


Scalar Epistemic Consequentialism

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Abstract: The following is an advertisement for scalar epistemic consequentialism. Benefits include an epistemic consequentialism that (i) is immune from the the no-positive-epistemic-duties objection and (ii) doesn't require bullet-biting on the rightness of epistemic tradeoffs. The advertisement invites readers to think more carefully about both the definition and logical space of epistemic consequentialism.

Key words: consequentialism, epistemic duties, epistemic normativity, rationality

Attracted by the idea that your favourite epistemic good, e.g., true belief, is a value to be promoted? Tempted by the thought that epistemically better states of affairs and endeavours are those with overall epistemically better consequences? Why aren't you an epistemic consequentialist, then?¹

Maybe you think that epistemic consequentialism is false since you don't believe that there exist positive epistemic duties to analyse consequentially. Maybe, that is, you're like Clayton Littlejohn (2012: 46–48) and Mark Nelson (2010: 86–90): you think that epistemic consequentialism can't be true because the idea that there's ever something you *must believe*, on epistemic grounds, doesn't make sense in the way that there's sometimes something you *must do*, on moral grounds, does. Compare: failing to learn simple, easily knowable propositions is not epistemically criticisable, while failing to act to benefit those in serious need at zero self-cost is morally criticisable.

Relatedly, you might be turned off epistemic consequentialism because you find distasteful the kind of tradeoffs that are the *raison d'être* of consequentialising. That is, you think it repugnant that sometimes one *must* do some bad for an overall good. You're not simply opposed to the idea that there are positive epistemic duties; you oppose, more specifically, the constraint-free way that consequentialists sometimes require one to fulfil these. It just can't be required, morally, to kill one innocent to prevent a mob from killing several hundred. Similarly, you might agree with C. S. Jenkins (2007: 36–37) and Selim Berker (2013: 363–365) that it just can't be required, epistemically, to accept a proposition blindly, even if you've good evidence that doing so will net you innumerable many true beliefs. For instance, Jenkins's 'quirky goddess' will grant you a life of true beliefs if you just accept one proposition for no reason (and which is in fact false). Indeed, your distaste for such tradeoffs may have transformed into full-on alarm upon seeing some epistemic consequentialists follow moral consequentialists by simply bullet-biting on their rightness.²

So, are epistemic duties not for you? Does biting an excessive number of bullets turn your stomach? Us too! You see, scalar epistemic consequentialism escapes these difficulties while remaining faithfully consequentialist. It may be the view for you.

What is scalar epistemic consequentialism? Consider scalar moral consequentialism.³ It says that there are morally better/worse states of affairs, defined by the respective goodness/badness of

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their overall consequences. But it then refuses to be drawn on a threshold for moral rightness, rejecting the very idea of one. Crucially, the view remains action-guiding: it is straightforwardly a recipe for ranking states of affairs in terms of their comparative moral betterness/worseness. Ranking in hand, the view then claims that the morally better states of affairs are, *ipso facto*, ones that we have more reason to bring about, and in proportion to their being better than the alternatives. Still, we are not *required* to actualise those better states of affairs. As Alastair Norcross puts it:

The fundamental moral fact about an action is how good it is relative to other available alternatives. Once a range of options has been evaluated in terms of goodness, all the morally relevant facts about those options have been discovered. There is no further fact of the form ‘x is right,’ ‘x is to-be-done,’ or ‘x is demanded by morality.’ (2006: 44; see also Norcross 2020: 11, 27)

Scalar epistemic consequentialists apply the same thinking to epistemic normativity. We think that once a range of options has been evaluated for epistemic goodness, then all of the epistemically relevant facts about those options have been discovered. (Again, we’ll understand ‘epistemic goodness’ here veritistically as ‘true belief(s),’ though it could also mean ‘justification,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘understanding,’ etc.—we’re flexible!) In particular, scalar epistemic consequentialists think that there are no additional facts about epistemic rightness/wrongness that must be invoked. More specifically, we think that, again roughly following scalar moral consequentialists, matters of theoretical reason can be guided comparatively, rather than absolutely. That is, one can be steered in one’s epistemic endeavours via awareness that a course of thinking or activity is better (or worse) than another, where this means that it brings about more epistemic goodness (or badness). We reject the idea that one’s epistemic endeavours must be directed by such crude terms as ‘rightness’ (or ‘wrongness’). Consider: reading history books in the library brings about more epistemic goodness, and is *ipso facto* epistemically better, than staying home playing computer games. Therefore, there’s more reason to pick up a book than a gaming controller, epistemically at least. Still, one isn’t epistemically blameworthy for choosing Halo 3 over Henry VIII.⁴

Crucially, insofar as our brand of epistemic consequentialism avoids the no-positive-epistemic-duties objection and avoids debasing itself with bullet-biting on the rightness of tradeoffs, we think that you’ll agree: the results are pretty interesting. No positive duties? Nothing you *must* trade off. Acquiescing to Jenkins’s quirky goddess will bring about a greater amount of overall epistemic goodness than not acquiescing. That, we think, gives one a reason to do it, insofar as it counts in favour of that course of action. Still, acquiescing is not epistemically obligatory on our view. We think Littlejohn and Nelson have it right: nothing is.

