

Explanatory Indispensability and Deliberative Indispensability: Against Enoch's Analogy

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In a crucial chapter of his important book *Taking Morality Seriously*,¹ David Enoch offers a highly inventive argument for metanormative realism, the view that there are objective irreducibly normative truths. The argument appeals to the idea that irreducibly normative truths are indispensable for deliberation. This, Enoch claims, justifies us in believing in irreducibly normative truths. In making this argument, Enoch draws upon an analogy with the indispensability of other entities for *explanation*, and the idea that we are justified in believing in such entities for this very reason. His challenge to opponents is to identify the disanalogy between explanatory indispensability arguments and deliberative indispensability arguments, and how the former could be legitimate without the latter being so.

Enoch's argument is quite compelling, and admirably seeks to secure for us positive reasons to believe metanormative realism rather than falling back on appeal to it as the "default option". However, in this note I will contend that the argument ultimately fails. In showing why I take the argument to fail, I will uncover the disanalogy between explanatory and deliberative indispensability arguments, thus meeting Enoch's challenge head on.

1. Enoch's Master Argument

I will work with the schematic version of Enoch's argument that he provides (83). Here it is:

Master Argument.

- (1) If something is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then we are (epistemically) justified (for that very reason) in believing that that thing exists.
- (2) The deliberative project is intrinsically indispensable.
- (3) Irreducibly normative truths are instrumentally indispensable to the deliberative project.

So (by (1), (2) and (3)),

- (4) We are epistemically justified in believing that there are irreducibly normative truths.

An intrinsically indispensable project is one that we in some sense cannot or ought not disengage from; a sufficient condition for intrinsic indispensability is that a project be "rationally non-optional" (70). For something to be instrumentally indispensable for a project is for it to be required for that project, in the sense that "it cannot be eliminated without undermining (or at least significantly diminishing) whatever reason we had to engage in that project in the first place" (69).

For very helpful written comments, I'm grateful to David Enoch. I also benefitted from discussions with David Plunkett, Matt Smith, and an audience at the Realism in Ethics early career workshop at the University of Sheffield.

¹ Enoch (2011: ch. 3). See also its predecessor, Enoch (2007).

The Master Argument is supposed to parallel the explanation of why we are justified in believing in explanatorily indispensable entities. In Enoch's view, the two warrants are instances of the same general phenomenon captured by (1): that we are justified in believing in entities that are instrumentally indispensable for some intrinsically indispensable project: in one case, deliberation; in the other case, explanation.

My argument will target premise (1). I will not argue that (1) is false, but rather that the argument Enoch gives for (1) fails, so that he has given us no good reason to believe (1); at least, not in its full generality. Though Enoch gives us a good case for a special case of (1) for explanation, but this case does not generalize to deliberation. Thus, the purported analogy between explanatory and deliberative indispensability arguments fails.

2. A small terminological clarification

A small terminological clarification before I begin. (This clarification is not made as a criticism of Enoch, but to assist the reader in interpreting my reconstructions of his arguments below.) As I understand them, explanatory indispensability arguments are arguments that move from the explanatory indispensability of some entity to the existence of that entity. An Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE) is an inference from a higher-order claim that some first-order claim C is the best explanation of the data, to C itself. Not all IBEs are explanatory indispensability arguments, since the first-order claim that one arrives at by IBE may not be a claim to the effect that some entity exists. But all explanatory indispensability arguments involve IBE.

If an explanatory indispensability argument is one that moves from the explanatory indispensability of an entity to the existence of that entity, and we want to understand deliberative indispensability arguments in parallel fashion, then a deliberative indispensability argument is one that moves from the deliberative indispensability of an entity to the existence of that entity. The Master Argument does not do this: rather, it is an ordinary deductive argument that concludes with a claim about what we are justified in believing. So strictly speaking, the Master Argument is not itself a deliberative indispensability argument. However, an argument from premise (3) of the Master Argument to the conclusion that there are irreducibly normative truths *would* be a deliberative indispensability argument. Moreover, if the conclusion of the Master Argument is true, then this deliberative indispensability argument – and other deliberative indispensability arguments, if there are any – is plausibly sanctioned as involving a legitimate inference.

