong-kind reason counts as a genuine epistemic reason.

3.5 Differing evidential standards

There are a wide variety of distinct research fields and sub-fields in the sciences, humanities, and other areas. Each of these fields has its own standards of evidence which determine how much evidence a hypothesis requires before it is accepted. Moreover, what kinds of things count as evidence in the first place is also determined by the internal standards of research fields. Even the degree of evidential support that some piece of evidence provides a hypothesis can differ from field to field due to differences in resources, e.g., conceptual

[25]This doesn't entail evidentialism about justification, as some beliefs may be justified without appeal to reasons. Moreover, this specific assumption about belief rules could be made weaker in various ways, compatible with the EPA. I adopt it for ease of explanation.

[26]Compare this to Berker (2013). I take it most of my readers will share the intuition that epistemic bribery is impermissible. The claim is that the explanation for this intuitive judgment is that, for those of us who have it, each of our communities' general epistemic practice includes this prohibition on epistemic bribery. It is compatible with the view that other societies may not share this prohibition, and their members' judgments might be different.

[27]For pursuing improbable theories, see e.g., (Fleisher 2022, 2023; Laudan 1978; Šešelja, Kosolosky, & Straßer 2012; Šešelja & Straßer 2014; Whitt 1992). For discussion of non-belief commitment attitudes, see (Barnett 2019; Fleisher 2018; Goldberg 2013; McKaughan 2007; Palmira 2020). For assertion and publication of improbable views, see (Fleisher 2019, 2020; Goldberg 2015; Plakias 2019).

schemes, background assumptions, and methodological commitments (Kuhn 1970; Laudan 1978; Longino 1990).

The evidential standards of different research fields are paradigmatic epistemic standards. Meeting evidential standards promotes epistemic goals in a community. However, the evidential standards of some fields exclude propositions that count as excellent evidence in other fields. Ethnographic studies provide excellent evidence by the standards of anthropology but do not provide evidence that meets the standards of bio-medical research or high-energy physics. Moreover, the standards of formalized research fields in the sciences and humanities differ from the evidential standards that operate in other contexts, ranging from small talk to a physician's clinic, or a courtroom. Of course, different communities—e.g., regions, cultures, nations—also have different evidential standards.

The upshot of these observations is that *epistemic norms differ based on social context*. Fields of inquiry, legal systems, governance structures, and cultural standards can all affect what the epistemic norms of a situation are. Thus, how we epistemically evaluate an agent's epistemic performances and attitudes depends on what social practices they (and we) are engaged in. This is another feature of epistemic normativity that the epistemic practices account aims to explain.

The EPA is well-positioned to explain differing evidential standards across fields. According to the account, there is a conventional component to determining the appropriate epistemic rules in a particular practice. There is significant latitude in selecting permissible rule sets, but any individual epistemic practice must convene on a particular rule set selected from the permissible ones. This allows for social coordination in a way that is sensitive to the different contexts of research fields. In some cases, particular choices of rules are better than others, based on the topic of inquiry and the social context it is conducted within. In other cases, the choice will be more arbitrary, but it is the convention itself that is necessary to allow successful social coordination.

On my account, each field of inquiry is constituted by at least one distinct epistemic practice, and this explains why different fields have distinct evidential rules and standards. The members of these social practices have made coordination decisions concerning which internal rule sets to accept in their practice. So, their epistemic practices have different rule sets. Of course, some of these might be better at promoting epistemic values than others. And some of them could be deficient enough that they don't count as genuine epistemic practices. If this occurs, the research fields with those social practices will fail to generate genuine epistemic norms and reasons. But there will be many genuine epistemic practices with permissibly divergent rule sets.

It would be both surprising and potentially alarming if there were only a single set of universal rules that every research field must follow. It would suggest that actual scientific inquiry is in a very bad state. Either there is a single set of very specific rules, and most fields are not following them; or the genuine epistemic rules are very permissive, meaning that many of the quite specific epistemic standards within different fields are overly demanding

and should be abolished. The epistemic practices account offers an alternative explanation of what is going on, one that alleviates these worries and better vindicates successful scientific research practices.

