**Kornblith on Epistemic Normativity**

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**Introduction**

Kornblith’s “Epistemic Normativity” is a classic in the now voluminous literature on the source of epistemic normativity. His account is as simple as it is bold: the source is *desire*, not a desire for true belief, or knowledge, but *any* set of desires. No matter what desires you have, so long as you are a being of a kind that employs beliefs in cost-benefit analysis, certain sorts of truth-centered epistemic norms will have normative force for you.This clever argument grabbed my attention in graduate school in the mid 90’s, when I first read it, and I am delighted to have an opportunity to engage with it nearly three decades later in a volume dedicated to Hilary’s work.

We can distinguish two questions about epistemic normativity, both seemingly under discussion in Kornblith’s paper, but which he does not clearly distinguish: (i) why should we care about having beliefs that satisfy epistemic norms? (ii) how do epistemic considerations have normative force with respect to particular propositions? I will argue that Kornblith’s proposal goes some distance toward answering the first question but is less helpful in answering the second.

I take both questions to be important to the topic of epistemic normativity. We do want our beliefs to be true, at least a broad range of them, and maybe even all of them (so many of us would at least *like* to think). Do we have any reason to want this? This sort of question famously arises in the moral sphere: why be moral? There, though, one senses that one is on firm ground in answering affirmatively. If you are moral, i.e., if you conform to moral norms, you will generally benefit others; you will do much good. This might not be the sort of reason Glaucon was looking for in the *Republic*, but it is a powerful reason. It’s a moral reason, yes, but there is nothing incoherent about having a moral reason to be moral. In the epistemic case, however, it’s far less clear what it would mean for there to be a purely *epistemic* reason to want our beliefs to be true or want them to conform to epistemic norms.[[1]](#footnote-1) We need to go beyond the realm of epistemic reasons to find reasons for having true beliefs and for having beliefs conforming to epistemic norms.

Even more central to epistemic normativity is the normative force of particular epistemic considerations. As Kornblith (1993, 363) says, “when you tell me that a belief of mine is unjustified, this gives me a reason for me to give up that belief.” The same goes generally when I acquire powerful evidence against p. Such evidence for p can provide a reason to believe p. How does this work?

Note the difference between the two questions. One asks for a reason why we should care to be a certain general way – why we should care to have our beliefs fit epistemic norms. The other asks how epistemic considerations in particular situations provide reasons for or against believing particular propositions.

Still, the two questions have interesting relationships, which we will explore as we go along. We already saw, in the moral case, that we might appeal to moral reasons to be moral. (Not all moral reasons are reasons to do or omit particular actions.) But suppose we doubted whether there are moral reasons at all. Then we would not have such an easy answer to the question, “why be moral?” Our answer, if we had one, would come from other normative sources – our own benefit, our desires, etc. And we might worry that Glaucon will come out on top in this dispute: perhaps being moral doesn’t, or needn’t, except contingently or by luck, contribute to our benefit or the fulfillment of our desires more than being amoral. On the other hand, if Glaucon turned out to be mistaken and Socrates right – if we do have non-moral reasons to be moral – then we might hope to ground particular moral reasons in particular cases in our having reasons to be moral in general. We will consider whether some sort of analogous grounding is available in the epistemic case for Kornblith.

I’ll divide up the paper as follows. In section 1, I give a summary of the main arguments of Kornblith 1993, and then in sections 2 and 3 I’ll assess the resources Kornblith’s proposal affords us in trying to answer the two target questions about epistemic normativity. Before proceeding further, though, I want to say something, tentatively, about how I think this relatively early paper, and the questions it tackles, relate to Kornblith’s subsequent work.

Someone familiar only with Kornblith’s publications over the last couple decades might be surprised to see him attempting to explain epistemic normativity in terms of desire. Consider his recent discussion of the “normative dimension” of knowledge:

“How reliable, then, must an animal’s psychological processes be in picking up information about the world if those processes are to count as capable of producing knowledge? They must be reliable enough to allow the species to survive in that environment. *This is not a standard which we have somehow imposed on the world because we care to have beliefs which are at least this reliably produced*. It is a standard set by nature. Creatures with processes that meet such a standard will survive; those which don’t, in W. V. Quine’s memorable words, “have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind” (Kornblith 2021, 148) (My emphasis.)

The point here is not that knowledge lacks a normative dimension but that its having a normative dimension is fully consistent with the standards of knowledge being a natural phenomenon, one that is “given” to us, and so not up to us.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Curiously, Kornblith 2021 doesn’t cite Kornblith 1993 as a potential explanation of the normative dimension of knowledge. Moreover, there is at least a hint of a suggestion that the normative force of the standards of knowledge is to be explained entirely by evolutionary considerations: species that don’t conform their beliefs to them don’t tend to survive long enough to reproduce.

