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Against Evidential Minimalism: Reply to Hofmann

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Abstract

In this paper, I respond to Frank Hofmann's reply to my (2022) argument against "evidential minimalism" (EM). According to defenders of EM, there is a close connection between evidence and normative reasons for belief: evidence is either itself, or (under certain "minimal" conditions) gives rise to, a normative reason for belief. In my (2022), I argued against EM by showing that there are cases where: (i) S possesses strong evidence E for the truth of p at time t, (ii) all minimal conditions for the normativity of E are met at t, (iii) S doesn't believe p at t, yet (iv) S isn't criticizable on account of (i)–(iii) at t. I then appealed to a linking claim connecting criticizability with the existence of normative reasons for belief. Hofmann's reply invokes a distinction between two different kinds of epistemic criticism: a strong and a weak form. I will argue that Hofmann's distinction fails to save EM from my argument.

Keywords: Evidence; epistemic normativity; reasons; epistemic norms

1. Against evidential minimalism

Under what conditions does strong evidence for the truth of p give rise to a normative reason to believe p? Defenders of evidential minimalism (EM) posit a very close connection between evidence and normative reasons for belief: evidence is either itself, or (under certain "minimal" conditions) gives rise to, a normative reason for belief. Compare this with "non-minimalist" accounts of evidential normativity. According to these latter views, strong evidence for the truth of p only gives rise to a normative reason to believe p given certain *extra*-epistemic (viz. "non-minimal") conditions, e.g. the obtaining of pragmatic or moral reason to be interested in p's truth. The "minimal" conditions invoked by EM's defenders, by contrast, do not involve extra-epistemic considerations. Minimal conditions might include things like activating the question of "whether p" in one's conscious awareness, or somehow directing one's attention to the relevant evidence. What makes these conditions "minimal" is that they can obtain in the absence of pragmatic or moral reason to be interested in p's truth (just imagine

an annoying friend who prompts you with questions and evidence regarding highly trivial or uninteresting issues).¹

In my (2022), I argued against EM. My argument occurred in two stages. First, I established that there are cases where: (i) S possesses strong evidence E for the truth of p at time t, (ii) all minimal conditions for the normativity of E are met at t, (iii) S doesn't believe p at t, yet (iv) S isn't criticizable on account of (i)–(iii) at t. I then appealed to a linking claim connecting criticizability with the existence of normative reasons for belief. According to this linking claim, when (i)–(iv) obtain, then E does not constitute or give rise to a (normative) epistemic reason for S to believe p at t.²

My cases involved subjects who possess strong evidence in support of trivial or pointless propositions. Consider, for instance, the case of Katlyn in BORED AT HOME:

BORED AT HOME: Katlyn is at home with nothing to do. She recently left her job in order to take up a better position at a new company. There's a one month interval in between her leaving the old job and beginning training for the new job. Katlyn doesn't have to move for her new job, and she's tied up all manner of loose ends, taken care of various errands and housekeeping, etc. She finds herself at home one Sunday afternoon and is simply bored with nothing to do.³

While at home, Katlyn is in possession of strong evidence for the truth of many trivial or pointless claims:

Say that Katlyn knows her own age (32), and she's quite talented at quick mental math. She could easily figure out that she's been alive for more than 200,000 hours, were she to sit down and think about it for a minute. Thus, at any arbitrary time t when Katlyn is at home, she will possess...strong evidence E for truth of the following claim: that she has been alive for more than 200,000 hours.⁴

There will also be countless "junk" disjunctive propositions which follow from Katlyn's current body of knowledge. Say that Katlyn knows her own name. Also say that she remembers the disjunction introduction rule from her symbolic logic class in college. As a result, Katlyn is in possession of strong evidence for the following propositions: "Either her name is Katlyn or aliens exist", "Either her name is Katlyn or aliens exist or the moon is made of cheese", and so on, without end. We can also introduce the various "minimal" conditions for the normativity of evidence mentioned above. So, imagine that Katlyn has a friend over who prompts her with the relevant questions and evidence: "Hey, you're 32 and good with math, how many hours have you been alive?". Or imagine a situation in which Katlyn is consciously attending to the (known) proposition that her name is Katlyn and is also vividly aware of its evidential import vis-à-vis the various "junk" disjunctive claims mentioned above.

