

No Excuses: Against the Knowledge Norm of Belief

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§0. Introduction

Under what conditions are you epistemically permitted to believe that P? Recently it has become increasingly popular to argue that the answer is: *only when you know that P*. This idea gets called the 'knowledge norm of belief'.¹ In this article I present an argument against the knowledge norm.

First I show that the knowledge norm is incompatible with the conjunction of three claims:

Rational Requirement: There are circumstances in which you do not know that P, but it would be irrational for you to suspend judgement on P, and irrational for you to disbelieve that P

Impermissible Irrationality: It is epistemically impermissible to take epistemically irrational doxastic attitudes

Doxastic Permissibility: In any given situation there is always at least one epistemically permissible doxastic attitude for you to take towards P of belief, suspension of judgement, and disbelief

I then argue that each of these claims is true, and so we should reject the knowledge norm. Like Cohen's (1984) New Evil Demon argument and variations on it, the argument trades on the epistemic situation of subjects in 'the bad case'. Notably however, unlike with New Evil Demon-style arguments, appealing to the

¹ Knowledge normers include Adler (2002), Williamson (2000, 2013), Littlejohn (2013), Sutton (2005, 2007)

distinction between permissibility and excusability cannot help knowledge normers to rebut this argument.²

In §1 I show that the knowledge norm is incompatible with the conjunction of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. In §2 I argue that each of these claims is true, and so that we should reject the knowledge norm. In §3 I show how, unlike with New Evil Demon-style arguments, appealing to the permissibility/excusability distinction is of no help to knowledge normers when it comes to this argument. In §4 I conclude.

§I. Incompatibility

The knowledge norm says that you are epistemically permitted to believe that P only if you know that P. This claim is incompatible with the conjunction of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. Here's why.

Firstly, if Rational Requirement is true, then there are cases in which you don't know that P, but it would be irrational for you to suspend judgement on P or disbelieve that P.³ Let's suppose you are in one of these cases. According to Impermissible Irrationality it is impermissible to take irrational doxastic attitudes. So if Impermissible Irrationality is true, then it is impermissible for you to suspend judgement on P and impermissible for you to disbelieve that P in this case. But according to Rational Requirement you don't *know* that P. So if the knowledge norm is true, then it is *also* impermissible for you to believe that P. The result is that each of the attitudes: belief, suspension, disbelief, is impermissible when it comes to P. But this contradicts Doxastic Permissibility, which says that in any given situation there is always at least one doxastic attitude that it is permissible for you to take towards P of belief, suspension, and disbelief. So, if Rational Requirement,

² A referee has pointed out that the general argumentative strategy that I will employ is fairly familiar by now. McGrath (2007) uses it to argue against Preservationism about rational belief; Feldman (2003) uses it to defend Evidentialism; Huemer (2013) turns it against Siegel's (2013) views about the justificatory relevance of the etiology of belief; and Smithies (2016) uses it to argue against radical externalism about perceptual justification. Whilst the general strategy is the same here as in these articles, both the target view and the details differ. One notable difference is the focus here on how this argumentative strategy is invulnerable to the excuse maneuver. Two others are the new arguments I put forward for Impermissible Irrationality and Doxastic Permissibility.

³ To be clear, the kind of rationality that I am interested in here and throughout is the kind associated with *being reasonable*, not the kind associated with achieving internal coherence amongst one's attitudes and intentions. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need for clarification on this matter.

Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality are all true, then the knowledge norm is false.⁴

Notice that the argument here relies on the claim that it is a *necessary* condition on permissibly taking a doxastic attitude that it is rational to take that attitude (this is the contrapositive of Impermissible Irrationality). The argument does not rely on the claim that it is a *sufficient* condition on permissibly taking an attitude that it is rational to take that attitude. This will be important when it comes to distinguishing the argument from New Evil Demon-style arguments in §3.

§II. Motivating Impermissible Irrationality, Doxastic Permissibility, and Rational Requirement

We just saw that the knowledge norm is incompatible with the conjunction of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. In this section, I'll argue that each of these claims is true, and so we should reject the knowledge norm.