However, even supposing that the normativity of the standards for knowledge is explained in terms of evolutionary considerations, and not in terms of what we care about, we might ask whether the normativity of the standards for *justification* might be explained in terms of our cares. Indeed, Kornblith 1993 appears to focus on justified belief more than on knowledge. Perhaps we should construe his paper as concerning justificational norms.

This suggestion is bolstered by reading Kornblith’s 2008 paper, “Knowledge Needs no Justification.” One of the aims of that paper, as I understand it, is to argue that the standards of justification are determined by our justificatory practices rather than nature alone. To be justified is, roughly, to be doing one’s reasonable best to meet certain objective standards. Being justified then doesn’t require meeting those objective standards, nor does meeting those objective standards require being justified.[[3]](#footnote-3) Now if the standards of justification are determined by our practices, those standards are at least somewhat up to us, collectively: we can help determine what counts as doing the best one can, or responsibly believing. It looks, then, as if we can ask meaningful questions about what our standards for justification should be – which standards to have.

I doubt this explanation is quite right. For, Kornblith 1993 explains the normative force of truth-centered standards, not of standards the meeting of which consists in doing one’s best to meet truth-centered standards. It seems to be the more objective standards that he is attempting to explain and ground in the 1993 paper, standards that a belief must meet to be knowledge. His references to ‘justified belief’ seem to be references to beliefs that meet roughly reliabilist standards.

Nevertheless, I want to evoke Kornblith 1993 against Kornblith 2021. Even if we don’t set the standards for knowledge, this doesn’t settle questions about normative force, and it doesn’t make those questions go away. Let’s grant that nature sets the standards. Still, should we care about having beliefs/processes meeting the standards? Do the sorts of considerations relevant to those standards provide reasons for us for and against particular beliefs? We can ask similar questions about other standards that aren’t up to us. Presumably, we cannot determine the standards for morally right action either, but we can certainly ask, with Glaucon, why we should care about these standards and whether considerations related to them give us reasons for action in particular cases. And we can ask the same about the law, about fashion, etc.

In a way, Kornblith 2008 only improves the case for the Kornblith 1993 project. If some of the standards that nature sets for knowledge do not answer to our goals and interests, this might be a reason to reduce their influence in our lives in ways that we can, including by changing our standards for justified belief, replacing them with standards that would serve us better – using not truth- or knowledge-centered but some other ones. We would then need to ask – along with Kornblith 1993 – should we aspire to our beliefs’ meeting knowledge-relevant standards, or such alternative standards? So, even if Kornblith 2021 is right about the standards for knowledge not being up to us, his normative questions in the 1993 paper are very much apt.

Another theme in Kornblith’s recent work seems at odds with the project of tackling my second target question, about how epistemic considerations provide reasons.[[4]](#footnote-4) In a 2015 paper, Kornblith considers, sympathetically, an eliminativist position that “seeks to do away with reasons, while leaving belief and knowledge intact” (226). The most radical eliminativist position doesn’t merely eliminate reference appeal to reasons in epistemological explanations; it positively denies their existence. Kornblith takes even this view seriously. But in the end, he takes a more qualified position:

“Exactly how large a role talk of reasons should play in epistemology, and, indeed,

whether it should play any role at all, must be settled by our understanding of the

psychological facts.” (2015, 238)

However, the following claim seems consistent with what he argues in the 2015 paper – and seems to me a plain fact: in a great many cases, when we obtain new knowledge, we become justified in believing various other things as a consequence, and we become justified in those further things *in part* becausethe new knowledge, together with other things we know, stands in certain sorts “supportive” relations to those further things. When I learn that the family reunion planned for August 10 in Kansas City is canceled, I come to be justified in believing a number of things (in a normal situation), e.g., that I won’t see my extended family members then, that I won’t be in Kansas City, then, etc. Here the language of ‘evidence’ and ‘reason’ seems appropriate to use in describing what is going on: when I gain the “evidence” that the reunion is canceled, that provides me “reason” to believe these new things. Of course, the correctness of this description is compatible with the claim that in the end it all boils down to reliability.

Acknowledging that acquiring “evidence” can change what we are justified in believing doesn’t imply that it does so in a way that is “purely formal” or in a way that has nothing to do with our psychology. I agree with Kornblith that this is a wrongheaded way of thinking about justification.[[5]](#footnote-5) I agree with him, moreover, that perceptual, memorial, etc. states don’t contribute to justification in the same way that knowledge does in examples like the reunion example. So, perhaps the more careful way to formulate the issue is as follows: when some state of mine confers justification on me to believe p, in virtue of what does it do so? The reader should read my second target question in this spirit.[[6]](#footnote-6) That said, I will lapse into the more convenient language of “evidence” and “reasons.”