4 Unifying Epistemic and Zetetic Normativity

In the previous section, I argued that the epistemic practices account explains four desiderata for an account of epistemic normativity and dissolves their internal tensions. Another desideratum for an account of epistemic normativity is to explain the close relationship between zetetic and epistemic normativity. That there is such a relationship is intuitive to many of us.[28] Zetetic and epistemic normativity both govern how we pursue epistemic value. They both concern evaluating our intellectual lives more generally. Also, one role of belief—the paradigmatic epistemic performance—is to serve as the culminating state of inquiry. Moreover, zetetic normativity is characterized by the same four features I focused on above as crucial aspects of epistemic normativity.

First, inquiry is an activity we undertake because we want answers to our questions. Moreover, we want good answers: true ones that furnish us with knowledge and understanding. In other words, we seek answers that constitute epistemic values (in the sense I have been using here). Thus, inquiry is useful in just the way other epistemic performances are. The norms that govern inquiry are also instrumentally valuable since they concern doing inquiry well (Friedman 2020; Steglich-Petersen 2021).

Second, zetetic norms appear categorical. An agent is subject to zetetic evaluation even if they don't personally have a desire or goal of successful inquiry. Consider the following case[29]:

> **Pleasant Archaeology** Archer is researching the origin of a particular style of ancient pottery. There are two hypotheses in the field: a Mayan origin and an Inuit origin. Pursuing the Mayan hypothesis involves working in very pleasant weather, while the Inuit hypothesis involves very unpleasant weather. Archer does not care about the truth, but he does care about the weather. Very few archaeologists are pursuing the Inuit hypothesis, so Archer could contribute a great deal to that project. The Mayan hypothesis has a glut of researchers.

If Archer decides to pursue the Mayan hypothesis in this case, we can evaluate him negatively as an archaeologist, i.e., as an inquirer. This is despite Archer lacking any desire or personal goal for successful inquiry. Zetetic norms thus appear to have a kind of categorical force, just as epistemic norms do.

The third feature is also illustrated by *pleasant archaeology*: there are wrong-kind reasons for inquiry, just as there are for belief. The pleasantness of the

[28] For instance, (Ballantyne 2019; Friedman 2020; Hookway 2006; Kelp 2020). See (Falbo 2023) for an overview and critical discussion.

[29] Modified from (Fleisher 2022, p. 25)

weather in Central America provides only a wrong-kind reason for pursuing the Mayan hypothesis. It does not concern how the pursuit of that theory would promote successful inquiry, nor is it part of a practice with that aim. It just concerns Archer's weather preferences.[30]

Finally, there are also differing standards for conducting inquiry in different fields. For one thing, differing evidential standards will require different standards for *collecting* evidence. There are also differing standards for how to justify a research project as promising or pursuitworthy across different subfields. That one could use grant money to conduct ethnographic studies is a good reason to include in a grant application in anthropology, but not in physics.

The epistemic practices account explains the tight connection between epistemic and zetetic normativity, and it explains why zetetic norms have the four features. According to the EPA, zetetic norms *are* epistemic norms, and zetetic reasons *are* epistemic reasons. Zetetic norms are rules internal to epistemic practices. Zetetic reasons are reasons which concern promoting epistemic values, and which do so in a way that satisfies the internal rules and standards of the practice.

The EPA explains the four desiderata for zetetic normativity in precisely the same way as for epistemic normativity more broadly. First, epistemic practices are justified in virtue of their usefulness, including the usefulness of their inquiry governing norms. Specific rules and reasons governing inquiry need not concern maximizing expected epistemic utility. Second, zetetic norms seem categorical because they are in force in virtue of the social practice, and do not depend on individual goals and desires. Third, wrong-kind reasons for inquiry—as in *pleasant archaeology*—fail to be epistemic reasons because they violate the internal rules of the epistemic practice. Finally, standards for proper inquiry will vary from practice to practice.