§2.1. Rational Requirement

Rational Requirement states that there are cases in which it is irrational for you to suspend judgement on P or disbelieve that P, but at the same time you don't know that P. The following familiar case gives us good reason to accept this claim:

The Bad Case: You have just woken up and are in the kitchen making breakfast. You look at the kitchen table and see what appears to be your favourite mug is sitting on it, just where you left it last night. On the basis of your visual experience you form the belief that your favourite mug is on the kitchen table. Alas, you are deceived. Last night while you were sleeping a thief broke in, stole your mug, and replaced it with an identical-looking replica.

Call the proposition that your favourite mug is on your kitchen table 'P'. You don't know that P, because your belief is false and no falsehoods are known. And it would be irrational for you to disbelieve that P in this case. Disbelieving that P is equivalent to believing that not-P. Given that your evidence overwhelmingly

⁴ The case I will use to motivate Rational Requirement is one in which your belief is *false*. The upshot of this is that the argument also cuts against the truth norm of belief (Whiting 2010, 2013, Littlejohn 2012).

supports P and you have no evidence supporting not-P, to believe that not-P would be to egregiously disregard the evidence. That's irrational.

More interestingly, it would also be irrational for you to suspend judgement on P in this case, or so it seems to me. You have been presented with the flawless, vivid, appearance of your favourite mug being on the kitchen table right in front of you. Moreover, you have no reason to think that your perceptual experience is not veridical or that anything is amiss. Were you to suspend on P you would, intuitively, be too epistemically cautious. And in virtue of being too epistemically cautious, suspending judgement would be irrational. So the result is that in this case you don't know that P, but it would be irrational for you to suspend judgement on P and irrational for you to disbelieve that P. So Rational Requirement is true.

§2.2. Doxastic Permissibility

Doxastic Permissibility states that whatever circumstances you are in, there is always at least one doxastic attitude that it is permissible for you to take towards P of belief, suspension, and disbelief. There are, I think, quite a few good reasons to accept this claim. But I won't go into all of them here. In order to keep things brief, I'll only discuss the two that seem to me to be most decisive.

Firstly, think about the *raison d'être* of epistemic norms. Why do we try to adhere to them? One of the main reasons is surely because doing so enables us to form the appropriate doxastic attitudes *with the result we are then able to go on to use these doxastic attitudes in planning and decision-making*. In order to form and execute a plan of action one needs both desires and doxastic attitudes about how those desired can be fulfilled. For example, if I want to make a cup of tea, then I have to make use of my doxastic attitudes about where the tea bags are in order to plan and execute a course of action that fulfills my desire. If I have no doxastic attitudes about where the tea bags are, then I simply cannot form and execute a plan of action. According to a theory that rejects Doxastic Permissibility there are circumstances in which I ought not to have any doxastic attitudes towards some proposition P. If so, then in these circumstances I ought to be in a state of mind in which I am unable to plan and execute a course of action to fulfill my desires when the fulfillment of those desires depends on the question of whether or not P is true. The result is that epistemic norms are of no practical use in these circumstances.⁵ So an epistemic theory that rejects Doxastic Permissibility commits itself to the view that epistemic

⁵ Note that even if suspension is the appropriate attitude to take towards P, this is still action guiding. If I want to make a cup of tea, and I suspend judgement on where the tea bags are, then I can use this desire/doxastic attitude combination to motivate seeking out more evidence about their location. By contrast, if I am obligated, as per the rejection of Doxastic Permissibility, to have no attitude at all, then I will be obligated to be in a state of mind in which I cannot even do this.

norms do a bad job of fulfilling one of their main purposes: to assist subjects in successfully navigating their way through the world. That's a good reason to accept Doxastic Permissibility.⁶

The second point I want to make about Doxastic Permissibility isn't intended to show that we should accept it in full generality (though I think we should). Instead what I want to argue is that rejecting it in order to save the knowledge norm commits one to an absurd claim: that one can be permitted to believe that P is probable, yet at the very same time not be permitted to have a credence in P

To begin with we need a particular thesis about the metaphysics of doxastic attitudes. It is this:

Fine-to-Coarse: for every credence n towards P between 0 and 1, taking n to P entails that one either believes that P, suspends on P, or disbelieves that P.