3. Enoch's argument for (1)

Enoch's stated argument for (1) occurs in section 3.4, where, drawing on previous work,² he presents a general epistemological claim designed to tell us when a "basic belief-forming method is justified":

² Enoch & Schechter (2008). In turn, this work itself draws on a broader philosophical tradition of "pragmatic" justifications of belief-forming methods. See the references collected in fn. 10 of Enoch & Schechter's article, especially Reichenbach (1938), Lycan (1985), Nagel (1997), Dretske (2000), and Wright (2004).

General Epistemological Claim (GEC).

Given a project which is non-optional in the relevant sense, and given a belief-forming method that we, given our constitution, have to employ if we are to have any chance of successfully engaging in that non-optional project, we are *prima facie* epistemically justified in employing it as basic. (60-1)

A belief-forming method is employed as “basic” just if one’s use of it is not based on any other method. By talking of the methods we have to employ if we are to have “any chance of successfully engaging” in some project, Enoch means (i) it’s *possible* for the method to enable us to successfully engage in the project and (ii) that the method is *necessary* (but perhaps not sufficient) for our successfully engaging in the project (62). This gives us a neat account of our justification for relying on, for example, perception. There are some possible worlds (ones in which appearances are radically disconnected from reality) where relying on perception does not enable us to successfully engage in the project of forming a body of (largely) true beliefs that help to guide us around in the world. Nevertheless, there are many worlds in which we can successfully engage in this project by relying on perception. And, plausibly, more strongly, in all the worlds in which we do successfully engage in the project, we do rely on perception. So even though perception goes wrong in some cases, relying on perception meets both conditions for being our only hope for engaging in a rationally non-optional project. Hence, relying on perception is justified (irrespective of which case we’re actually in). Similar stories may be told about justifying induction in the face of the possibility of a universe which lacks uniformity from past to present, and – crucially, about justifying IBE in the face of the possibility of a universe which lacks “loveliness” or “explanation-friendliness”.

Clearly, there is something pragmatic about this account of what distinguishes the belief-forming methods that we are epistemically justified as basic in employing from those that we are not epistemically justified in employing as basic. Nevertheless, GEC does state that we are indeed *epistemically* justified in employing the former as basic. On Enoch’s view, then, epistemic justification has a kind of pragmatic undergirding. One might want to resist this, but this will not be my strategy here.³ I will concede, for the sake of argument, that GEC is true.

Instead, I want to put pressure on the transition from GEC to (1). I think that this transition is something of a lacuna in Enoch’s argument. Section 3.4, purportedly the section that argues for (1), is nearly entirely devoted to arguing for GEC and its application to particular belief-forming methods. And there is no doubting that GEC and (1) seem at least *prima facie* to be in the same philosophical spirit. But Enoch does not explicitly spell out how GEC is supposed to get us to (1). I am going to argue that, when we try – in a maximally charitable way – to spell out the transition that Enoch is relying on, it turns out to be illicit. So, I will argue, even conceding GEC, we have been given no reason to accept (1) in its full generality.

Let us have GEC and (1) in front of us again:

³ My approach thus differs from that taken by McPherson & Plunkett (2015). McPherson & Plunkett want to resist Enoch’s argument on the grounds that GEC, at least stated in full generality, is false. Of course, one could consistently endorse both their objection and mine.

General Epistemological Claim (GEC).

Given a project which is non-optional in the relevant sense, and given a belief-forming method that we, given our constitution, have to employ if we are to have any chance of successfully engaging in that non-optional project, we are *prima facie* epistemically justified in employing it as basic. (60-1)

- (1) If something is instrumentally indispensable to an intrinsically indispensable project, then we are (epistemically) justified (for that very reason) in believing that that thing exists.

It's certainly at least not *obvious* why or how (1) is supposed to follow from GEC. GEC is a claim about which belief-forming *methods* are justified. (1) makes no reference to methods whatsoever. It is about the justification of beliefs in particular posits or entities.