Note that inquiry consists in the performance of various actions: e.g., running experiments, gathering evidence, double-checking evidence, or engaging in debate and disagreement. So, if zetetic reasons are epistemic, then there are epistemic reasons for action. Though epistemic reasons for action are controversial, I think there are some independent and compelling arguments in favor of recognizing them.[31] There are also zetetic reasons that are important for understanding rational theory pursuit in science, and which seem particularly epistemic. Specifically, *inquisitive reason* are reasons which favor pursuing a theory because doing so will promote successful inquiry (Fleisher 2022, 2023). Pursuit here consists in various kinds of inquiring actions, e.g., experimentation, publishing defenses, or writing grant proposals. Inquisitive reasons are reasons to act, but they also seem epistemic, because they concern promoting epistemic values by doing science. The EPA straightforwardly explains how reasons for action, including inquisitive reasons, can be genuinely epistemic.

[30] So-called "sandwich reasons" are another wrong-kind reason for inquiry (Falbo 2023; Fleisher 2018, 2023; Horowitz 2019; Singer & Aronowitz 2022).

[31] See (Singer & Aronowitz 2022) and (Leary 2020). Berker (2018, p. 458) also offers a nice collection of intuitive reasons for action, though he argues against treating them as such.

The epistemic practices account also requires denying a traditional way of drawing the distinction between epistemic and practical norms and reasons, based on distinguishing theoretical and practical *reasoning* (Arpaly 2023; Falbo 2023). On this view, epistemic norms govern belief-states and practical norms govern actions. There isn't space to offer a full argument against this view. However, I think the traditional view has difficulty explaining large portions of epistemic normativity, including epistemic responsibility, doxastic (ex post) justification, intellectual virtue, and the intuitive cases of epistemic reasons for action. And of course, it does not explain the tight connection between the epistemic and zetetic.

The epistemic practices account thus offers a unification of epistemic and zetetic normativity by explaining both zetetic and epistemic norms as being derived from the internal rule set of epistemic practices. In some sense, the EPA collapses the epistemic and zetetic distinction. However, the view maintains our ability to distinguish between some traditional epistemic norms governing belief and zetetic norms for actions of inquiry. This is because it builds in the idea that different performances within a practice can be governed by different parts of the overall rule set. This point helps in dissolving an apparent tension between epistemic and zetetic normativity.

In recent work, Friedman (2020) has pointed out the possibility of conflict between zetetic norms and traditional epistemic norms. In one illustration of the tension, Friedman (2020, p. 503–4) identifies two plausible norms, one a traditional epistemic norm governing belief, and another a zetetic norm governing the activity of inquiry:

ZIP: If one wants to figure out $Q^?$, then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out $Q^?$.

EP$_\mathbf{a}$: If one has excellent evidence for P at t, then one is permitted to judge P at t.

Here, P is a propositional variable, and $Q^?$ is a question variable. To "judge" means to form a belief.

Given a few background assumptions, these norms conflict in a wide variety of cases. Friedman imagines a case where an agent wants to figure out how many windows the Chrysler building has. Successfully answering the question requires counting the windows, which demands focused attention to avoid making errors or losing count. But the agent is on the street outside Grand Central Station, which is a very busy place with a lot going on. Given the agent's background knowledge and the huge amount of perceptual evidence they are being bombarded with, they have excellent evidence regarding many propositions besides those relevant to their inquiry. Forming a belief in a proposition such as Y: *that cab is yellow* is permitted by EP_a. However, the performance of forming the belief that Y at that moment would likely cause the agent to lose count of the windows. Hence, forming the belief that Y at that moment is forbidden by ZIP. Thus, the case demonstrates the conflict:

ZIP forbids a performance, while EP_a permits the very same performance (at the same time).

Friedman makes two important background assumptions: first, that if one norm permits what another forbids, then the two norms conflict; second, that norms that conflict in this manner cannot be part of the same kind of normativity, on pain of incoherence. If the very same rule set both forbids and permits some particular action (at a particular time), then the rule set seems inconsistent: much as someone telling you to leave and telling you that you are allowed to stay seems incoherent. So, Friedman concludes, EP_a and ZIP cannot be the same kind of norm. Either zetetic normativity must be distinct from epistemic normativity—perhaps because it is just practical normativity (Falbo 2023) —or we must revise which epistemic norms we accept so that they no longer conflict with zetetic norms like ZIP.