My reasons for thinking that Fine-to-Coarse holds are the same as Weatherson's (2005). Weatherson asks the question: when it comes to fine-grained doxastic attitudes (i.e. credences) and coarse-grained doxastic attitudes like belief, do we have two wholly different representational systems on our hands, or merely two descriptions of the representational system? He argues that the answer is the latter. He writes: "There is no evidence to believe that the mind contains two representational systems, one to represent things as being probable or improbable and the other to represent things as being true or false. The mind probably does contain a vast plurality of representational systems, but they don't divide up the doxastic duties this way. If there are distinct visual and auditory representational systems, they don't divide up duties between degrees of belief and belief *tout court*, for example. If there were two distinct systems, then we should imagine that they could vary independently, at least as much as is allowed by constitutive rationality. But such variation is hard to fathom." (2005: 420). I agree. But if that's right - if the language of credences and the language of coarse-grained attitudes merely capture two different ways of describing a *single* representational system - then it is simply not possible to have a credence in P without having a coarse-grained attitude towards P. And since the set {belief, suspension, disbelief} *exhausts* the possible coarse-grained attitudes, it follows that it is not possible to have a credence in P without either believing that P, suspending on P, or disbelieving that P.⁷

⁶ You might think that it isn't coarse-grained attitudes like belief that matter to our planning and decision-making, but only fine-grained attitudes like credences. However, the next argument shows that knowledge normers who reject Doxastic Permissibility must commit to the claim that there are cases in which there is no permissible credence to take towards P. So even if you think it's credences, rather than beliefs, that matter, the point about an epistemic theory that rejects Doxastic Permissibility being committed to the claim that epistemic norms do a bad job of fulfilling this purpose still stands.

⁷ An analogy helps to show why. Imagine a circle. We can divide it into three segments - A, B, and C -

If Fine-to-Coarse holds, then having a credence in P entails that one either believes, suspends on, or disbelieves, that P. And according to the rejection of Doxastic Permissibility there are circumstances in which one is not permitted to believe, not permitted to suspend, and not permitted to disbelieve. It follows, then, that rejecting Doxastic Permissibility means claiming that there are circumstances in which there is *no* credence that it is permissible for you to take towards P.

The problem with this is as follows. For knowledge normers, if there is any case in which there is no permissible credence to take, then it had better be the bad case. Otherwise rejecting Doxastic Permissibility does nothing to block the argument against the knowledge norm. Why? Because if Doxastic Permissibility *does* hold in the bad case - that is, if there is at least one permissible attitude for you to take in the bad case - then even if it doesn't hold in full generality, we can still run the argument I have put forward to the conclusion that the knowledge norm is false.⁸ So, knowledge normers who reject Doxastic Permissibility had better say that it fails in the bad case. Now here's the problem with that. Knowledge normers (and indeed, everyone else) should accept the claim that in the bad case you are permitted to believe the proposition that *P is probable on your evidence*. After all, this is a proposition that you are in a position to *know* is true, so it is permissible by the knowledge normer's own lights for you to believe it. But if we deny that Doxastic Permissibility holds in the bad case, then we will have to say that at the very same time as you are permitted to believe that P is probable, you are not permitted to have a credence in P *simpliciter*. Some philosophers think that the details of the exact relationship between credences and beliefs about probabilities is a complicated issue. I expect they're right. But *whatever* the relationship is it must surely be the case that if one is permitted to believe that P is probable, then one is permitted to have a credence towards P! To deny this is absurd. But in order to save the knowledge norm by rejecting Doxastic Permissibility knowledge normers have to deny it. So,

which jointly make up the whole. But we can also divide it into 100 segments which jointly make up the whole. Suppose that we do the latter. Take any segment x from 0-100. Clearly x will fall into one of segments A-C. It is impossible for it not to. Segments A-C represent the coarse-grained attitudes belief, suspension, and disbelief, respectively, and segments 0-100 represent credences between 0 and 1. So if one has a credence c in P of 0 to 1, one has a coarse-grained attitude of belief, suspension, or disbelief, towards P, since c will fall into one of segments A-C, and falling into one of these segments means have that doxastic attitude. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing out the need for clarification on this matter.