But surely there's something more at work in Enoch's argument than a crude equivocation between GEC and (1). Indeed, I think there is. It can be extracted from Enoch's remarks about explanatory indispensability. It will turn out that we can extract a rationale running from GEC to a special case of (1) for explanation. What I am going to dispute is that this rationale generalizes for other intrinsically indispensable projects, which is what is required for (1) to be true in full generality. Crucially, I will argue that the rationale does not generalize to deliberation.

But first, the argument from GEC to the special case of (1) for explanation. What follows is my best rational reconstruction of the argument; Enoch does not explicitly present what I am about to suggest, but I think it is something like what he has in mind.

Argument to the special case.

- (5) Given a project which is non-optional in the relevant sense, and given a belief-forming method that we, given our constitution, have to employ if we are to have any chance of successfully engaging in that non-optional project, we are *prima facie* epistemically justified in employing it as basic. (*GEC*)
- (6) Explanation is rationally non-optional ("non-optional in the relevant sense")
- (7) IBE is a method that we, given our constitution, have to employ if we are to have any chance of successfully engaging in explanation

So (by (5), (6) and (7)),

- (8) We are *prima facie* epistemically justified in employing IBE as basic
- (9) Explanatory indispensability arguments (that is, arguments that move from the premise that an entity is instrumentally indispensable for explanation to the conclusion that that entity exists) employ IBE
- (10) If an argument (or argument-type) employs a method that we are *prima facie* epistemically justified in employing as basic, and the argument's premises are true, then we are justified in believing its conclusion

So (by (8), (9) and (10)),

- (1*) If something (some entity) is instrumentally indispensable for explanation, then we are justified in believing that that thing (entity) exists.

Assuming that (as (6) together with Enoch's gloss on intrinsic indispensability entails) explanation is an intrinsically indispensable project, (1*) is a special case of (1), with the "for that very reason" clause omitted.⁴

I cannot resist one small gripe with the argument to the special case. As it stands, (10) is dubious. Suppose that an argument employs a true but *unjustified* premise, and employs a method that we are prima facie epistemically justified in employing as basic. It is doubtful that we are (always) justified in believing its conclusion. The mere truth of the premise seems not to suffice; rather, it needs to be justified. So really this modification should be made. To preserve the validity of the argument, we would then need to revise (1*), and then correspondingly alter all the premises of the Master Argument, so that everything refers to what we are *justified in believing* is instrumentally indispensable for an intrinsically indispensable project. However, these modifications would still leave the Master Argument valid (without revising its conclusion), so for the sake of argument, I'm going to pretend that (10) is OK as stated.

I've already (for the sake of argument) conceded the truth of (5) (that is, GEC). (6) and (7) seem hard to resist. (8) is just a deductive consequence of (5), (6), and (7). (9) is true as a consequence of the way we're understanding IBE and explanatory indispensability arguments. So, apart from the problem with (10) just raised, the argument to the special case is looking pretty good. So, I'm now going to concede (for the sake of argument) that it is sound.

How, though, are we supposed to get from (1*) to (1)? I assume that the idea is simply that the argument from the special case is supposed to generalize to other rationally non-optional projects. But I am going to contend that it fails to so generalize; specifically, it fails to generalize to deliberation.

4. Why the argument fails to generalize to deliberation

We need one more piece of background to set up the problem. In a crucial passage, Enoch writes:

"What is in the first instance indispensable to the scientific – and more generally explanatory – project is not electrons and numbers but rather whatever it is that our best explanations quantify over. The commitment to electrons and numbers is both derivative (from the more general belief together with the scientific findings and theories) and tentative (for better explanations may be found in the future. We would lose whatever reason we had to engage in the explanatory project, not if we ceased to believe in electrons, but rather if we ceased to believe that whatever it is our best explanations quantify over is likely to exist." (69)

So, on Enoch's account, here is how we put (1*) to work in application.

Application.

⁴ I will ignore the question of how we get that clause back in. If that is a problem, it is a problem for Enoch, not me. But I doubt that it is ultimately crucial: the "for that very reason" clause in (1) does no work in the Master Argument.

(1*) If something (some entity) is instrumentally indispensable for explanation, then we are justified in believing that that thing (entity) exists.

(11) Whatever it is that our best explanations quantify over is instrumentally indispensable for explanation.

So, by (1*) and (11),

(12) We are justified in believing that whatever it is that our best explanations quantify over exists.