1. **The main arguments of Kornblith 1993**

Kornblith disposes of two sorts of accounts of the source of epistemic normativity in short order (and convincingly, I think): semantic accounts and what we might call *specified-end instrumentalist* accounts.

Semantic accounts try to draw conclusions about normativity from linguistic meaning or content. Suppose the very meaning of ‘justified’ guarantees that justified beliefs are good in some way. What does this show? It would show that if a belief is justified, it is good in some way. But this doesn’t show much of normative interest. It doesn’t show even that any of the beliefs we regularly call “justified” are good in any way. In fact, a normative skeptic could try to argue that since no beliefs are good in the required way, none count as “justified.” And even if some of the beliefs we call “justified” are justified and so good, the fact that ‘justified’ implies ‘good’ doesn’t tell us anything about the source of this goodness.

On *specified-end instrumentalism*, epistemic norms are understood simply as instrumental norms that target some specific epistemic end, e.g., true belief, predictive adequacy, etc. They tell us to have beliefs that are efficacious in serving the specified end. Quine notoriously wrote:

“For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemological term, prediction .... There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morals; it a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed.” (Quine 1986, 664-5).

Kornblith’s main beef with such proposals is that we are told nothing about the value of the end. We can define up all sorts of specified-end instrumentalisms, some crazy, e.g., one in which the terminal parameter is *false belief.* What is so special about true belief? It must be that there is something good – something positively assessable normatively – about true belief that sets it apart from false belief, ignorance, etc.

A variant of specified-end instrumentalism is in no better shape. Consider the following hypothetical imperative: if you have as a goal epistemic state E – true belief (prediction, etc.) – then you should believe a proposition iff it is efficacious for this end. If you have the goal, and epistemic norms take the form of such imperatives, then we can see how epistemic norms could have normative force for you.[[7]](#footnote-7) The most obvious problem with this variant is that if this is what epistemic norms are like, then they are applicable only to people who have the relevant goals. Perhaps many people do have some such general goal or have other goals in which such a goal is “embedded” (Bernard-Willoughby 2022). But still, do we want to say that epistemic norms don’t apply if someone manages not to have this goal? Like Kornblith, I hold out hope for an account on which epistemic norms have force universally. The defender of specified-end instrumentalism could appeal to goals we *should* have. But then we’ll need a story about where this ‘should’ comes from, a story that isn’t given simply by specifying a “terminal parameter.”

(The view is also in trouble for other reasons. For instance, if epistemic norms take this form, they seem to allow for problematic tradeoffs. Perhaps by believing p against the evidence I could ensure that I’d better fulfill the general end of having true beliefs. But presumably believing p in such a case is epistemically unjustified; it violates epistemic norms. [[8]](#footnote-8))

Kornblith’s next target is a sort of easy universalism suggested by Stich (1990). For Stich, as interpreted by Kornblith, epistemic norms are norms that bid us to use processes or to have beliefs that best satisfy what we intrinsically value. Since people can value very different things, this view gives rise to a kid of relativism: epistemic norms will tell different people to use different processes and have very different beliefs depending on what we intrinsically value.

A natural reply, made by Kornblith, is that Stich has simply changed the subject: these are not epistemicnorms*.* Even if my believing against the evidence the falsehood that I am the most popular person in my neighborhood would promote what I intrinsically value, this hardly shows the belief is *epistemically* justified, let alone that it approaches anything close to knowledge.

But I doubt Stich will be much bothered by this. I suspect he would happily agree that his norm isn’t epistemic but nonetheless claim that it outperforms any properly *epistemic* norm. Kornblith’s main reply to Stich addresses this very point. It starts with an assumption:

“Now it will not be unfair to Stich if we assume that cognitive systems which are effective in producing happiness and so on are quite different both in their inferences and in the beliefs they ultimately produce, from cognitive systems which are effective in producing truths. Indeed it would be miraculous if all cognitive systems produced inferences and beliefs in very much the same way, regardless of the ends they were effective in serving. Moreover, were this the case, it would rob Stich’s position of its interest, for Stich means to be endorsing systems different from those which are favored by truth-based accounts. So we may safely assume, without unfairness to Stich, that those cognitive systems which satisfy his epistemic standards produce beliefs which, by and large, are not true.” (Kornblith 1993, 370)

Call this the “divergence assumption.” This seems a *lot* to assume, especially considering what Kornblith himself will argue, namely that true beliefs assist us in achieving our desires whatever desires we happen to have. Given what we intrinsically value, cognitive systems that produce mostly false beliefs won’t help us very well in fulfilling our desires. That is going to be Kornblith’s main point. Now, if we could separate out certain classes of beliefs– e.g., ones concerned with our self-image, politics, religion – then we could possibly argue that these beliefs, but not the others, might help us achieve what we intrinsically value independently of their truth value. False beliefs about the speed of cars coming toward us, the location of steep drop-offs, and even the properties of toasters, are probably not going to help us achieve what we intrinsically value. But beliefs that align with what cultural leaders endorse might do us quite well, irrespective of their truth-value.