My claim is that, even If all of the "minimal" conditions for the normativity of evidence are met, Katlyn is in no way criticizable for not believing the pointless propositions.

¹I count engagement in active inquiry as a non-minimal condition given that it is a purposive or goal-directed activity.

²My argument doesn't depend upon the truth of this linking claim. Rather, I argue that the minimalist can either accept or reject the linking claim and that, either way, the minimalist view falters.

³Buckley (2022): 8.

⁴Ibid.

Thus, there are cases where (i)–(iv) obtain. The key move made against defenders of EM, however, is to connect the issue of criticizability with the existence of normative reasons for belief. The idea here is that, if epistemic reasons for belief are genuinely “normative”, then they should imply claims about how we ought to regulate our doxastic lives. If these claims are genuinely binding on us, then, when we violate them, we should be open to various forms of criticism, censure, and reproach. As I put it in my (2022),

The driving idea behind this linking claim is that normative reasons for belief should somehow show up in our practices of interpersonal criticism and assessment. Their “normativity” should be revealed in the ways that we respond to individuals who either conform or fail to conform to them. If there is no trace of such reasons in our actual practices, then by what right can we call them “normative”?⁵

However, if I am correct about the case of Katyln and other similar cases, then subjects can be in possession of very strong (perhaps even decisive) evidence for the truth of *p*, fail to believe *p* even when all “minimal” conditions are met, and yet *not* be open to any form of criticism on account of this. Given the linking claim, this implies that, in such cases, the evidence does not constitute or give rise to a normative reason for belief, and this is incompatible with EM.

2. Varieties of criticizability: Hofmann’s reply

In his (2023), Frank Hofmann presents an important and insightful response to my argument against EM. As we have seen, my argument involved a linking claim connecting “criticizability” with normative reasons for belief. But what is “criticism”, exactly? In my (2022), I centered much of the discussion around recent theories of epistemic *blame*. In particular, I discussed four theories of epistemic blame: an emotion-based, a desire-based, a relationship-based, and an agency-cultivation account.⁶ I argued that, on none of these accounts are individuals like Katlyn epistemically blameworthy for not believing pointless propositions. However, while I focused much of my discussion on epistemic blame, I did not restrict “criticism” to blame:

Criticism might involve aretaic assessment of the person which falls short of blame. Also, there are ways of holding a person accountable (e.g. via sanctions of various kinds) which do not imply that the person manifests a character defect.⁷

What I *did* mean to rule out as “criticism” was

something that we might call “mere appraisal”; simply assessing someone’s thought or conduct vis-à-vis a standard where this has no real weight or significance in our actual practices.⁸

My argument thus hinged on what Hofmann calls a “strong” form of epistemic criticism; one whose appropriateness is sensitive to the “significance” of the object of evaluation. Thus,

⁵Ibid.: 15.

⁶All four of these theories are discussed in Boulton (2021).

⁷Buckley (2022): 7.

⁸Ibid.

Strong Epistemic Criticism (SEC): If S has strong evidence for p (and fulfills all the minimalist conditions), does not believe p, and her attitude toward p does not matter, she is not criticizable for not holding the belief that p.⁹

Contrast this with a “weak” form of epistemic criticism; one which is “blind toward the issue of significance”.¹⁰ A subject S is open to criticism in this weak sense just in case one can truly judge that S made an epistemic mistake, where “epistemic mistakes” depend upon “whether the subject respects or flouts her epistemic reasons”.¹¹ Thus,

Weak Epistemic Criticism (WEC): If S has strong evidence for p (and fulfills all the minimalist conditions), does not believe p, and her attitude toward p does not matter, she is criticizable for not holding the belief that p.¹²

Hofmann then presents a dilemmic response to my argument: When it comes to cases involving subjects like Katlyn in *BORED AT HOME*, we can either appeal to SEC or WEC. If we appeal to SEC, then the subjects will not be criticizable. However,

we cannot infer from the lack of criticizability to the non-existence of an epistemic reason for believing p (generated by the evidence). The reason is simply that not being criticizable might just be due to the *lack of significance*.¹³

On the other hand, if we appeal to WEC, then the subjects *will* be criticizable and, once again, we cannot infer the lack of epistemic reasons for belief. Thus, by appealing to the distinction between SEC and WEC, Hofmann attempts to block my argument against EM.