The epistemic practices account provides a principled way of dissolving this tension. This solution involves distinguishing two kinds of performances in Chrysler Building-type cases: (1) the act of closing inquiry on a question by forming some belief or other; and (2) the forming of a belief in a particular proposition that answers the question. This distinction is inspired, in part, by Sosa's discussion of shot selection (Sosa 2015).[32]

Following Sosa, we can recognize a general distinction between a) choosing to engage in *some* performance *or other* of a particular type, and b) the specific performance subsequently performed. Sosa illustrates this idea with the example of shot selection in sports like basketball or hunting (2015, p. 69). The basketball player holding the ball must decide whether to take a shot, to pass, or to move to a different position on the court. Whether the player should take a shot depends on how likely that shot is to score from that position (given the player's abilities), how likely a pass would be to promote scoring, how much time is on the clock, whether their team is winning, etc. However, once the player has decided to shoot, we can evaluate the shot itself based on the standards of excellence *specific to shooting*. These standards concern, e.g., whether the shot was well-aimed, its release well-timed, and its spin is appropriate.

There are thus two kinds of performances, and two corresponding kinds of evaluations: a) the selection of shooting from among various possible actions, and b) the performance of the shot itself. The two kinds of evaluation can come apart: a shot can be poorly selected, but still be an excellent shot by the standards of shooting. In some cases, we can say that the player shot exactly how she should have: she followed all the rules and met all the standards of excellence *for shooting*, even if her prior performance of shot selection was poor or incompetent. She should have passed. But given that she chose to take the shot, she made an excellent one. I would suggest that shot selection and shooting are two distinct kinds of performance in the social practice of basketball.

[32]The solution offered by EPA here is similar to two recent proposals for dealing with Friedman's apparent conflict, by Thorstad (2021) and Haziza (2022), who both argue that traditional epistemic norms and zetetic norms have different targets of evaluation. The primary innovation offered by the EPA is to provide independent justification for this move.

As Sosa goes on to suggest, we can make the same kind of distinction for belief as we do for basketball. There is the performance of closing inquiry and choosing to form some belief *or other* on a question $Q^?$. Then, there is the distinct performance of forming a belief in some particular proposition as an answer to this question. The evaluation of these performances may come apart. In the Chrysler building case, the decision to form some belief or other concerning the question *what color is that cab?* is like a shot-selection performance. If the agent decides to form a belief in that case, we can criticize her for violating a norm like ZIP. But at the same time, once she has made this choice, we can separately evaluate the belief that she forms. Given her choice to form a belief, she is permitted to form a belief that Y because she has excellent evidence for Y. If she does so, we can evaluate the resulting belief positively.

Thus, we can see ZIP and EP_a as rules that govern different performance types within the same epistemic practice. The agent in the Chrysler building case ought to avoid forming any belief on the question of the cab's color because she is governed by ZIP_a. However, if she were to form a belief about the cab's color, she would be permitted to believe the cab was yellow according to EP_a. I think it is most natural to talk about these norms in terms of evaluative standards: differing evaluative standards for different performances. However, I think it is also reasonable to still see ZIP and EP_a as providing deontic norms. Because of rules like ZIP, the agent in the Chrysler case *ought*—all-epistemic-things considered, by the lights of the epistemic practice she is engaged in—to avoid forming beliefs about cabs. However, because of rules like EP_a, if she chooses to form a belief—if she makes that shot selection—then she *is permitted* to form the resulting beliefs in any propositions she has excellent evidence for.

The epistemic practices account therefore offers a way of resolving the apparent tension between zetetic norms and traditional epistemic norms. They are all norms that govern performances in epistemic practices. The apparent tension is explained by the fact that these norms govern distinct kinds of performances. The norms have different targets or "focal points", as Thorstad (2021) puts it. The EPA offers independent motivation for a solution of this kind, as it suggests the norms are rules of social practices, and the very same social practices have differing rules for different performances. But the fact that these performances are part of the same epistemic practice also helps to make sense of the fact that we can still make an all-epistemic-things-considered evaluation of the sequence of performances.