Whatever Stich’s intentions, I think someone endorsing Stich’s norm shouldn’t grant Kornblith the divergence assumption. And without it, Kornblith’s argument can’t go through, as it is formulated. A cognitive system that maximizes what we intrinsically value – for all Kornblith shows -- could be one that mostly gives us true beliefs when they best serve our interests – which is often (e.g., when choosing toasters) – but often gives us false beliefs in special cases in which false beliefs serve our interests better. [[9]](#footnote-9)

However, Kornblith is right that Stich’s norm isn’t epistemic. And the question is whether *epistemic* norms have normative force. It’s possible both Stich’s norm and epistemic norms have normative force. Let’s turn, then, to Kornblith’s positive argument that epistemic norms have normative force.

After discussing Stich, Kornblith writes:

It seems that someone who cares about acting in a way which furthers the things he cares about, and that includes all of us, has pragmatic reasons to favor a cognitive system which is effective in generating truths, whether he otherwise cares about truth or not. (Kornblith 1993, 371)

The argument for this conclusion goes as follows. Anyone who has desires, and who uses beliefs in cost-benefit analysis to try to fulfill those desires – and that includes all of us – has pragmatic reason to want to have beliefs that will positively assist them in achieving those desires. True beliefs assist us well in this capacity. Thus, we all have pragmatic reason to want to have true beliefs. And this gives us pragmatic reason in turn to want to have beliefs formed by truth-conducive cognitive systems. The result: we have reason to want to have beliefs that fulfill truth-centered epistemic norms.

Kornblith takes his account to have many merits. It grounds the normativity of epistemic norms in terms of desires, which he takes to generate reasons in a familiar and unmysterious way. Moreover, it doesn’t make epistemic normativity parochial: the normative force of epistemic norms for you doesn’t depend on your having a desire for some special end, e.g., a desire for true belief; it depends merely on your having desires at all. It also avoids relativism: the epistemic norms whose normativity are vindicated don’t impose different standards on different people, e.g., in the way as Stich’s norm does insofar as its prescriptions vary with what we intrinsically value. Finally, it grounds the normativity of genuinely *epistemic* norms, since the standards concern truth-conduciveness. Putting it all together, we have an account of how universal, non-relativistic and genuinely epistemic norms have a familiar desire-based sort of normative force.

Let me add several clarifications before turning to whether Kornblith’s proposal helps us answer our two central questions. First, I haven’t gone into depth about the details of why having true beliefs *generally* is so useful us in achieving our desires. To fulfill our desires, we use beliefs in cost-benefit analysis. Relevant beliefs include ones about what we want, what we don’t want and how to get the former and avoid the latter. But there is vast set of beliefs that feed into *those* beliefs. If we want the final beliefs, most directly relevant to a given cost-benefit analysis, to be true, we should want the ones along the way need to be true as well.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Second, Kornblith doesn’t deny that we have pragmatic reason to seek more than truth or truth-conduciveness in our beliefs. He notes that we need to form beliefs in a timely way, for example. And I’m sure he’d agree that we need to form true beliefs about matters relevant to our desires, not only about pure mathematics, say. But he claims that truth will be “preeminent” in any account of what features we should want of our beliefs (372).

Third, Kornblith relies on an assumption about the reason-giving force of desires, one that many ethicists have come to question in the last thirty or so years. Does Warren Quinn’s (1993) *radioman*, who has the urge to turn on radios everywhere, really get a reason to turn on a radio in virtue of having this urge? This can seem implausible. Perhaps, as Scanlon (1999) argues, it’s rather *what* we desire (pleasure, achievement, etc.) that can give us reasons rather than the desire itself. If turning on the radio would give one pleasure, that fact would provide the reason to turn it on, not the fact that one has a desire to turn it on (or even a desire for pleasure). Even if this line of critique is correct, I doubt that Kornblith’s proposal is dead in the water. We might reframe the proposal using the notion of having reason to have sets of desires/aims. Perhaps every agent has reason to have certain sets of aims. And then he can argue that if one has a reason to have a set of aims, one will also have reason to have beliefs which improve one’s prospects at fulfilling that set of aims, and true beliefs improve those prospects.

