

Inventing Rationality

The Social Origins of Epistemic Norms

What makes a belief rational rather than irrational, knowledge rather than mere opinion? This book argues that the standards governing responsible belief are social constructions: shared rules that humans developed to coordinate inquiry, share reliable information, and hold one another accountable. I offer a full-scale account of epistemic normativity—what epistemic norms *require*, why they *exist*, how they gain their *authority*, and what *role* they play in our lives.

The argument begins from a puzzle for theories of instrumental rationality. If we ought to follow epistemic norms because they are useful (as instrumentalists claim), why do these norms still bind us when following them makes our lives worse? For example, if I would personally benefit from believing against the evidence, why should anyone say my belief is unjustified or irrational? Standard versions of instrumentalism cannot answer this question, because they tie the authority of epistemic norms to the aims or desires of *individual believers*. But the anti-instrumentalist alternative fares no better. It insists that epistemic norms bind us unconditionally, yet it offers no satisfying account of where this authority comes from or why it should matter to us.

This book proposes a better form of instrumentalism: *social epistemic instrumentalism*. The core idea is simple. We depend on others for most of what we know, and this dependence requires trust. But testimony is trustworthy only when others form their beliefs responsibly. So we need shared rules governing how beliefs are formed and revised, which allow members of a community to rely on each other. These are epistemic norms: socially constructed standards that define what it is to count as a rational believer among people who pool and share information. Their authority derives not from the goals of individual agents, nor from a realm of mind-independent epistemic facts, but from the practical necessity of making one another trustworthy as sources of information.

I develop this account in seven chapters, moving from the failure of traditional instrumentalism to a positive social theory of rationality, followed by a sustained critique of anti-instrumentalism. **Chapter 1** formulates the core dilemma for epistemic instrumentalism and explains why existing accounts cannot secure the apparent universality of rational requirements. **Chapter 2** advances the social-instrumentalist framework, characterizing epistemic norms as coordinative tools that make testimony trustworthy. **Chapter 3** examines our practices of epistemic accountability, including blame, external and internal sanction, and normative language like “irrational,” as the mechanisms through which these norms acquire their authority. **Chapter 4** shows how this yields a form of categorical obligation compatible with instrumentalism, while rejecting “reasons-implying” conceptions of normativity. **Chapter 5** addresses worries about relativism, arguing that although standards of rationality are socially constructed, they are not arbitrary. **Chapter 6** considers objections involving social isolation, epistemic bribery, and the problem of too much conformity. **Chapter 7** critiques anti-instrumentalist theories, arguing that their purportedly mind-independent standards of rationality face a numerous challenges, including the problem of suspiciously convenient norms, metaphysical spookiness, and newer, more evil demons.

The result is a unified account of epistemic normativity as a social achievement. Rationality, on this view, is not discovered but invented. It is constituted by the practices that make responsible belief possible, and justified by the role those practices play in enabling us to orient ourselves together.