

Three Grades of Epistemic Awkwardness*

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Since Pryor 2004, my views about immediate but underminable justification have been bound up with the possibility of a certain kind of epistemic awkwardness—that is, a certain kind of position your evidence can put you in, that’s awkward (in a way yet to be explained). I’m not the only theorist to posit this kind of awkwardness: I believe something analogous is at least implicit (and sometimes explicit) among fans of “wide-scope” oughts in ethics. And Michael Bergmann and Alex Jackson have made proposals that suggest they might agree with me about its role in epistemology. But I’ve noticed that when other philosophers engage with my work, this kind of epistemic awkwardness is often missing from their discussion. It’s as though they haven’t understood the role it’s supposed to play. I doubt that the story I’ve been telling is coherent without it.

There’s nothing in the awkwardness I posit that’s specific to my controversial views about immediate justification, so let’s try to spell it out in more general terms. I’ll do so by describing three “grades” of epistemic awkwardness. The first and third grades are already familiar to many epistemologists. Not that they’d all agree they’re possible! But they’d have no difficulty recognizing that some proposal posits awkwardness of those sorts. The kind of awkwardness I’m relying on, and whose possibility isn’t being taken sufficiently seriously, is a second, intermediate grade. I will describe the three grades in that order.

The most modest awkwardness is illustrated by the Preface. Here it seems like your epistemic position can recommend a set of doxastic attitudes the joint holding of which is recognizably incoherent. By a “doxastic attitude,” I mean to include believings, as well as withholdings, as well as more finely-grained attitudes. And I’m imagining that your position recommends these states both individually *and jointly*. That is, in the Preface case, your epistemic position really does recommend that you believe P *and* believe Q *and* believe R, . . . *and* believe that not-all-of: P, Q, R, . . . I think situations of this sort can also arise with graded belief, as David Christensen has argued in recent years. For example, your evidence E might mandate a credence at least as high as n in H; and suppose you do so believe. Now you acquire further evidence E* that, while

*Thanks to David Barnett for a conversation that brought this all into better focus.

not interfering with your possession of E, testifies that credence n in H is inappropriately high. The addition of E* might not in fact relieve E's mandate; at the same time it seems inappropriately unresponsive for you not to lower your credence in H at all in response to E*. So it seems that however you respond to your combined evidence will involve some kind of incoherence. Someone who accepts the first grade of epistemic awkwardness thinks that nonetheless, some responses here *are* jointly recommended—and are also not prohibited—by your epistemic position. Some way or ways of responding to that evidence are justified or reasonable responses.

Not every epistemologist accepts this first grade of epistemic awkwardness. Of course they agree that people can *have* sets of attitudes with the envisaged structures; but they don't accept that those sets of attitudes can ever be justified. Now, you might think that, but still be able to seriously entertain proposals that such attitudes *can* be justified. I think I have argued with some philosophers who can't entertain that. They may as well stop reading now, for things are only going to get worse.

Let's jump now to the third, most extreme, form of epistemic awkwardness. I think of this as an epistemic form of normative tragedy. Calling it a "tragedy" doesn't mean it needs to be very momentous. The idea is rather that some given choice is doomed to be wrong, no matter what you do. For example, your normative situation both mandates doing something *and also* prohibits it. Or it may mandate doing one thing, and also mandate doing another thing, when it's recognizably impossible to do both. In ethics, these kinds of scenario are sometimes argued to arise from the possibility of competing pro tanto duties, or competing incommensurable ends. You ought to keep your promise to attend your daughter's recital; the fact that there's a police roadblock in your way is no excuse. At the same time, you ought to stop for the police roadblock; that your daughter's recital starts in ten minutes is also no excuse. Arguably, whatever you do here, you'll have done *something* wrong. It is controversial even in ethics whether such normative situations are possible. It's even more controversial whether there is any analogue in the epistemic case. I'll give some candidates in a moment, but many epistemologists will doubt whether this is the right way to describe any case. I think it sometimes is, but my own endorsement of this is tentative.

Let's clarify some things about this third grade of epistemic awkwardness. (1) One who believes in it needn't think that just anything goes. It may be that one set of considerations (non-monotonically) mandate doing A, and another set of considerations (non-monotonically) mandate doing B, which is incompatible with A, but that both sets of considerations agree in prohibiting anything other than A or B. In this case, doing A would be doing something wrong: it would preclude doing B, and thus violate the mandate to do B. But it'd be *better* than doing something other than A or B. (2) Even between A and B, this view needn't necessarily say all is equal. Nothing we've said so far *introduces* a difference between how wrong it would be to do A, and how wrong to do B; but