3. Against evidential minimalism: reply to Hofmann

I would like to highlight two problems with Hofmann’s response to my argument. I think that these problems, taken together, suffice to show that Hofmann’s response fails to save EM from my argument.

First, focus on Hofmann’s “weak” form of epistemic criticism. In order to be criticizable in Hofmann’s “weak” sense, it has to be true that Katlyn made an epistemic mistake (albeit one that isn’t “significant”). However, an opponent of EM could argue that, in cases like Katlyn’s, no epistemic mistake was made. “Mistakes” imply standards, viz. rules or norms that can be brought to bear on human actions and attitudes. What are these standards when it comes to epistemic evaluation? In saying that Katlyn is epistemically criticizable in the “weak” sense, Hofmann is assuming a view about the content of such standards, viz. that they tell us to conform our doxastic attitudes to the evidence *whenever* that evidence is sufficiently strong and all minimal conditions are met. Such an assumption is, however, question-begging in a certain respect.¹⁴ Hofmann acknowledges that the “weak” form of epistemic criticism

⁹Hofmann (2023): 5.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.: 4.

¹²Ibid.: 5.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Hofmann says that an evidential standard of the required kind is a “constitutive norm of belief” (p. 4, note 7). However, this is clearly a substantive commitment that might be called into question.

is somewhat technical, not so intuitive, and probably less often involved in ordinary life, if at all.¹⁵

This implies that epistemic standards or norms *themselves* will have a somewhat tenuous connection to our ordinary practices. Consider, however, views which ground epistemic norms themselves in our social-epistemic practices rather than the other way around. For instance, according to the view defended by Goldberg (2018),

epistemic norms themselves are grounded in and reflect the legitimate social (epistemic) expectations we have of one another. As I might put it: when legitimate, our epistemic expectations of one another *generate* the proper norms or standards to be used when we engage in the epistemic assessment of one another's beliefs...¹⁶

Thus, one could argue that we simply have no grip on the content of “epistemic” standards for belief independent of our social-epistemic practices. If this is right, then we might take the case of Katlyn (and other like it) as showing us that epistemic standards do not tell us to conform our doxastic attitudes to the evidence whenever that evidence is sufficiently strong and all minimal conditions are met.¹⁷ If that is right, then subjects like Katlyn have made no epistemic mistake in failing to believe pointless propositions and are therefore not criticizable even in Hofmann's “weak” sense.

There is a second problem that confronts Hofmann's reply; one that remains even if we grant Hofmann's assumption about the content of epistemic standards. So, grant for the sake of argument that Katlyn is epistemically criticizable in the “weak” sense; she has made an epistemic mistake in not forming beliefs in the pointless propositions. The problem is that there's no reason to think that “weak” criticism is, as we might put it, *normativity implying*. Defenders of EM say that evidence is either itself, or (under certain “minimal” conditions) gives rise to, a *normative* reason for belief. “Normative” reasons are often tied to deontic notions like ‘obligation’, ‘requirement’, or ‘ought’.¹⁸ There is, however, no reason to think that “weak” criticism implies genuine normative requirements; we can be “weakly” criticizable for making “mistakes” vis-à-vis *any* arbitrary or pointless standard. Thus, once we remove the significance condition, we run the risk of deflating “criticism” to the point where it no longer implies anything recognizably “normative”. What this means for a defender of EM is that, even if Katlyn is weakly criticizable, that does not imply that the strong evidence in her possession provides a *normative* reason for belief. However, the latter is precisely what a defender of EM needs in order to save her view from my argument.

Now, perhaps Hofmann could respond in the following manner: violating epistemic standards is something that, by and large and for the most part, has significance. However, on certain (perhaps rare) occasions, epistemic standards can be violated in ways that don't matter and aren't significant (e.g. Katlyn in BORED AT HOME). In

¹⁵Hofmann (2023): 6.

¹⁶Goldberg (2018): 2 (emphasis added).