And then, if we are in a good enough epistemic position with respect to (13), we can continue,

(13) Our best explanations quantify over electrons.

So, by (12) and (13),

(14) We are justified in believing that electrons exist.

The first part of this application is parallel to the master argument for the claim that we are justified in believing in irreducibly normative truths.⁵ (12), the claim that we are justified in believing that whatever our best explanations quantify over exists, is the analogue of the claim that we are justified in believing that irreducibly normative truths exist.

With this application provided, we can make a crucial point that Enoch does not make explicit. When the argument to the special case and its application are taken together, something that is at least very much like indispensability enters the overall argument at *two* distinct points: there are two “layers” of indispensability. First, there is premise (7): the claim that employing the method that explanatory indispensability arguments employ – IBE – is a method that we have to employ in order to engage in the (rationally non-optional) project of explanation. Though Enoch does not explicitly frame this point in the language of indispensability, it can be very naturally expressed by saying that the method of IBE is itself indispensable to explanation. This premise is needed to get the result that explanatory indispensability methods justify belief in their conclusions. Then, quite separately, there is premise (11): the claim that the entities we quantify over in explanation are indispensable to explanation. This premise is needed to get to the claim that we are justified in believing in such entities. As the foregoing regimentation of the argument shows, both premises – both layers of indispensability – are needed for the overall argumentative strategy to work.

In the explanatory case, both layers of indispensability – both (7) and (11) – are plausible. However, my contention is that there is no plausible claim analogous to (7) in the case of deliberation. Tellingly, whereas Enoch is quite clear that explanatory indispensability arguments employ the method of IBE, he never makes any mention of the “method” involved in deliberative indispensability arguments. This is perhaps because deliberative indispensability arguments don’t utilize any “method” with anything like as wide a sphere of applicability as IBE. Stipulatively, though, let us call the method

⁵ Because (1*) is a special case of (1) that builds in the claim that explanation is a rationally non-optional project, (1*) on its own plays the role that (1) and (2) play together in the Master Argument. If we were to set out the argument as proceeding from (1) – rather than (1*), we would need to supplement it with an analogue of premise (2), making the structural parallel fully explicit.

that one employs in deliberative indispensability arguments “inference to a presupposition of deliberation” (IPD). So the analogue of (7) for the deliberative case would be:

(7*) IPD is a method that we, given our constitution, have to employ if we are to have any chance of successfully engaging in deliberation

But (7*) is just not plausible. IPD does not seem like it is even a part, let alone an indispensable part, of deliberation. One does not deliberate about what to do by employing deliberative indispensability arguments. Indeed, it’s not obvious that there are *any* familiar instances of IPD other than one that Enoch offers us: the deliberative indispensability argument to the existence of normative truths. But that argument is not something that one makes use of, still less needs to make use of, while engaged in actual ordinary deliberation about what to do. At most, one uses it in theoretical deliberation about the truth of moral realism. But such metaethical reflection is quite distinct from first-order deliberation about what to do, and it is only the latter that is plausibly a rationally non-optional project.

The fact that IPD is not itself indispensable to deliberation creates a big disanalogy with the explanatory case. The method involved in explanatory indispensability arguments, IBE, is plausibly *itself* indispensable to the project of explanation. Explanation itself crucially *involves* employing IBE: that is part of the activity. Deliberation does not crucially involve employing inference to a presupposition of deliberation.

This is so notwithstanding – and this bears stressing – the merits of the claim that irreducibly normative truths are indispensable to deliberation (premise (3) in the Master Argument). This claim is analogous to premise (11), not premise (7). For all I have said, it may be true that irreducibly normative truths are indispensable to deliberation. But that is not enough for the overall argument to go through. We also need the claim that employing the method of IPD is indispensable to deliberation (7*) – that is, the analogue of the first claim (7). Without it, the rationale for (1*) – the special case of (1) for explanation – does not extend to the deliberative case. So we should be unwilling to generalize from (1*) to (1), or to any special case of (1) for deliberation.

