

Epistemic Evaluations: Consequences, Costs and Benefits

Peter Graham, Zachary Bachman, Meredith McFadden and Megan Stotts

University of California, Riverside

It is our pleasure to contribute to a discussion of Nicholas Tebben and John Waterman’s “Epistemic Free Riders and Reasons to Trust Testimony” (2014), itself a critical discussion of Sinan Dogramaci’s paper, “Reverse Engineering Epistemic Evaluations.” Tebben and Waterman (T&W) make two critical points. We’ll present and discuss them in turn, with the hope of stimulating further discussion.

On Dogramaci

We begin with a sketch of Dogramaci’s paper. Dogramaci defends a position about the function of epistemically evaluative terms like ‘rational,’ ‘reasonable,’ or ‘justified.’ According to this position, which Dogramaci calls ‘epistemic communism,’ the function of ‘rational’ (and other related epistemic terms) is to get other people to use the same belief-forming rules (or “procedures,” “methods,” “processes,” or “practices”) as we do. I call your belief ‘rational’ so that you use my rules, and you call my belief ‘irrational’ to get me to shift to your rules. Dogramaci thinks over time mutual epistemic evaluations lead to convergence, so that all of us form, revise and sustain beliefs in more or less the same ways. We thereby create a community of epistemic surrogates—people whose belief-forming rules match ours.

Why would we want to live in a community like that? Because creating a community of surrogates solves a problem: life is short, resources are scarce, and we can’t discover everything we want to know on our own; we need others to fill in the blanks. Inevitably we outsource much of our cognizing to others. But we should only do that if we can trust their belief-forming rules. Dogramaci claims epistemic agents trust their own rules, on pain of radical skepticism;¹ my rules give me reasons for belief. Since I trust my rules, I can trust other people if they use the same rules.² Since I want to know things I cannot find alone, I want to live in a community like that.

Our epistemic evaluations encourage epistemic surrogacy. First, when I evaluate a belief as rational or irrational, what I am really doing is evaluating the rule that led to the belief. Second, when I evaluate the rule positively, I am prescribing the rule. I prescribe the rules I use.³ Third, since we are social beings motivated by approval and disapproval (see Adam Smith, David Hume, and teenagers asking for money to buy the latest fashion trend), our epistemic evaluations influence others to adopt our rules.⁴ By evaluating you, I spread my rules to you. (Of course you can have a similar effect on me through your evaluations.) Over time our entire community converges. According to epistemic

¹ “I am [...]taking it for granted,” Dogramaci writes, “[that] we each rationally believe, of our own actual rules, that they are reliable. If we couldn’t, we would be forced into radical skepticism” (2012, 524).

² “We are able to trust each other because we’ve shared [our] rules with each other” (2012, 524).

³ Our own belief-forming rules and evaluations are tightly connected according to Dogramaci because of the truth of judgment internalism (2012).

⁴ As Dogramaci claims: “we are built to respond to each others’ evaluations in accommodating ways” (2012: 520).

communism, this conformism—coordination of belief-forming rules—“makes testimony trustworthy” (2012, 523).⁵ Epistemic evaluators of the world unite!

The Free Rider Problem

We now turn to T&W’s first critical point. They fear Dogramaci’s idea falls prey to a free-rider problem and so requires supplementation.

What’s free riding? Ever get on a bus or train that requires you to buy a ticket, but isn’t checked by a conductor and so you decided not to pay? Then you are riding for free. Suppose ticket sales fund the train. As long as enough people pay, the train will run. But if no one pays, it won’t. To keep the trains running, you’ll need to prevent free riding.

What is the benefit of paying for a ride on the train? Getting from A to B. But if you can ride without paying, why pay? Analogously, what is the benefit of epistemically evaluating others? Creating a community of surrogates. But if you can live amongst surrogates without evaluating, why evaluate? As long as others evaluate, the community will converge on a set of rules.

For a free-rider problem to arise, evaluating others must be costly (like paying for a ticket). If evaluating isn’t costly, the problem doesn’t get off the ground; if the ticket is free to begin with, nothing counts as free-riding. T&W must identify the costs.⁶ And to solve the problem, they must identify benefits. As for costs, they claim: “identifying and correcting the errors of others constitutes an opportunity cost: it is time that one does not spend pursuing one’s own ends” (2014, 3). As for benefits that override these costs, T&W identify two.