1. **The “why should we care?” question**

In my view, Kornblith’s proposal goes some distance in showing us why we should care about having true beliefs and beliefs that satisfy truth-conducive epistemic norms, even if it doesn’t go all the way.My main reservation concerns comparisons between the strength of reasons.

Kornblith has shown us that we have good reason to want true beliefs. But he hasn’t shown us we have more reason to want true beliefs than to want beliefs that satisfy Stich’s norm, for instance. Although conforming to Stich’s norm and conforming to a truth-centered norm overlap substantially, they likely don’t overlap completely. So, they look like competitors, and we might ask why we should prefer our beliefs conform to the one rather than the other. Without a good answer, it seems we haven’t fully vindicated epistemic norms.

As a parallel, suppose you could demonstrate to Glaucon that there were self-interested reasons to be moral. For instance, maybe you convince him that if a person is moral, they’ll feel a kind of satisfaction, vital to happiness, which is much harder to achieve for the amoral. Or maybe you convince him that if a person is moral, the person doesn’t have to engage in the exhausting and happiness-inhibiting efforts to keep up duplicity that is necessary for most people to be amoral. Glaucon might be forced to concede that there are real advantages to being moral, and that therefore we have reason to be moral. But consistent with that, he might still insist we, or some of us at least, have more reason to be amoral than to be moral. Skipping between centuries, compare the closing speech of Judah Rosenthal in Woody Allen’s *Crimes and Misdemeanors,* who is describing his actual experience to someone as if it was an idea for a screenplay:

“And after the awful deed is done, he finds that he's plagued by deep-rooted guilt. Little sparks of his religious background, which he'd rejected, are suddenly stirred up.... And then one morning, he awakens. The sun is shining, his family is around him and mysteriously, the crisis has lifted… [A]s the months pass, he finds he's not punished. In fact, he prospers… His life is completely back to normal. Back to his protected world of wealth and privilege.” (1989)

At this point, Kornblith might wish to reach into the grab-bag of maneuvers developed by rule utilitarians. The rule utilitarian applies utilitarian calculations to rules and then takes right action to be action recommended or required by the preferred set of rules. If we could gerrymander rules, we could construct a rule of *always performing the action that will be best overall among one’s options*. How could we beat this rule?[[11]](#footnote-11) Any other rule will have us sometimes perform an action that is worse by utilitarian calculations than the action recommended by this rule. The usual answer is that this gerrymandered rule isn’t available in the required way; it isn’t usable; and that, when we focus on usable rules, none are such that their use will always result in our doing the best action among the actions available. Perhaps Kornblith can make a similar argument. The upshot will be that our “options” don’t include complying with a Stich-like norm but do include forming beliefs in truth-conducive ways. The latter option might be pragmatically better than any usable competitor.

The details will matter here. Is it feasible to form certain classes of beliefs, especially ones relevant for cost-benefit analysis, by relying on truth-conducive processes, while for others relying on some other sorts of processes? If so, we might have more reason to form beliefs in this complex way rather than generally forming them in truth-conducive ways. But this simply might not be feasible. Empirical evidence is needed to determine what sorts of belief-forming processes are available to us as we stand, and which could be become available to us over time, through social influences and other means.

So, I see Kornblith’s proposal as giving us *part* of an answer to why we should care about having beliefs satisfying truth-centered norms. We do have reason to care about having beliefs satisfying such norms. But it remains an open question whether there are feasible alternative ways of forming beliefs which secure truth-conduciveness when it matters but don’t when it doesn’t. If there are such alternatives, we might well have more reason from our desires to want beliefs formed in *that* way than beliefs formed in exclusively truth-conducive ways.

1. **Explaining epistemic reasons**

Kornblith takes himself to be addressing reasons for and against particular beliefs. He writes:

Any account which does explain the source of epistemic normativity must explain how it is that epistemic claims have normative force. If you tell me that a belief of mine is unjustified, this gives me reason to give up that belief. (Kornblith 1993, 363)

But he does not distinguish the question of how epistemic considerations give us such reasons from the “we should we care?” question. Tellingly, the above remark is followed immediately with a remark about the need to explain why we should care:

The epistemic claim is something about which I should care, and an account of the source of epistemic norms must explain why it is that I should care about such things. (Ibid.)

Kornblith seems to be suggesting that there is a general link between an epistemic consideration’s giving us a reason for/against belief and our having a reason to care about generally conforming our beliefs to such considerations.