5 Objections and Comparisons

The goal of this paper is to introduce and motivate the epistemic practices account. There isn't space to provide a full defense against all potential worries or objections, nor to consider how the view compares to all of its competitors. However, I will offer a brief sketch of responses for a few immediate worries, and briefly discuss the account's advantages over a closely related kind of view.

5.1 Objections

First, according to the EPA, epistemic evaluations are practice-specific. This leaves us with questions—and perhaps worries—about how practices themselves can be epistemically evaluated.

Epistemic practices are evaluated and justified based on their instrumental value in helping communities obtain epistemic values like truth, knowledge, and understanding. Developing a practice, critiquing it, or amending it are all performances that are part of inquiry. Thus, they can be evaluated as epistemic performances. And beliefs that we form about practices are also epistemic performances.

According to the EPA, the performance of practice evaluation (or amendment) is undertaken from within some epistemic practice, and this performance is itself evaluated within that practice. However, there are multiple possible relations between the practice being evaluated, and the practice within which the evaluation performance occurs. Call these the evaluated and evaluator practices, respectively. The evaluated practice might be identical to the evaluator practice: we can evaluate a practice, within that practice, in virtue of its own rules. This can be seen as a matter of detecting incoherence within the practice. We can call this an internal evaluation. Alternatively, there are several kinds of external evaluations. The evaluator practice might be a super-practice of the evaluated practice. For instance, we can evaluate whether particular research fields are adequately promoting our epistemic goals, from the perspective of our society's general epistemic practice. A third option is that the evaluator practice could be a sub-practice of the evaluated practice: a practice of reflection on the broader practice, aimed at improving it, with a separate set of rules. Finally, the two practices can be unrelated or independent.

How we should evaluate specific practices will depend on a variety of context-specific factors. The same is true for considering which practice should be the evaluator. I won't try to give a general theory about this here. But the kinds of considerations involved will depend on, e.g., the subject matter of the practice, its generality, who the practitioners are, how it is related to other practices, and whether there are shared conceptual schemes or other resources between the practices. I would expect that ultimate evaluations will bottom out in the general epistemic practice of a society. But the EPA need not be committed to this: perhaps there is something more like a coherentist picture of justification, with different practices serving as evaluators of different evaluated practices, in a holistic web of justifying support.[33]

A second worry is that, in general, practice-based accounts of normativity suggest a profligate expansion of normative domains. The worry is that the epistemic practices view is committed to the idea that social practices can generate genuine norms, and that we should type those norms by typing the social practice. This means that there is a vast array of types of norms. While this

[33]Bengson et al. (2019) similarly appeal to coherence conditions in evaluating what they call cognitive practices. Their account provides several helpful resources for thinking about how to evaluate practices.

doesn't appear so bad regarding clearly normative practices—e.g., epistemic, etiquette, or aesthetic—some find it worrisome when applied to more mundane social practices like cooking, or cooking-mince-pies.[34]

The primary response to this second objection is that the epistemic practices account is the best candidate for making sense of all the desiderata, and therefore it is preferable to alternative accounts of the epistemic, even though it suggests there are many different kinds of normativity. And we have an explanation for why we care more about epistemic, aesthetic, and etiquette norms than we do about mince-pie norms. The goods the former practices provide us are so much more important for our lives. In addition, note that recognition of a wide variety of kinds of norms helps to make sense of the wide variety of wrong-kind reasons for various activities. There can be wrong-kind reasons for bowling or even knot-tying (Schroeder 2010). A view that allows "profligate" social-practice-based norms can explain the wide prevalence of wrong-kind reasons. Thus, I don't think recognizing a wide variety of normative domains is a significant cost for the view.

The most significant objection to the epistemic practices account concerns what we can call *noxious epistemic practices*. These are social practices that are apparently epistemic, but whose activities or rule set exhibit discriminatory biases, epistemic violence (Dotson 2011), pernicious ignorance (Martín 2021; Mills 2007), or other obviously bad features. It might seem possible to have a social practice that adequately promotes epistemic values and yet contains these noxious features. If so, then the EPA would seem to count noxious practices as genuinely epistemic, and so admit their rules as genuine epistemic norms. Thus, all kinds of discriminatory bias and pernicious ignorance will not only produce justified beliefs, but will also purportedly *explain* why they are justified. This is a bad result.[35] Even worse, it's plausible that most of our epistemic practices are infected with pernicious biases and ignorance of various sorts (Mills 2007; Sullivan & Tuana 2007).