⁸ The argument would be this: In the bad case it is irrational for you to suspend on P and irrational for you to disbelieve that P. By Impermissible Irrationality you are thereby not permitted to suspend or disbelieve. You don't know that P though, so by the knowledge norm you are not permitted to believe that P. So you are not permitted to believe, not permitted to suspend, and not permitted disbelieve in the bad case. But this contradicts the restricted version of Doxastic Permissibility according to which there is at least one permissible attitude to take in the bad case of belief, suspension, and disbelief. So the knowledge norm is false.

knowledge normers cannot plausibly save their view against the argument of §1 by rejecting Doxastic Permissibility.

§2.3. Impermissible Irrationality

Impermissible Irrationality states that it is impermissible to take irrational doxastic attitudes. Or, to put it another way, that rationality is a necessary condition on permissibility when it comes to taking doxastic attitudes. Why should we think that?⁹

Because without it we cannot adequately capture what is epistemically wrong about epistemic irrationality. Clearly there is *something* epistemically bad about being epistemically irrational. Perhaps we should say that although it is bad it is not impermissible but rather merely suberogatory (inadvisable, non-ideal, etc.)? The problem with those descriptions is that they just don't do justice to the weight of epistemic wrongdoing that comes with failing to live up to the standards of rationality. It's not as though when one is epistemically irrational one is in a situation analogous to that of a person who gets drunk before a job interview: it's not a good idea, but you're within your rights to do it. Epistemic rationality has more normative force than that within the epistemic domain. It is most naturally understood as being epistemically obligatory.

There is also another motivation for Impermissible Irrationality. It stems from facts about epistemic blameworthiness and its link with permissibility and impermissibility. To begin with, notice that were you to do the irrational thing and suspend judgement on P in the bad case, then you would be epistemically blameworthy. That is to say, you would be an appropriate target of criticism and censure for your behaviour as an epistemic agent. Why? The obvious answer is *precisely because you are being epistemically irrational*. So it seems that epistemic irrationality and epistemic blameworthiness are linked: in general, one is epistemically blameworthy for being epistemically irrational.¹⁰ This fact gives us a good reason to accept Impermissible Irrationality. The reason is simple: one is an appropriate target of blame only if one has done something wrong. So if one is epistemically blameworthy in virtue of being epistemically irrational then, quite generally, to be epistemic irrational is to commit an epistemic wrong. What kind of

⁹ An anonymous referee for this journal has pointed out to me that on to certain ways of thinking about epistemic rationality and epistemic permissibility, they are naturally taken as simply being the same thing. If so, one might wonder, why bother arguing for Impermissible Irrationality? I agree with the referee that they are the same thing (at least for some readings of 'the same thing'). But knowledge normers deny precisely this claim, so it would be question begging to simply assume an equation between the two. Hence, an argument is needed.

¹⁰ There are exceptions to this. Sometimes you have an excuse for your irrationality, and so you are not an appropriate target of criticism. But such exceptions do not affect the point I want to make here.

wrong? As I just said, to suggest that it is merely suberogatory fails, it seems to me, to adequately capture the normative force of epistemic rationality. It is stronger than that. This leaves us with the wrongdoing of obligation-violation. And the claim that one violates an epistemic obligation when one is epistemic irrational is precisely the claim that Impermissible Irrationality makes.

§2.4. Against the Knowledge Norm

In §1 we saw that the knowledge norm is incompatible with the conjunction of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. And we just saw that there are good reasons to accept each of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. The conclusion that we should draw from this, I suggest, is that the knowledge norm is false.

§III. Excuses & New Evil Demon-Style Arguments

The argument I've presented bears some similarity to more familiar New Evil Demon-style arguments against knowledge norms. In fact, however, it is importantly different. Unlike with the New Evil Demon-style arguments, knowledge normer's favoured response of appealing to the distinction between permissibility and excusability cannot help them here. In this section, I'll show why.

§3.1. New Evil Demon-Style Arguments

New Evil Demon-style arguments against knowledge norms go like this (where x = something that knowledge is putatively the norm of, like belief, assertion, and reasoning):

- (1) It is rational in the bad case for you to x (i.e. believe that P, assert that P, or reason on P)
- (2) If it is rational in the bad case for you to x , then it is permissible in the bad case for you to x .
- (3) Therefore: it is permissible in the bad case for you to x
- (4) In the bad case you do not know that P
- (5) Therefore: knowledge is not the norm of x

Variations on this argument are at work in Brown (2008), Neta (2009), and Gerken (2011), *et al.* in the practical reasoning case; Lackey (2007), and Kvanvig (2011), *et al.* in the assertion case; and Cohen & Comesana (2013) in the belief case. It finds its historical origins in Cohen's (1984) 'New Evil Demon' argument against reliabilism. The key premise in the argument is (2): that rationality entails permissibility. Those who endorse the traditional argument argue at length for this claim (the details are not important for our purposes).