First, other people will value my testimony more if I evaluate (for it will signal that I use the right rules), which lets me demand more for my testimony in exchange. Second, since I use the right rules others will seek me out for evaluative feedback; I gain greater access to testimony. In short, I get more for my testimony and give less for theirs. Problem solved.

Critical Discussion

First, we’re not entirely sure T&W have shown there is a problem. Is epistemic evaluation actually costly? If it is cheap and easy (unlike paying for the train), there’s no problem. So how costly is it?

Sometimes it may be really costly. I may have no idea, for example, of how you came to form beliefs about the chemical structure of carbohydrates in pizza. Figuring that out may require going back to college.

⁵ “We are able to trust each other because we’ve shared [our] rules with each other” (2012, 524).

⁶ When convergence on a set of belief-forming rules is already present, free riding is not a pressing issue. But when novel rules are introduced to the community, convergence is lost. What is needed to return to convergence is evaluating the novel rules. This is where free riding becomes pernicious, for if free riding is the dominant strategy, the community will not be able to return to a convergence.

But sometimes it may be a piece of cake. If you tell me that Zargon created the universe out of a pizza in less than a day, I reject your belief out of hand. You may even know yourself that I would, and so you don't even need to say anything; my evaluation might not require any evaluating at all.⁷

So evaluations could be quite costly or cost free. To achieve Dogramaci's communist utopia, how much evaluating is required? It's hard to say. It's surely an empirical issue.

Now for the benefits. What benefits explain why we take the time to evaluate others?

Let's focus on their first alleged benefit: others will pay more for my testimony. Is this plausible? Do people really "pay" for my testimony?

There are times when we pay a great deal for testimony. In court we pay experts a lot of money to testify on special topics. But these cases are rare. And what we are paying for is their expertise—for their use of procedures that go beyond the widely shared. So according to epistemic communism, these cases are not only rare but special.

Second, *qua* pieces of information, testimony doesn't clearly fit in the category of excludable goods.⁸ Once I give information to you, I can't control what you do with it. You can even post it on the internet for the whole world to see. So it is not obvious how being an evaluator raises the price for the information I possess.

On the other hand, we agree that people often do want information *from us*, for either we are the only ones who *have* the information (maybe only I know what I had for lunch) or we are the only ones who are available who can easily *provide* the information (if I can see what is in the other room and you can't, you'll want me to tell you). People do ask us to tell them what we know, after all. But what do we get in return? T&W don't really say.

Here's a possible motive. Suppose T&W are right that evaluators develop a reputation for using the right rules. Then other people are more likely to *believe us* when we tell them something. Maybe that is what motivates us to pay the price of evaluating others, so that when we tell people something they are more likely to *believe us*: we evaluate for *influence*.

Relatedly, by evaluating we might earn a higher social status, with all of its attendant benefits. Jean-Louis Dessalles (2009) thinks that is why we *talk* so much. He thinks we provide all sorts of relevant information in exchange for a higher reputation. Maybe we evaluate for the same reason: we evaluate for *reputations*.

⁷ This is a point Pettit (1990: 740) emphasizes when it comes to the role our positive and negative evaluations of each other play in motivating behavior, for our evaluations are often unintentional *qua* attitudes (as opposed to *qua* overt behaviors), and other people often know our attitudes. So we often unintentionally and automatically evaluate others, at no cost.

⁸ This point also puts pressure on how the "paying" aspect, or benefiting response would work in exchange for testimony. We take it that our responses to T&W's free riding model of testimony mutually support each other.

And maybe we evaluate and provide information because we've internalized social norms for evaluating and providing information. Maybe evaluation is its own reward.

T&W also argue that the reputation we gain as evaluators gives us access to testimony from others who seek our evaluative expertise. However, we think that this effect of a reputation as an evaluator is just as likely to be a cost as a benefit, for two reasons.

First, unsolicited testimony is not terribly likely to be relevant to the evaluator's own interests and concerns, and may actually serve as a distraction or interruption. If we are trying to figure out how to get from Los Angeles to Phoenix in a hurry, it will not be beneficial to receive testimony about, say, French culture.

Second, even if the content of the testimony is relevant to the evaluator's concerns, the testimony will often be unusable for the evaluator because it comes from an aberrant belief-forming procedure. Being exposed to useless testimony is not beneficial, and it is actually costly because one has to take the time to realize that it doesn't conform to one's own belief-forming procedures.⁹

So whatever the value of a reputation as an evaluator might be, it does not obviously come from increased access to others' testimony.

We now turn to T&W's second critical point: an internal criticism of Dogramaci. We're not convinced. We present their reasoning stepwise, paraphrasing and quoting liberally.