¹⁷This wouldn't imply that epistemic standards *never* tell us to conform our beliefs to the evidence. For instance, perhaps such standards say that, *if* you hold a doxastic attitude D towards a proposition p, then conform D to the evidence for p.

¹⁸I argue that EM still fails even if evidence only *warrants* (rather than *requires*) belief (see: Buckley (2022): 17–18).

these cases, subjects are only criticizable in the “weak” sense. However, given the relative infrequency of these sorts of cases, we cannot conclude that such weak criticism fails to imply genuine normativity; the weakness of the criticism might instead reflect the idiosyncratic nature of these particular cases rather than the general insignificance of the relevant standards/violations thereof. This coheres with Hofmann’s points about epistemic evaluation of people’s beliefs vis-à-vis evidential norms and how this goes beyond “mere appraisal”:

it is quite common to assess people’s beliefs with respect to evidentialist considerations, both in science and in ordinary life... subjects whose beliefs are in accordance with their evidence are credited with justified beliefs, those whose beliefs do not fit their evidence are classified as holding unjustified beliefs... So we can conclude that the standard of evidence qualifies as going beyond “mere appraisal,” according to Buckley’s own characterization.¹⁹

The problem with this reply is that my examples *aren’t* idiosyncratic or atypical. On the contrary, it is part of our everyday epistemic predicament to be met with (perhaps very strong) evidence in support of propositions that we don’t care about and aren’t important. If we are operating on the basis of Hofmann’s assumption, then, in failing to believe in accordance with such evidence, we are making epistemic mistakes and are thus criticizable in the “weak” sense. However, as I have noted, this means that being “weakly” epistemically criticizable will be a fairly common occurrence within our everyday lives.²⁰ Given the pervasiveness of this kind of criticizability, its weakness thus does not seem to be a reflection of the idiosyncratic nature of examples like BORED AT HOME. Rather, it seems that its weakness is a reflection of the fact that, contra defenders of EM, evidence is not itself normative.

Note that this is perfectly compatible with Hofmann’s important observation that we frequently hold each other to evidential standards both in ordinary life and in scientific inquiry. These forms of interpersonal accountability are indeed important fixtures of our ordinary practices. However, if my points above regarding the failure of “weak” epistemic criticism to imply genuine normativity are on the right track, then this observation won’t save EM: Even if subjects like Katlyn are criticizable in the “weak” sense, it doesn’t follow from this that the strong evidence in their possession constitutes a normative reason for belief. The “normativity-implying” forms of epistemic criticism, then, might somehow involve extra-epistemic considerations, as the non-minimalist about evidential normativity contends.

¹⁹Hofmann (2023): 4, note 8.

²⁰This is not to say that being “weakly” epistemically *criticized* is a common feature of our everyday lives. The latter involves taking on a (true) judgment that someone made an epistemic mistake. Given the pointless nature of the propositions and the insignificance of the epistemic “mistakes” in cases like Katlyn’s, it is unlikely that anyone would actually bother to judge that a mistake was made. Nevertheless, if we are operating on the basis of Hofmann’s assumption, we are still “weakly” criticizable, i.e. *able* to be criticized in this way. Moreover, the insignificance of these mistakes shouldn’t bar us from engaging in such weak criticism since the point of the latter is simply to track the truth vis-à-vis epistemic mistakes. Thus, we *could* appropriately (and truly) judge that someone has made an epistemic mistake, thereby weakly criticizing them, whenever they fail to believe in accordance with the strong evidence in their possession no matter how pointless or insignificant the target proposition(s).

4. Conclusion

Summing up, Hofmann has presented an important and insightful challenge to my argument against EM. However, as I have tried to show, my argument can accommodate Hofmann's distinction between SEC and WEC. Either subjects like Katlyn have made no epistemic mistake and are thus not criticizable even in Hofmann's "weak" sense, or they have made an epistemic mistake but the "weak" form of criticism that can be adopted towards them doesn't imply genuine normativity. If these points are on the right track, then defenders of EM must try to find another way to reconcile their view with the connection between normative reasons for belief and criticizability. Alternatively, a defender of EM might deny the connection altogether and maintain that evidential normativity somehow floats free from our ordinary practices of interpersonal criticism.

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