Naturally, knowledge normers are well aware of the argument. Their response to it has been to argue that the claim made by (2), that rationality entails permissibility, is false. They argue that some rational actions not permissible but rather *excusable* as a result of the subject's epistemic situation. That is, there are cases in which, although the subject's behaviour was impermissible, she is not to be blamed or criticised for it due to the fact that it was rational for her to behave in this way.

Knowledge normers argue that this is what is going on with you in the bad case when you believe that P, assert that P, or reason on P. Is not permissible for you to do these things, but rather merely excusable, and so (2) is false. In the case of belief the idea is that you are not culpable for believing that P, because although you do something impermissible in believing that P, since your situation was one in which you were in no position to know that it was impermissible (you were, after all, in a situation which was first-personally indistinguishable from one in which you know that P) you are to be excused for your transgression. But excusable behaviour is not the same thing as permissible behaviour, and excusable transgressions of a norm are not counterexamples to that norm; although you are blameless it remains the case, knowledge normers argue, that your belief is impermissible. Thus (2), and with it the New Evil Demon-style argument, is rejected. This reply to New Evil Demon-style arguments is put forward by Sutton (2005, 2007) and Williamson (2007, 2013, forthcoming) in the belief case. Williamson (2000) also puts it forward in the assertion case, and Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) put it forward in the reasoning case.

Whether this is a convincing response to New Evil Demon-style arguments is a matter of ongoing controversy. However, although this debate is interesting and important in its own right, as I will now show it is simply inert when it comes to the argument I have given in §1-2.

§3.2. No Excuses

New Evil Demon-style arguments appeal to a principle according to which, if it is rational to take a doxastic attitude D to P, then it is permissible to take D to P (i.e.

Rat \rightarrow Per). It is this principle invoked in premise (2) above. By contrast, the argument I gave in §1-2 appeals to the converse principle: that it is *only* permissible to take a doxastic attitude D to P if it is rational to take D to P (i.e. Per \rightarrow Rat). This is what gives us the principle Impermissible Irrationality, which is one of the centrepieces of the new argument.

Crucially, even if considerations relating to the permissibility/excusability distinction undermine appeals to the principle that rationality entails permissibility, they *simply have nothing to say* when it comes to the converse principle that permissibility entails rationality. A conditional and its converse are logically independent. So an argument to the effect that R does not entail P provides no reason for thinking that P does not entail R.¹¹ Just because P isn't *sufficient* for R, that doesn't mean that P isn't *necessary* for R. So whilst it may be the case that - as knowledge normers argue - recognition of the category of excusable actions reveals that there is sometimes *more* to permissibility than rationality, acknowledging that some actions are merely excusable in virtue of being rational does nothing to motivate the idea that there may be *less* to permissibility than rationality. And so it does nothing to motivate the idea that it is permissible to be irrational.

Accordingly, knowledge normers cannot appeal to the permissibility / excusability distinction in order to respond to new argument. That distinction is simply inert when it comes to this argument. This is the key difference between New Evil Demon-style arguments and the new argument. The latter, unlike the former, allows for 'no excuses'.

§V. Conclusion

The knowledge norm is incompatible with the conjunction of Rational Requirement, Doxastic Permissibility, and Impermissible Irrationality. As there are good reasons to think that each conjunct is true, we should reject the knowledge norm. Moreover, unlike with superficially similar New Evil Demon-style arguments against knowledge norms, appealing to the distinction between permissibility and excusability cannot help knowledge normers here.¹²

¹¹ For example: an argument for the claim that belief doesn't entail knowledge gives us no reason to think that knowledge doesn't entail belief.

¹² Thanks to Matthew McGrath, Herman Cappelen, Jessica Brown, Patrick Greenough, Torfinn Huvenes, Stewart Cohen, Clayton Littlejohn, two anonymous referees for this journal, and audiences at Harvard University, the University of Groningen, the University of Notre Dame, and the University of Oslo for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article.

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