It might well be true in general that if a consideration of a certain sort gives one a reason to , one should care about the fact that it does so and should even care about respecting such reasons. But the more important question for us is whether, when a consideration gives one a reason to , it does so *only if* and *because* one has a reason to want generally to conform one’s -ings to such considerations.

In some cases, I think this sort of dependence holds. Suppose that parking in a certain spot would not obstruct traffic or interfere with others’ rights or have any ill effects other than being a violation of the law. (It’s a parking spot in a hollowed-out old Kansas town.) The fact that it’s against the law to park in the spot arguably gives me a reason not to park there. And it seems to give me a reason only because I have a reason to care about following the law.

But the dependence doesn’t hold in general. Moral considerations – e.g., the fact that in -ing I will give someone her due – can provide reasons for -ing, and we should care about conforming our actions to them, but they don’t provide reasons only because we have reasons to want to conform our actions to them. Similarly, a tiger’s being dangerous to us can provide us with reasons to fear it, and plausibly we should want to fear dangerous things, but the danger isn’t a reason to fear the tiger because we have reason to want to fear dangerous things in general. One might have thought that this is how it goes for epistemic considerations, too. That is, one might have thought that epistemic considerations provide reasons but \*not\* or at least \*not only\* because we have reason wantour beliefs to have the relevant features (e.g., to be supported by our evidence, to be formed in truth-conducive manner).

Kornblith’s account of epistemic normativity supports, in the first instance, only a claim about why we should care that our beliefs generally conform to truth-centered epistemic norms. If it is to have implications for how truth-centered considerations provide reasons for and against beliefs in particular cases, such reasons must be explained as coming from our reason to care about our beliefs generally fitting such norms.

How could a reason to have a general desire – a desire to have beliefs that meet truth-centered norms – help explain why a certain truth-centered consideration provides me with a reason to have or not to have a particular belief? A natural thought is that there is some sort of transmission at work here. If I have a reason to want to be such that, generally, when I’m in C I , and I’m in C, perhaps these two facts jointly ensure that I have a derived reason to . So, for instance, if I have a reason to want generally to wear my seatbelt when I am in a moving car, and I’m in a moving car, perhaps these can generate a derived reason for me to wear a seatbelt on that occasion.

We certainly think this way about seatbelts. We think of ourselves as having a reason to want to conform to the policy, and this alone creates some sort of rational pressure to wear the seatbelt in every case in which we’re in a moving car. Speaking for myself, I feel this pressure especially when I find myself in *very safe* situations in a moving car. I feel it, for instance, when I am merely moving my car a short distance from the driveway to the very quiet street in front of my house.

Let me get one distracting worry out of the way. Kornblith speaks of reasons to *care,* to *favor,* to *want* to have certain beliefs. But can reasons to care transmit to reasons to believe? They would seem instead to transmit to a reason to *want* to believe, which is not the same, and not what needs to be explained. However, it’s open to Kornblith take our reason to want our beliefs to meet truth-centered norms itself to be downstream from a reason to be such thatour beliefs meet these norms. And so he can claim that if we have a reason to be such that our beliefs meet the norms, then if believing that p meets the norm, then this reason transmits to reason to believe that p.

There are, nevertheless, two serious worries about the transmission story, one about the reason’s strength and one about its character. Start with strength. Let’s grant that a reason to be such that one ’s when one is in C can give rise, when one is in C, to a reason to . What is the strength of the resulting reason? In the example of moving my car to the street, my reason to wear a seat belt is *much* weaker than my reason to be such that generally I wear a seatbelt in a moving car. Note just how easy it is for a reason to outweigh the transmitted reason: if wearing the seatbelt was uncomfortable on this occasion, even that might outweigh it. Next, it’s plausible that these transmitted reasons always have the strength we observe in cases in which they are isolated – i.e., in cases in which one has no other relevant reasons. Those cases reveal what its strength is. So, such reasons are always quite weak, at least when, as in the seatbelt case (and the epistemic case), -ing is something one will do repeatedly.

The fact that one’s evidence rules out p, however, is a very strong reason not to believe p, plausibly a conclusive reason, and the fact that one’s belief is unjustified is a strong reason to give it up. So, these reasons must not come via transmission from reasons to have the relevant general policies/dispositions.

Might they come via another kind of transmission – the more familiar transmission from reasons to attain an end to reasons to take the necessary means? I doubt it. Granted, in some cases one can have a strong reason to in C, based on considerations about keeping/losing the policy of -ing in C. And if you knew that your having the policy hinged on your conforming to it on the particular occasion, you’d have a strong reason to conform to it (the same as the strength of the reason to have the policy.) But it’s a rare situation in which your retaining the policy hinges on your conforming to it on that occasion. It’s therefore doubtful that your evidence-provided reasons to believe p in standard cases – and plausibly *ever* – come the fact that believing p is the necessary means to one’s generally conforming to epistemic norms.