neither does anything we've said preclude such a difference. It could be that doing A is wrong, and so too is doing B, but doing A is less wrong. Someone who doesn't believe in the possibility of normative tragedy would insist that doing whatever is least wrong must always be right. But that is a substantial hypothesis, and it's intelligible to some of us that it might not be true. (3) Finally, note a difference between the first and third grades of awkwardness. In the Preface case, it's plausible that the set of attitudes you should jointly have is, though incoherent, the right and reasonable and appropriate and justified set of attitudes to have. They are both individually right and jointly right. Those are the attitudes that you should have, all together. Despite their incoherence, plausibly you are doing what you overall should be doing, in having them. We may perhaps say there's something epistemically unfortunate or vicious or *awkward* about having them, because of their incoherence. We may even, using terms differently than I am here, call manifestations of that awkwardness *a kind of* epistemic wrong. But I think the most plausible view of the Preface would not deem having those attitudes wrong in the sense invoked by the third grade of awkwardness. Arguably, you really *shouldn't* overall drive through the police roadblock; and at the same time, you *shouldn't* overall delay your arrival for your daughter's recital. But arguably, you *should* believe each of the claims in the book, *and* simultaneously believe some of those claims will be wrong.

I promised to describe some candidate examples of epistemic tragedy. The cases I find most plausible come from the interaction of static and dynamic epistemic norms. We can bring these into focus by thinking about Epistemic Permissiveness. I understand this as the view that a single body of evidence might permit several doxastic responses. A strong form of this holds that even for a single subject, who has evidence E at a given moment, any of several doxastic responses might be permitted. A weaker form holds only that there can be two subjects, both having E, and one of them be permitted (at least) to respond in one way, and the other be permitted (at least) to respond in a different way. Why might someone who endorses Permissibility in the weaker sense refrain from endorsing the stronger? Because it's conceivable that what doxastic responses are permitted for you depend on extra-evidential factors as well. In particular, they may depend on what doxastic attitudes you currently do have. When we consider a single subject at a given moment, those extra-evidential factors get fixed to a single choice. There may in that case be only a single permitted response left. This is the kind of view held by a Bayesian who allows that more than one set of priors is epistemically ok. If S1 and S2 start with different priors, then even though they both now have the same total evidence, S1 may be permitted (indeed mandated) to have one set of credences, and S2 may be permitted (indeed mandated) to have another. But neither subject herself has any leeway in what credal responses she is permitted.

These kinds of examples of weak Permissibility without strong Permissibility involve the idea that, though another set of doxastic attitudes might *statically* fit your evidence, your current set of attitudes doesn't permit you *to move* directly to them. And this is an idea that seems plausible to me regardless of

whether we endorse even weak Permissibility. It drives what I've found to be the most persuasive examples of epistemic tragedy.

Suppose your epistemic position prohibits some doxastic attitude B, which you nonetheless have. At the same time, it prohibits changing your attitude towards B except on some appropriate psychological basis, which as it happens you lack. Then you are not epistemically as you should be. You would be better rid of attitude B. But you ought also have some *basis* for rejecting it, and none of the attitudes you do now have constitute an appropriate such basis. Perhaps the realization that B doesn't conform to your evidence, or further discernment of what your evidence *is*, could become such a basis. But I'm supposing you haven't had these realizations, and that having them would put you into a *different* epistemic position. (Someone who retained B after the realization would be worse than someone who retains B before it. This motivates the idea that having the realization changes one's epistemic position.) It seems plausible to me that a subject who hasn't had those realizations may have attitudes that are statically bad, but there be no route dynamically permitted her from the attitudes she actually has to attitudes she'd be statically better off with. Unless she lucks upon some new evidence (including new insight into her epistemic position), whatever choice she makes about B—whether to retain it or to reject it—may commit some epistemic wrong.

This seems to me a plausible description, but it isn't indisputable. If you don't believe such cases would exemplify our third grade of epistemic awkwardness, that's ok. If you don't believe *any* cases would exemplify it, that's also ok. I'm bringing descriptions of these cases into focus so that we can distinguish them from other proposals.

In simplified form, I understand the first grade of epistemic awkwardness to say something like: Believe P and Believe Q, despite their incoherence! (There can also be cases involving doxastic attitudes other than belief.)

I understand the third grade to say something like: Believe P! Also, don't believe P! Or, something like: Believe P! Also, don't move from where you doxastically are to believing P!

The first is more familiar than the third, but I think both of these ideas will be recognizable to epistemologists. They may not *believe they're genuine normative possibilities*. But they wouldn't have much trouble identifying these possibilities as an essential part of a view they're engaging with.

There's an intermediate, second grade of epistemic awkwardness that hasn't yet achieved that kind of recognition. In a similarly simplified form, this says something like: Believe P! Also, believe Q! Also, don't simultaneously believe P and believe Q!

This resembles the first awkwardness in some ways, and the third awkwardness in others. But they are different.