I conclude that we have not been given a sound argument for (1). This is, needless to say, a problem for the Master Argument to the claim that our belief in irreducibly normative truths is justified. The Master Argument employs (1) as a premise. But we have been given no reason to believe (1). We have been given the GEC, and it has been assumed that this will get us (1). But, as I hope to have shown, it does not.

Moreover, it suggests that there is a major disanalogy between explanatory indispensability arguments and deliberative indispensability arguments. This disanalogy gives Enoch’s opponent a principled basis for accepting the former but not the latter, meeting Enoch’s challenge to her to find such a principled basis. And it gives us reason to be suspicious that deliberative indispensability arguments can be vindicated on a model analogous to that which vindicates explanatory indispensability arguments.

5. Coda: objection, reply, an interesting offshoot

Someone trying to defend Enoch might reply that I should not have saddled Enoch's argument with the claim that IPD is indispensable to deliberation. Perhaps there is something else, other than IPD, that can play this role in Enoch's argument. In particular, one might wonder whether Enoch could simply claim that the relevant "method" employed is simply normative reasoning (or some particular method used in normative reasoning, such as the method of reflective equilibrium). Plausibly, this method is indispensable to deliberation.⁶

However, one cannot simply make this substitution and expect the remainder of the argument to go through. The argument to the special case was supposed to show that we are justified in believing in entities that are explanatorily indispensable, by showing that we are justified in employing the method (IBE) that moves from the explanatory indispensability of entities to their existence. Similarly, then, a deliberative analogue of the argument of the special case needs to show that we are justified in believing in deliberatively indispensable entities, by showing that we are justified in employing the method that moves from the deliberative indispensability of entities to their existence. It is not enough to establish that we are justified in employing the method of normative reasoning, for normative reasoning is not a method by which we move from the deliberative indispensability of entities to their existence; rather, it is a method by which we move from relevant normative considerations to first-order normative conclusions.

My point here can be generalized against other potential candidate methods that one might think should figure in the argument instead of IPD. IPD was just my *stipulative name* for whatever method it is that moves from the deliberative indispensability of entities to their existence. So IPD, by definition, *is* the method that Enoch would need to say is indispensable to deliberation, if the argument is to go through in a parallel way to the explanatory case. I agree, of course, that once the premise that IPD is indispensable to deliberation is made explicit, it looks very implausible. However, I do not think that this counts against the way that I have read Enoch, since it took a lot of work to *make* that premise explicit and to show that his argument (at least, as long as it is to be kept parallel to the analogous argument in the explanatory case) requires it.

However, I do want to note that there is an interesting offshoot from the claim that *normative reasoning* (as opposed to IPD) is indispensable to deliberation. As I have argued, this is insufficient to establish that we are justified in believing in deliberatively indispensable entities. However, it might (continuing to concede the General Epistemological Claim to Enoch) be enough to establish that our *first-order* normative beliefs – the beliefs that are the outputs of our normative reasoning – are (in general) justified. Though this is not the result that any particular *second-order* beliefs (e.g. the belief in irreducibly normative truths) are justified, it would be an interesting and significant result in its own right, and one arrived at by an interesting route.

Moreover, *perhaps* Enoch could try to construct an argument from the claim that our first-order normative beliefs are justified to the claim that belief in irreducibly normative truths are justified. However, if Enoch were to take this route to his conclusion, this would constitute a significant revision

⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for another journal for this objection. Enoch himself also floated something like this possibility in personal correspondence. However, he did not offer this as an account of how his argument was *originally* supposed to go, or as an objection to my reading of him. Rather, he acknowledged (in line with what I will argue below) that this proposal would constitute a "major change" as compared with the argument of the book.

of the argument given in his book. In particular, it would make the analogy to explanatory indispensability much looser and less important, since the argument would no longer proceed in any obviously parallel way to that for belief in the existence of explanatorily indispensable entities. Moreover, one worry about this way of going is that it is *already* common-ground between Enoch and many kinds of metaethical anti-realists that our first-order normative beliefs are justified. So insofar as deliberative indispensability considerations get us only as far as the justification of our *first-order* normative beliefs, they would only serve to establish something that many of Enoch's opponents already accept. The real challenge would then be to construct an independent and persuasive argument from the justification of our first-order normative beliefs to the justification of a second-order belief in irreducibly normative truths.

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