

Against Epistemic Teleology, Pt. 1

I. Kelly on the Instrumentalist Conception of Epistemic Rationality

Some terminology (p. 612):

epistemic rationality = “the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one’s evidence and refrain from believing propositions that are improbable given one’s evidence”

instrumental rationality = “the rationality which one displays in taking the means to one’s ends”

the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality = the thesis that “epistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality, viz. instrumental rationality in the service of one’s *cognitive* or *epistemic* goals”

Throughout his article, Kelly assumes that the cognitive/epistemic goals in question are the Jamesian twin goals of *having true beliefs* and *avoiding false beliefs*.

Kelly’s aim: to argue against the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality.

Why should we care whether the instrumentalist conception is true?

- According to Kelly, many epistemologists and philosophers of science hold this conception.
- It is commonly invoked as a way of *naturalizing epistemology* without abandoning its normativity.
- It is commonly invoked by opponents of *categorical moral reasons* as a way of resisting a “companions in guilt” response that appeals to the existence of *categorical epistemic reasons*.
- Its truth would (allegedly) undermine *the incommensurability thesis*, according to which although we can evaluate *what one epistemically ought to believe* and *what one practically ought to believe*, there is no such thing as *what one all-things-considered ought to believe*.

Three interpretative issues:

1. *Kelly regularly conflates instrumental reason and instrumental rationality.*

It is common these days to distinguish between these two notions, along roughly the following lines:

I am flouting instrumental reason if (i) I have conclusive reason to E, (ii) M-ing is a necessary means to E-ing, and (iii) I fail to M.

I am flouting instrumental rationality if (i) I intend to E, (ii) I believe that M-ing is a necessary means to E-ing, and (iii) I fail to intend to M.

More generally, *instrumental reason* is thought to concern the relation between *our reasons to pursue ends* and *our reasons to pursue the actual means to those ends*, whereas *instrumental rationality* is thought to concern the relation between *our intentions for ends* and *our intentions for what we believe to be the means to those ends*.

2. *Kelly is working with an outdated conception of instrumental reason.*

A typical passage: “That I have the goal of asking a question gives me a reason to raise my hand” (p. 613). But these days it is more commonly assumed that what gives me a reason to raise my hand is *my having a reason to ask a question*, not *my having a goal of asking a question*.

3. *Because beliefs ≠ intentions, it is far from clear that epistemic rationality can be a species of instrumental rationality.*

If instrumental rationality enjoins us to intend to take the believed-means to our intended ends, then *instrumental rationality in the service of cognitive ends* would enjoin us to form certain intentions, rather than enjoin us to form beliefs-that-help-us-meet-our-cognitive-ends.

II. Kelly's Argument against the Instrumentalist Conception

On one way of reading Kelly's article, his argument against the instrumentalist conception in §3 consists of an initial objection and reply on behalf of the instrumentalist, which then leads into Kelly's main objection.

initial objection: According to the instrumentalist conception, epistemic reasons are *hypothetical reasons* that depend for their existence on whether a subject possesses a certain goal.

But in third-person contexts (e.g. when offering reasons to others) and in first-person contexts (e.g. when responding to reasons in the course of one's own theoretical deliberations), we treat epistemic reasons as *categorical reasons*.

So the instrumental conception must be mistaken.

reply on the instrumentalist's behalf: The reason we treat epistemic reasons as categorical reasons in our everyday practice is that everyone [or almost everyone] possesses the relevant goal.

[Compare Kant on imperatives of prudence: though hypothetical, they are commonly stated in an assertoric mode because of the pervasiveness of happiness as an end.]

This leads to Kelly's primary objection:

main objection: For each subject S, there are many propositions P such that S does not have a goal of believing P if P is true and not believing P if P is false.

Some examples, for S = Tom Kelly, of such propositions P:

<Bertrand Russell was right-handed>,
 <Hubert Humphrey was an only child>,
 <Such-and-such street in Bakersfield, CA, is one-way>,
 <Such-and-such movie that T.K. has not seen ended in such-and-such a way>.

In fact, in the last case, T.K. insists he has a goal of *not* believing the proposition if it is true.

However, in all of these cases, S can still have epistemic reasons to believe P. So the instrumentalist conception of epistemic justification must be wrong.

Possible replies by the instrumentalist:

- *reply #1:* Insist that the truth-goal is present in each of these cases, but is outweighed by other goals that one has, so all-things-considered one would prefer that that the truth-goal not be met.

counter-reply: This might help with the movie case, but it doesn't seem to help with the others. What's the countervailing goal in the case of trivial truths?

- *reply #2:* Even if one doesn't have the truth-goal with regard to P = <Hubert Humphrey was an only child>, one has it with regard to other propositions, and maybe the best way of succeeding in the truth-goal with regard to those other propositions is to believe the truth with regard to P.

counter-reply: Maybe, and maybe not. "There is simply no goal—cognitive or otherwise—which I actually have, which would be better achieved in virtue of my believing true propositions about such subjects, or which would be worse achieved in virtue of my believing false propositions about them" (p. 625).

- *reply #3:* Because beliefs constitutively aim at the truth, I inherit the aim/goal of believing the truth with regard to all these propositions once I form a belief about them.

counter-reply #1: This doesn't help in cases in which I *don't* believe or disbelieve the proposition P. Yet presumably in such cases I still have epistemic reasons for/against believing P.

counter-reply #2: This response relies on the following line of reasoning:

I have beliefs about x .
 The aim of any belief is truth.
 Therefore, I have the aim of having beliefs about x which are true.