Is this result coherent? Certainly. The fact that a life spent reading Steven Erikson novels would bring about a colossal amount of aesthetic goodness, i.e., a certain kind of pleasure, is a reason to do it, from the point of view of the aesthetic. But one is not aesthetically obliged to read Erikson, and certainly not to the exclusion of all other activities, aesthetic or otherwise. Indeed, aesthetic obligations are arguably non-existent. Yet people do not make their aesthetic choices arbitrarily. They do not need guiding in their aesthetic choices and activities by a notion of aesthetic obligation or rightness. Aesthetic normativity has a scalar structure devoid of duties. Comparable remarks hold for prudential normativity (Norcross 2020: 43). We invite you to think similarly about epistemic normativity.

Don’t scalar epistemic consequentialists go in for bullet-biting? After all, our remarks above imply that there are situations, i.e., acquiescing to the quirky goddess, that we rank as epistemically better than others, i.e., not acquiescing. Perhaps you think that’s counterintuitive.

No tricks—we won’t try to disabuse you of this notion, though we do think the counterintuitiveness of this is up for debate. But if we do bite a bullet on this matter, then two crucial points in favour of scalar epistemic consequentialism remain. First, you’ll bite half the bullets with us as on traditional, non-scalar alternatives. (Remember, our initial concern was framed in terms of biting

an *excessive* number of bullets.) Non-scalar versions of epistemic consequentialism, i.e., those that accept the existence of epistemic duties, will agree that acquiescing is better than not. Crucially, they also bite the further bullet of claiming that acquiescing to the goddess is required, with failure to comply being epistemically criticisable. We deny this. So it is important to see that we do dodge a bullet here. Second, we think that the bullet we dodge is considerably larger than the one we ask you to swallow. The idea that acquiescing is required seems to us significantly more counterintuitive than its being better than not acquiescing. So we think scalar epistemic consequentialism claims two advantages here: half the bullets bitten, and a smaller one at that.

Now, some folks look as if they will fail to recognise even the possibility of scalar epistemic consequentialism. After all, epistemic consequentialism is typically defined as the view that “epistemic rightness . . . is to be understood in terms of conduciveness to epistemic goods.”⁵ These sadly misinformed and misinforming folks build rightness into the definition of epistemic consequentialism. Epistemic rightness is precisely what scalar epistemic consequentialists reject, so we take this to be an attack on the coherence of our view. If someone tries this trick on you, remind them to take seriously epistemic consequentialism’s being the “analogue”⁶ of moral consequentialism, lest they beg the question of scalar consequentialism across both domains.

How should epistemic consequentialism be characterised, as a genus, then? We think of its fundamentals as follows: that the relative value (goodness or badness) of a course of thinking or activity is fixed *wholly* by the *overall* epistemic goodness of its consequences; that is, consequences, and only consequences, matter for epistemic goodness, in a totalising and teleological fashion. Importantly, this suffices to distinguish all varieties of epistemic consequentialism, scalar or otherwise, from non-consequentialist epistemologies. For instance, consider Kurt Sylvan’s (2020) epistemic Kantianism. Epistemic Kantianism denies that consequences figure in fundamental explanations of epistemic goodness. (n.31) Sylvan’s view has it that what matters for epistemic goodness isn’t *promoting* true belief, i.e., causing such beliefs to exist, but *respecting* truth, i.e., ensuring one’s actual beliefs are true. Epistemic Kantianism rejects the totalising and teleological features of epistemic consequentialism common to both scalar and non-scalar varieties. Epistemic consequentialism can thus be characterised, and distinguished from its non-consequentialists cousins, without mentioning epistemic rightness. Hence scalar epistemic consequentialism is a *bona fide* variety of epistemic consequentialism, though it rejects epistemic duties. Sticking our necks out: consequentialism, epistemic or otherwise, isn’t fundamentally about rightness (see also Howard-Snyder 1994: 110–112).