Note the difference between the first awkwardness and the second. An example

of the first is where you're enjoined to believe some things, and also believe those things aren't all true. These beliefs can't all be correct. But it would be possible to simultaneously follow these prescriptions. (I assume there is not a global proscription against having a set of beliefs that can't jointly be true. If there were, then putative cases of the first awkwardness would indeed turn out to illustrate the second.)

A similarity between the second awkwardness and the third is that for both, whatever you do, you will be doing something wrong. The difference is in how localized that wrong can be. For example, in the second case, suppose you do believe P, and you refrain from believing Q. Now you've conformed to the prescription to believe P, and you've conformed to the prescription not to both believe P and believe Q. You have violated the prescription to believe Q; but it's at least arguable that this doesn't discredit your belief *in P*. Given that you were in that epistemic position, you were doomed to do *something* wrong somewhere. (It's not clear where we should *locate* the wrong in the case where you both believe P and believe Q, but let's not pause to settle that.) But you weren't doomed to do anything wrong *about Q specifically*. You might instead have believed Q, and disbelieved P, thus doing something wrong with your attitude towards P, instead.

Though I didn't emphasize it before, our examples of the third awkwardness differ in this respect. In the third awkwardness, there are specific choices where your epistemic position dooms you to be doing wrong with respect to them. If you believe P, you've done something wrong. If you disbelieve P, you've done something wrong. If you withhold judgment about P, you've also done something wrong. (If that were a justifiable escape, we wouldn't have any awkwardness.) As we said, it needn't be that all of these are *equally* wrong. But the third grade of awkwardness posits that they each would be wrong.

Ok, as I said, it's not essential to my story about immediate justification that the third grade of awkwardness be possible. I do however rely on the possibility of the second grade. (If the second and third grade are each possible, it's not essential to me that the difference between them be philosophically fundamental.)

Here is how the second grade of epistemic awkwardness comes into the stories I tell about immediate justification.

Sam is lucky. His evidence supports the claim that his vision is reliable, and also supports believing P on the basis of vision.

Teresa is less lucky. She has no evidence about vision's reliability, and so her evidence supports withholding judgment. However, since what support she has to believe things on the basis of vision doesn't require justification or justified belief that vision is reliable, she also has support for believing P on the basis of vision.

If Sam were the only one who could have justified beliefs on the basis of vision, then there would be at least a necessary connection (if not some more intimate

link) between having those beliefs and having justification for believing vision is reliable.

However, Teresa can also have justified beliefs on the basis of vision. So there is no such necessary connection.

However, Teresa's condition is epistemically awkward. She ought to withhold judgment about whether vision is reliable, and she ought to believe P on the basis of vision—but of course she should not do both of these simultaneously. Holding both of those attitudes at once arguably manifests a kind of incoherence that's impermissible (unlike the Preface incoherence).

Perhaps it's possible for Teresa to have no attitude at all about reliability, not even a withheld judgment. And perhaps she's not mandated simpliciter to withhold judgment about her reliability, but only to withhold judgment if she has any attitude. But if Teresa does have an attitude about her reliability, it seems that whatever it is, she's going to commit some epistemic wrong. Still, there *needn't* be anything wrong with her belief in P. She might believe, unjustifiably, that her vision *is* reliable. Like most epistemologists, I don't think that an unjustified belief in reliability can *support* another belief *that epistemically depends on the assumption of reliability*. But nor do I think Teresa's belief in P does so depend. So the unjustifiedness of her belief in reliability needn't undermine her justified visual belief in P. That belief needn't share in the wrongness.

The kind of view I'm sketching here requires a kind of slackness between what prescriptions or requirements your evidence makes, and what justified sets of attitudes you can move to, or even statically have. Some philosophers will deny there is such a slackness. For example, Tim Willenken distinguishes:

Does having propositional justification for p always entail the existence of a sound, undefeated reasoning route from one's evidence to the conclusion that p? I will call views of propositional justification wherein the answer is "yes" robust views of propositional justification and views wherein the answer is "no" anemic views of propositional justification. (Willenken 2011, at p. 11)

This is the kind of issue that doesn't often get much explicit discussion—at most only a sentence in one paper, a tacit assumption in another. But from my experience talking to other epistemologists, I think many will want to embrace the robust notion Willenken here articulates. Many will want to say, further, that what attitudes you have propositional justification for must be possible for you to *jointly* reasonably hold. But not all will. I think the kind of slackness I envisage is also an intelligible possibility. And it may be essential to the intelligibility of the kind of immediate justification my work has posited.

Those who believe in the first grade of epistemic awkwardness think incoherence can sometimes be epistemically permissible. But other times it is not. And philosophers sometimes argue from the fact that, if your evidence supports some attitude A, and *actually having* A would be impermissibly incoherent

with attitude B, then your evidence can not also support attitude B. Those who believe in the second grade of epistemic awkwardness think this inference is invalid. The interaction between norms of evidential support and norms of coherence is not that straightforward.