The EPA has the resources to avoid this objection. First, genuine epistemic practices must aim at epistemic values, and they must do so in an adequately reliable way. The requirement here is an externalist one: the practice has to actually be reliable at promoting the values—merely believing it to be reliable isn't enough. Moreover, some epistemic values would seem to rule out biased generation, or pernicious conceptual schemes, by their very nature. Knowledge and understanding are demanding states, and they are incompatible with bias and pernicious ignorance. The use of deeply biased belief-forming methods would defeat any purported knowledge.[36]

However, even setting aside this appeal to the nature of knowledge and

[34]Falbo (2023) presses this objection in defending the traditional epistemic/practical distinction. The cooking example is from Anscombe (1957, p. 58), who was making a somewhat similar point about different kinds of syllogism. I first heard this objection raised by Eric Wiland. Arpaly (2023) makes a similar point.

[35]This objection was first pressed to me by Mona Simion. Thorstad (2023) raises roughly the same objection to Maguire and Woods (2020).

[36]Thanks to Mona Simion for pointing this out to me.

understanding, the adequate promotion requirement will still rule out perniciously biased inference rules, evidential standards, and other epistemic resources. This is because these resources could be easily replaced by more reliable ones that don't exhibit pernicious bias or ignorance. As argued above (section 2.3), if practitioners are in a position to know that there are easily available and obviously better rules, the adequate promotion requirement won't be satisfied. For instance, I suspect that most discriminatory or ignorance-supporting practices involve commitment to false and unjustified empirical beliefs that practitioners are in a position to know are false and unjustified (e.g., pseudo-scientific racism and sexist gender essentialism).

Second, the actual patterns of intentional action that comprise the activities within a practice can diverge from what the rules of the practice require (see section 2.2). The rules are determined by what the practitioners accept about the rules. Practitioners might all diverge in their behavior from what the rules require, and yet those rules will still be in force, based on what rules practitioners accept, i.e., what rules they use to evaluate each other, and hold each other accountable. The internal rules of the practice can then diverge significantly from the actual behavior of participants. Hence, in many cases, the noxious behavior won't count as part of the epistemic practice.

Third, even in cases where an epistemic practice apparently includes pernicious *rules*, these apparent rules will be incoherent with the core rules that make the practice adequate at promoting epistemic values. That is, there will be a certain set of rules that explain the practice's adequacy, rules that involve requirements to follow one's evidence, meet structural rationality requirements, and gather evidence in certain ways. These are core rules because they are central to the practice's epistemic functioning and will be difficult to amend. These rules will exclude as irrational the empirical assumptions—e.g., pseudo-scientific racism—that underwrite the noxious or biased rules. Alternatively, if the noxious rules are straightforwardly discriminatory enough, the core rules will simply directly conflict with them. In either case, we can recognize the core of what makes the epistemic practice adequate to be epistemic, and this core rule set of the practice will be incoherent with the noxious rules.[37] So, we can treat what I'm calling the core rule set as determining the epistemic practice, which we can now recognize is a sub-practice of the overall (non-epistemic) social practice that contains the noxious rules. Thus, the epistemic justification practitioners gain in such cases won't be explained in virtue of the noxious rules: those rules aren't part of the *epistemic* practice. Moreover, it is an advantage of the account if it can allow that noxious social practices can contain genuine epistemic practices: even bigots may have some epistemically justified beliefs.

Thus, the epistemic practices account does not have the result that noxious practices count as genuinely epistemic. Nor does it suggest that biased

[37] Again, see Bengson et al. (2023) for additional discussion of incoherence within practices. Note that the practitioners do not need to recognize that a bias violates the core rules of their epistemic practice for it to be true that it does.

rules within a scientific field (or other social practice) contribute to explaining epistemic justification. Genuine epistemic sub-practices within those fields explain the justification, without appeal to the biased rules.