Here’s a further juicy point: insofar as reliabilists, with their truth-conductivity talk, are epistemic consequentialists, it’s important to understand that maximizing epistemic consequentialism isn’t fully representative of epistemic consequentialism. As is widely recognised, reliabilists are satisficers, not maximizers. They hold that there are situations where one does one’s epistemic ‘duty’ by believing a falsehood, since processes generating reliable beliefs need not be maximally reliable but can meet some lower threshold.⁷ So a further lesson to teach naysayers who refuse to recognise scalar epistemic consequentialism is this: to make ample room for satisficing versions of the view, without a shred of willingness to acknowledge scalar ones, smacks of double standards. Granted, our brand of epistemic consequentialism is an outlier insofar as it lacks a deontic component—indeed, that’s simply our USP—but so what? As argued above, we can’t be said to be non-consequentialists simply by denying epistemic duties.

But isn’t the reason why a consequentialist ranks options at all is to then derive epistemic duties, positive ones in particular? We don’t think so, and we doubt maximisers or satisficers do either. Maximizers, like veritists, care only for the best. You might think of that as a point at the top of a scale. However, veritists typically just think of it as ‘true beliefs.’ No ranking *per se* need matter here. A satisficer, like the reliabilist, sets the threshold for rightness lower than the top. But where that point is located in a ranking is determined by the satisficer’s intuitions; the ranking *per*

se doesn't tell them where it should be. So even if rankings of goodness feature in maximizing and satisficing theories, positive duties are either derived from further considerations or else can be characterised without reference to a ranking.

So what's the point of the ranking? We think it can be wholly to work out degrees of goodness/badness between options. On our view, that's enough to guide one's life epistemically. For instance, suppose one is a judgment internalist about epistemic motivation (Mitova 2011). Cognising a course of thinking or action as epistemically better than others seems sufficient to motivate one to take that option over those cognised as less good. Moreover, the degree to which an option is cognised as better is likely, from the internalist's perspective, to line up with the degree to which one is motivated to take that option. Crucially, nothing additional seems achieved, from the internalist's point of view, by adding "and the better option is the right one." If one is an epistemic judgment externalist, then another source will be required to motivate one to take the better course of action or thinking, cognised as such. But settling what that source might be and whether one should be an internalist or externalist about epistemic motivation are not issues specific to scalar epistemic consequentialism.

But wait—there's more! Sign up today, and by becoming a scalar epistemic consequentialist, you'll become a member of a highly exclusive club. A recent volume dedicated to epistemic consequentialism makes not a single mention of the view.⁸ Indeed, aside from two small hints in the literature that we know of, scalar epistemic consequentialism might be one of recent-epistemology's best-kept secrets.⁹ In fact, we're so confident in our claims that we think that by merely discussing, and not even endorsing, the view that you'll improve your grasp of logical space from day one. You might even make a citable contribution to the literature!¹⁰

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NOTES

1. We'll assume that true belief is your favoured epistemic good. The claims offered here could be rephrased if it is instead justification, knowledge, understanding, love of truth, wisdom, etc.
2. Singer (2018: 596) bites Berker's bullets. See Smart 1978 for the classic bullet-biting, moral-consequentialist strategy.
3. See Slote 1985, Howard-Snyder 1994, and Norcross 2006 and 2020.
4. Caution: one might be prudentially blameworthy, e.g., if one has an upcoming test on the Tudor monarchy.
5. Dunn and Ahlstrom-Vij 2017: 2. Near-identical characterisations in terms of rightness saturate the literature. A small sample: Littlejohn 2012: 62, Andow 2017: 2632, Singer 2018: 582, and Sylvan 2020: 2.
6. Percival 2002: 121. Like many others, Percival acknowledges that epistemic consequentialism may take many forms, mentioning, e.g., satisficing varieties, but neglects to consider that it may also be scalar.
7. Dunn and Ahlstrom-Vij 2017: 2, 5; and Percival 2002: 133–134. The claim that reliabilism is a version of epistemic consequentialism is controversial. But not, crucially, on the grounds that it fails to be maximizing.
8. Ahlstrom-Vij and Dunn 2017.
9. Hints that epistemic consequentialism can be scalar are in Berker (2013) who mentions scalar moral consequentialism as "an increasingly popular form of [moral] consequentialism" (343), agreeing with us that it is a counterexample to what we identified above as the mistaken idea that consequentialism, moral or epistemic, must be a theory of rightness. (It's a pleasant surprise to find common ground with a non-consequentialist in this manner!) Another hint is in Sinhababu (2018: 3143), who claims that "Scalar evaluation may be appropriate for nonmoral norms." No motivation is provided by either for why one might be a scalar epistemic

consequentialist. We suggest that this is not surprising in the case of Berker, since his chief aim is to saddle epistemic consequentialists with tradeoffs that, as we highlight, scalar versions shrug off by denying that there exist positive epistemic duties to begin with.

10. Individual results are not guaranteed.

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