These problems of strength do not affect a “particularized” version of specified-end instrumentalism in the same way, as defended by Steglich-Petersen and Skipper (2020), for instance. Such a view would explain epistemic reasons to believe p as transmitted from a reason to have a true belief about whether p. As we raise the probability of obtaining the end from taking the means, transmission yields a stronger reason to take the means.[[12]](#footnote-12) So, if my evidence for p becomes stronger, and the strength of my reason to have a true belief on whether p is held fixed, the view under consideration predicts that transmission results in a stronger reason to believe p: stronger evidence yields a stronger reason, holding fixed reasons to have a true belief. That said, this view doesn’t seem to avoid all problems of strength either. Suppose I \*very much\* want to have a true belief, but my evidence is not especially strong. The resulting reason to believe p might be the same as it is for someone who values having a true belief on the matter much less but has very strong evidence. Intuitively, though, my reason to believe p is weaker than this person’s.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The second problem concerns the *character* of epistemic reasons. In the case of moving my car from the driveway to the street, we have a sense that although I do have a reason to wear a seatbelt, something general seems to stand behind it. As far as the identity of my reason, perhaps we might think it omits anything about the policy: my reason to wear the seatbelt in this case is that I’m in a moving car. But a fuller story about where the reason comes from will naturally mention the benefits of having the policy of seatbelt-wearing. Compare this to a case in which I’m going to drive on I-95 from Philadelphia to New York City. Here I have a strong reason to wear my seatbelt, which intuitively is particular in source – it doesn’t depend on the importance of habits, policies. If you’ve driven on this stretch of I-95, you know what I mean.

Let’s consider reason-character in the epistemic case. I think my cat is outside. Then my wife remarks how cute the cat looks asleep on the bookshelf. I turn and see the sleeping cat. My wife’s remark provides a powerful reason to give up my belief, as does my seeing of the cat. Intuitively it seems these reasons are like the I-95 seatbelt reason and less like the moving-my-car seatbelt-reason: they depend on features of the situation, namely, the evidence or grounds provided by the testimony and my perception. They don’t seem to depend on my having reasons to be such that I generally believe in accordance with my evidence. Indeed, they are seemingly not about *my* *beliefs* at all, but about the evidence.

The way we talk of our epistemic reasons in such cases further confirms their independence of policy-related factors. What reason do I have to give up my belief about the cat being outside? Well, my wife just said the cat was on the couch! And indeed, I just saw it. It would be peculiar to start talking about one’s commitment to believing the truth in general, or about the benefits of having truth-conducive beliefs. Contrast the moving-my-car seatbelt case. Here it would be odd *not* to bring in policy-related factors, upon interrogation. Why should I wear my seatbelt? If I simply said: “because I’m in a moving vehicle,” and left it at that, I’d invite gentle objections: “well, you’re moving very slowly, only a few feet, and in zero traffic.” The natural thing to do instead is refer to policy-matters, “look, I wear my seatbelt whenever I’m in a moving vehicle; it’s for the best.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. **Conclusion**

In “Epistemic Normativity,” Kornblith makes a strong case that we have pragmatic reason to have true beliefs and so to have beliefs that meet truth-centered epistemic norms. Depending on our other available options for forming beliefs, it may turn out we pragmatically *should* have beliefs meeting such norms. This is an important point. But it mustn’t be confused with another claim: that epistemic considerations provide reasons for and against particular beliefs because of the general benefits of having beliefs meeting epistemic norms. I’ve argued that *that* claim is false.

It can seem that the normative force of moral considerations hangs in the balance when we ask the question, “why be moral?”, and similarly, that the normative force of epistemic considerations, too, hangs in the balance when we ask, “why have beliefs conforming to epistemic norms?” But the appearance is misleading in both cases. Moral considerations don’t provide us reasons for action because we have reasons to be moral in general, and the same goes for epistemic considerations and epistemic reasons.