But according to Kelly, this argument is invalid, as the following parallel argument shows:

I have a heart.
 The aim of any heart is to pump blood.
 Therefore, I have the aim of having a heart which pumps blood.

- *reply #4:* It is not crucial that individuals actually possess the goal invoked by the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality. As theorists we can evaluate how well an individual's way of forming/revising beliefs *would* promote the goal in question, and it is from this perspective that a belief counts as "epistemically rational" or "epistemically irrational."

counter-reply: This involves giving up on the idea that epistemic rationality is a species of instrumental rationality: "...whether it is in fact instrumentally rational for me to ϕ depends on the content of the goals which I *actually* hold" (pp. 632-633).

counter-counter-reply #1: If the instrumentalist conception is primarily a thesis about *instrumental reasons*, then Kelly's claim here is controversial: nowadays instrumental reasons are widely held not to depend on one's actual goals. But if the instrumentalist conception is primarily a thesis about *instrumental rationality*, then Kelly's claim holds, but it becomes difficult to see how the instrumentalist conception can yield evaluations of beliefs (rather than intentions).

counter-counter-reply #2: Fine, then let's give up on the instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality, and instead endorse a goal-oriented/teleological approach to epistemic rationality that doesn't model itself on instrumental rationality.

III. Grimm's Dilemma

Grimm argues against the following combination of views:

the teleological approach to epistemic appraisal = a belief earns positive marks (counts as *justified*, *rational*, *virtuous*, etc.), from an epistemic point of view, just in case it *does well* with respect to the things with *final epistemic value* (i.e. helps to promote them or bring them about).

veritism = true beliefs have final epistemic value;
 false beliefs have final epistemic disvalue;
 nothing else has final epistemic value/disvalue.

(Why is this a goal-oriented/teleological approach to epistemic appraisal? Because we are assuming *X* has final epistemic value iff obtaining *X* is an ultimate epistemic goal.)

Grimm's argument takes the form of a dilemma:

- *first horn:* Endorse *restricted veritism*, so that only true beliefs on "matters of interest or importance to us" have final epistemic value.

problem: It follows, given the teleological approach, that positive and negative epistemic appraisals of beliefs in trivial truths are out of place. However, positive and negative epistemic appraisals of such beliefs are *not* out of place.

- *second horn:* Endorse *unrestricted veritism*, so that *all* true beliefs have final epistemic value.

problem: The idea that beliefs in utterly trivial truths have final epistemic value is "deeply implausible" (p. 250).

Two ways in which the first horn of Grimm's dilemma need to be fixed up:

1. It doesn't follow from *the teleological approach + restricted veritism* that if P is of no interest or importance, then believing P can't do well or do poorly with respect to anything of final epistemic value. For example, there might be *another* proposition, Q, of interest or importance such that believing the truth with regard to P helps make it the case that one believes the truth with regard to Q.

solution: Consider cases in which there are no relevant Q's for some given P.

2. To motivate the thought that beliefs in unimportant/uninteresting truths can still be the subject of epistemic appraisal, Grimm provides the following case:

"Suppose on a lazy whim you decide to scan your desktop for motes of dust. After a bit of distracted counting, you then conclude that the desktop is harboring eighteen motes. Given the sloppiness of your method, however, we can suppose that this answer really amounted to little more than a guess [and hence is epistemically unjustified]" (p. 249).

This is not the best case for Grimm's purposes: his opponent could insist that, when a subject turns her attention to how many motes are on a desktop in this way, the answer becomes of interest to her.

solution: Consider cases in which one automatically forms a belief in a trivial truth.

Grimm considers, and replies to, a very interesting way of avoiding his dilemma due to Ernest Sosa:

Sosa's proposal (on Grimm's understanding of it): "...we can evaluate items within a domain in terms of how effectively they promote or bring about the fundamental values of the domain, while all the while remaining agnostic about whether the domain's fundamental values are valuable or worthy pursuing intrinsically" (p. 252).

Grimm's objection: "...when we judge a belief to be unjustified or irrational, we seem to be doing more than just evaluating ... the skill or virtuosity of the believer's performance. In addition, we seem to be in some sense *criticizing*, perhaps even *reproaching*, them for believing in this way" (p. 253).

Sometimes Grimm appeals to the following principle in pressing his objection: "...if I accept that a certain belief of mine is 'inapt' [or 'unjustified'] I seem now to have a reason to do something about my attitude toward the content of the belief" (p. 254; see also p. 255).

Other times Grimm appeals to the following, logically distinct principle: "...to judge a belief to be justified (for example) is not simply to judge that it is skillfully oriented to the truth but rather that it *should* be so oriented" (p. 257; see also pp. 253-254).

IV. Grimm's Alternative

Grimm avoids his dilemma by sticking with the teleological framework while making three crucial changes:

- i. Switch to a social approach, so that a given belief of mine is appraised relative to how well it helps promote not just *my* goals, but also *everyone else's* goals.
- ii. Change the relevant goals from *epistemic goals* to *practical goals*.
- iii. Insist that, in general, if my preserving something could possibly be of use to other people in fulfilling their goals, then I am *obligated* to preserve that thing.

problem #1: (iii) is deeply implausible. Am I obligated not to crumple up a random piece of paper, on the off-chance that someone might have need of an unsullied piece of paper?

problem #2: (ii) allows in the sorts of counterexamples that caused trouble for Kornblith (and for Velleman).

problem #3: If conducting toward a *possible* goal is enough to provide a response to Grimm's dilemma, then a fan of restricted veritism can also respond to his dilemma using such a move.