5.2 Comparison to Activity-based views

Maguire and Woods (2020) offer a game- or activity-based account of epistemic normativity for belief (building on previous work by Schroeder (2010)). On their view, epistemic norms are part of the standards of correctness for the activity of belief, and epistemic reasons are right-kind reasons for belief—reasons that they bear on the correctness of believing. They also appeal to the main motivation for practice-based views: distinguishing what justifies the activity from what justifies performances within the activity. What justifies people's taking part in the activity of believing is the activity's practical benefits. What justifies individual beliefs is only evidence. I take it that Maguire and Woods also inherit Schroeder's commitment to the idea that the specific correctness conditions for an activity are essential, partially-constitutive components of that activity (2020, p. 220)—though they consider that there might be practical reasons for selecting one activity over another in a particular context, citing Rawls (1955).

Kelp (2020) offers a related account that treats inquiry as an "activity with constitutive aims and norms" (ACAN).[38] He takes all epistemic norms to be constitutive norms of the activity of inquiry. He also takes the constitutive aims and norms of an ACAN to be essential to it. "Anything that does not have these aims and norms will not qualify as a token of this ACAN" (Kelp 2020, p. 366). Kelp uses this account to argue for a unified notion of epistemic and zetetic norms, and a knowledge-first view of epistemic value (though he doesn't discuss the other desiderata).

These activity-based accounts are similar to the EPA in several ways, and they have similar resources for tackling some of the desiderata just discussed. One way to see the EPA is as a development of these views (especially Maguire and Woods'), now being applied to a wider variety of problems and desiderata. However, the EPA has a number of advantages over these views because the main feature of its *explanans* is the concept of social practices, rather than that of an activity with essential, constitutive norms. Social practices are concrete collections of activities, but where "activities" simply refers to patterns of performances. Social practices are identified by their membership, activities (so understood), and actual histories, rather than by essential, constitutive aims and rules. As a result, the EPA isn't committed to the idea that the internal rules and aims of a practice are essential to it. This means that it is easier to make sense of the idea that rules can change over time, or be different in different contexts, without changing what practice one is engaged in.[39]

[38] Interestingly, Kelp's account is independently inspired by Sosa's notion of a critical domain (2007) and Williamson's account of constitutive norms Williamson (2000), rather than by the tradition following Rawls that Maguire and Woods appeal to.

[39] The EPA also sidesteps objections raised for ACAN views by (Friedman 2024, p. 3). Friedman

A related advantage of the EPA is that social practices are partially conventional, which allows the account to deal with the permissiveness of epistemic normativity. The rules that are essential and necessary to determine what counts as engaging in epistemic performances—like believing or inquiring—will not be enough to settle on a specific rule set from the set of permissible rule sets that govern such performances. In other words, once we enumerate all the rules that any adequate epistemic practice must have, there will still be many choices concerning how to complete a specific rule set. The conventionality of social practices helps to explain how a specific rule set is chosen. Conventionally selecting the specific rule set serves the social coordination function discussed in section 2.3. The conventionality of epistemic practices also helps the EPA to explain differing evidential standards across research fields.

For these reasons, the epistemic practices account offers significant advantages over these related activity-based views.

6 Conclusion

The epistemic practices account explains what epistemic normativity is. It does so in a way that brings zetetic norms into the fold of the epistemic, while allowing us to distinguish norms governing belief and those governing other epistemic performances. The account also relieves the apparent tension between these types of norms. It makes sense of how the norms can be part of the same normative framework despite their apparent conflicts.

The EPA also suggests other future directions for research. For instance, the account can be expanded to consider anti-epistemic practices, e.g., practices of active ignorance (Mills 2007; Sullivan & Tuana 2007), epistemic violence (Dotson 2011) and epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), and propaganda (Stanley 2015). Just as epistemic practices promote epistemic values, anti-epistemic practices aim to promote ignorance. These too can be understood under the framework of a social practice account, though their relationship to more general normativity will obviously be quite different.

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suggests that inquiry doesn't have a constitutive aim as games do, because games are artifactual products of human construction, and inquiry isn't. But the EPA suggests that inquiry, of the sort that generates our epistemic norms, *is* artifactual.

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