

Epistemic Judgment and Motivation

Abstract: A core project in meta-ethical theorizing is to explain the systematic and reliable connection between moral judgment and motivation. Internalists start with the idea that moral judgment is in some way necessarily connected to motivation. Perhaps moral judgment itself gives one a motivating reason to Φ , or perhaps there is some other necessary connection. Those who reject internalism (externalists) claim that, whatever reliable connection there is between moral judgment and motivation, it can be explained, for example, by a contingent desire to do the morally right thing—a desire that is “external” to moral judgment. Whichever explanation is correct, it would seem to tell us something important about the nature of moral judgment.

Despite their disagreements, internalists and externalists largely agree that whatever plausibility moral motivational internalism has, it is due to the putative *normativity* of moral judgment. The starting point of this talk, then, is to combine this observation with the observation that there are other kinds of normative judgment besides moral judgment. More specifically, we are interested in the widely held view that *epistemic* judgment—for example, the kind typically expressed by the claims “S ought to believe that p”, or “S knows that p”—is often normative. Assuming as much, should one then expect epistemic judgment to be reliably and systematically connected to motivation, too? Might there be a plausible epistemic analogue of moral motivational internalism that would explain this? If so, what would it look like?

We explore this issue in two main parts. In Part One, we examine some recent work by Klemens Kappel and Emil Moeller (2014) and Veli Mitova (2011). These authors have argued in quite different ways that there is a systematic and reliable connection between certain kinds of epistemic judgment and motivation, and that this is indeed best explained by an epistemic analogue of moral motivational internalism. Kappel and Moeller focus on knowledge judgments and motivation to terminate inquiry; Mitova focuses on certain kinds of ought-to-believe judgments and motivation to believe. We argue that both approaches run into problems, but for different reasons.

Kappel and Moeller’s view runs into trouble because of their focus on knowledge judgments and motivation to *act* (terminate inquiry). We argue that the systematic connection they identify is better explained by the thesis that knowledge is the (or, perhaps, simply *a*) goal of inquiry (cf. Kelp 2014). The connection they identify can be understood as an instance of a general phenomenon: agents tend to lose their motivation to achieve a goal when they judge themselves to have accomplished the goal. We argue that this falls short of providing support for an epistemic analogue of motivational internalism. Meanwhile, Mitova is interested in the connection between epistemic “ought-to-believe” judgments and motivation to *believe*. Her view raises worries about doxastic control, and worries about the role of higher-order judgments in our cognitive economy. For example, the suggestion that people can be motivated to believe seems to imply that they can form beliefs at will. Moreover, it is unclear how often people are disposed to believe things on the basis of epistemic “ought”-judgments in the first place; typically, people are disposed to believe things on the basis of observations they make about the world around them, or the word of others—not on the basis of epistemic “ought”-judgments. Mitova has promising ways of dealing with these worries. We briefly discuss them. But we also argue that they lead her away from a defense of anything that we think is appropriately considered a version of motivational internalism.

In other words, Mitova’s view is on the right track, but challenging it leads to some surprising and fruitful results. In Part Two, we explore these results. In particular, we argue that critiquing Mitova’s meta-epistemological view brings into sharper relief a relatively underexplored issue in the

meta-ethical debate. In particular, there has been an undue focus in the internalism/externalism literature on *motivation*, as opposed to a wider range of phenomena. The epistemic case highlights that connections between normative judgment and various dispositions, including the formation of other mental states, such as doxastic states and the reactive attitudes, are just as important for our understanding of normative judgment as connections between normative judgment and motivation (sometimes even in the moral case).

In a bit more detail, we suggest that the moral judgment-motivation connection and the epistemic judgment-“motivation” connection are special instances of a pattern. More specifically, both seem to be instances of the following, very rough, claim:

General Normative Judgment-Disposition Connection: Normative judgment is reliably and systematically connected to an agent’s disposition to be in/adopt certain mental states: intentions, beliefs, reactive attitudes, etc.

We might say, then, that when the state in question is an intention, or a desire-like state that tends to produce intentions, we can appropriately talk about a connection between normative judgment and *motivation*. But when the state in question is a belief, or some other doxastic state, we have something else in mind. An immediate upshot of this idea is that, rather than thinking of the reliable and systematic connection between epistemic “ought”s and belief as giving us reason to endorse an epistemic analogue of moral motivational internalism, it gives us a reason to countenance a more general pattern between various types of normative judgment, and dispositions to be in certain mental states. Correspondingly, an additional question is whether a more general kind of internalism explains this general motivation-disposition connection. Regardless, our main concluding suggestion here is this: moral motivational internalism and “ought-to-believe” internalism (and perhaps other theses) are special cases of a more general normative judgment-dispositional internalist thesis.

References

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