However, there is an interesting contrast between the moral and the epistemic. Moral considerations can bear on whether to conform generally to moral norms: we can have moral reasons to be moral. There is something reassuring about this: moral reasons manage to support one’s being someone who generally respects the moral reasons. In the epistemic case, I see little hope for such reassurance. Epistemic reasons, unlike moral ones, don’t seem to reach beyond the particular – we can have epistemic reasons for against particular doxastic attitudes, inferences, etc., and not to have certain general policies, habits, dispositions. Is this a problem? I am inclined to think it’s not. Once we see it’s a mistake to want this special sort of epistemology-only reassurance – and that it is impossible, given the limited reach of epistemic reasons – we should be satisfied with the following combination of views: we do have epistemic reasons; they don’t come from reasons to conform to epistemic norms; and yet we do have practical reasons to conform to epistemic norms.[[15]](#footnote-15)

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1. Do true beliefs have a kind of intrinsic value? If so, we might think of this value is epistemic, and then propose to account for epistemic reasons as instrumental with respect to this value. If so, then we might have an epistemic reason to conform to truth-conducive epistemic norms. The sort of value at issue presumably would be objective, and it would inhere in states of affairs of the form *S believes p and p is true*. I think this approach is doomed, and I doubt Kornblith would disagree. I’ll give three problems (there are more). First, I see no reason to think the state of affairs of me truly believing that the dust bunny on my floor last Tuesday was 2” long has any objective value; the world is not made better by it. Second, epistemic value on this view would generate at best only very weak reasons to believe individual propositions. For, on this view, epistemic value is just another sort of objective value, to be weighed up against moral and prudential value. But if there was a choice between my forgetting the information about the dust bunny and anything of moral or prudential value, the fact that, in forgetting this information, the world would be deprived of a state of the form *S believes that and p* seems to have zero weight here. If there were value at all, the value of individual true beliefs would be vanishingly small, and so would support only very weak epistemic reasons to believe. But we often have strong epistemic reasons to believe individual propositions – even about matters like the dust bunny’s size. Third, the view would predict the existence of epistemic reasons to believe that p in some cases despite one’s having strong, even decisive, counterevidence, if believing p would result, down the line, in one’s believing more truths. (See note 7 for references concerning this well-known problem for both consequentialist and instrumentalist views of epistemic reasons.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It isn’t immediately clear to me whether Kornblith is suggesting in this passage that there is a single standard for all knowledge. Might nature set different standards depending on the sorts of processes or sorts of beliefs involved? Perhaps nature sets a high standard for perceptual belief-forming processes but a lower one for processes producing moral beliefs, religious beliefs, beliefs about values. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The ideas here at least resemble ideas in Kornblith’s early paper on justification, “Justified Belief and Epistemically Responsible Action,” one of my favorites from his oeuvre. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I thank Luis Oliveira for comments that prompted the discussion to follow. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See McGrath (manuscript b) and (forthcoming) for a discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In asking this question, I do not assume that the only way to acquire a justified belief that p is via reliance on states that confer justification on one to believe p. To use one of Kornblith’s (2015, 228) examples, perhaps justified beliefs based on proprioception don’t rely on states that confer *ex ante* justification at all and a fortiori don’t rely on anything that could be called “evidence”. Thus, I do not assume that *ex ante* justification is more basic that *ex post* justification. Perhaps a view like Goldman’s (1979, 21) is right: ex post justification is the basic notion, and ex ante justification should be understood in terms of there being certain sorts of routes available to the subject to an ex post justified belief. I say “certain sorts”: perhaps the route cannot run merely through subpersonal states, for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Some would say “rational” force but not normative force, aligning with the distinction between rationality and normativity from Broome (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Berker (2013) for a recent discussion of this issue, with references back to Firth. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Selim Berker makes similar criticisms of Kornblith’s reply to Stich. See https://scholar.harvard.edu/sites/scholar.harvard.edu/files/sberker/files/phil244-meeting7-sosa-kornblith.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One sees similarities here to Clifford’s (1886) explanation of why belief generally must meet a high evidential standard [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The matter might not be so simple, though, as Parfit (1984) shows. Suppose I’m not good at deception. Then having a never-self-denying disposition might be worse for me than having a normal, sometimes-self-denying disposition. See Comesaa and McGrath (forthcoming) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Steglich-Peterson and Skipper cite Kolodny’s “General Transmission Principle” to back up this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Steglich-Petersen and Skipper (2020) for a response. See also McGrath (manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In comments on a draft of this paper, Luis Oliveira writes, “You are exploring transmission possibilities, but I wonder if another possibility is one where the very same thing that grounds the reason for the general desire grounds the reason for the attitude itself.” What grounds the reason for the general desire is the satisfaction of our goals, whatever they may be. I don’t see why this would ground all the individual epistemic reasons we have. My overall goals might be clearly best satisfied by my not believing the truth on a particular proposition p, but if I’m considering the matter and have strong evidence for p (evidence whose support I can grasp), it seems I have a strong epistemic reason to believe p. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I thank David Christensen and Luis Oliveira for comments on an earlier draft and Allan Hazlett for numerous discussions of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)