1. "Epistemic evaluations can be used to shape *any* epistemic procedure, even the most basic" (2014, 5).
2. *Rational* influence on one's epistemic procedures requires recognizing good reasons to change procedures (2014, 5).
3. The agent can only recognize good reasons from within her existing procedures.
4. To change rationally from one basic set of procedures A to another basic set B, the agent would need reasons from within A to reject A. Such rational influence would be self-undermining.
5. But a basic set of epistemic procedures cannot be self-undermining in this way.
6. So one cannot *rationally* change from one basic set of epistemic procedures to another. (2014, 5) Dogramaci agrees (2012, 521).

⁹ Consider your experience of grading student papers. Only in rare cases do you actually learn something new from grading them. On those rare cases that we do, the hassle of wading through pages of confusion is a high price to pay (which is why we get paid to do it). Being an expert to whom people offer their half-baked thoughts can be more of a curse than a gift.

7. So epistemic evaluations that influence one to change from one basic set to another do not do so by *rational* influence, but rather by non-rational (merely causal) influence.¹⁰
8. If an agent adopts new procedures by merely causal influences, she will be alienated from them (to be “alienated” from X is to lack a reason for doing X, though you do it anyway).

This leads to the following undesirable conclusions:

9. If an agent is alienated from her belief forming procedures, relying on those procedures will not give her reasons for her beliefs.
10. If an agent is alienated from her belief-forming procedures, relying on testimony from others who use the same rules will not give her reasons for those testimony-based beliefs.

Consider an example.

Suppose Abigail and Barney use different basic procedures. Suppose Abigail evaluates Barney negatively, and as a result Barney changes his basic procedures to conform to Abigail’s. This means Barney lacked a reason for changing. He’s now alienated from his new procedures. Barney thus has no reason to use these new procedures, and no reasons for his beliefs based on them, nor does he have reasons when he believes Abigail’s testimony. And since everyone evaluated everyone else, the problem threatens to spread throughout the community.

Is this objectionable? T&W assert as much: Dogramaci’s position implies an objectionable “alienation” that he presumably meant to avoid.

We don’t think T&W have made the case for this conclusion. They seem to be guilty of a slide from:

- (i) Barney has no reason to change to new rules, to
- (ii) Once Barney has the new rules, the rules cannot provide Barney with any reasons to believe, to
- (iii) Once Barney has the new rules, Barney can’t have any reason to believe testimony from another person who uses those same rules.

We think (i) does not entail (ii) or (iii), and so even if Barney changes to new rules for no reason, it does not follow that the new rules will fail to give Barney reasons for beliefs, or when Barney trusts a surrogate that Barney has no reasons for those beliefs either.

¹⁰ Agents “who are subject to these non-rational influences will not, thereby, acquire a reason to adopt these new procedures” (2014, 5). “A’s influence on B is *merely* causal” (2014, 6).

“Rational origins” are one thing; whether a set of rules once acquired provides reasons for belief is another.

Recall that for Dogramaci we “...each rationally believe, of our own actual rules, that they are reliable. If we couldn’t, we would be forced into radical skepticism” (2012, 524). If we rationally believe that our rules are reliable, then when we use our rules, we have *prima facie* reasons for beliefs so formed. Reasons flow from actual rules. Or so Dogramaci asserts.

When Barney used his rules *before* Abigail came along, Barney rationally believed that his rules were reliable, and thus Barney had reasons for his beliefs. If Barney talks to another person who used the same rules, Barney will have reasons to trust that person’s testimony.

But when Abigail came along and “non-rationally” influenced Barney to change to Abigail’s rules, Barney switched from his *old* rules to a *new* set of rules. Does Barney rationally believe that his new rules are reliable, and so does Barney have reasons for his beliefs? Or, as T&W imply, does Barney *lack* reasons for his beliefs?

We believe that Dogramaci would assert that once the switch occurs, Barney *now* rationally believes that his *new* rules are reliable (on pain of radical skepticism; they are now his “actual” rules), and so has reasons for his beliefs when formed on this new set of rules. So Dogramaci would not agree that “non-rational” switching from one set of basic rules to another would undermine the reasons the believer has to rely on his current (new) rules. Reasons flow from actual rules.

The issue then is whether “origins” matter for the reason-giving power of our belief-forming rules. According to T&W, if they arise from “non-rational” influence then we are alienated from them and they cannot give us reasons. But it seems clear to us that Dogramaci would prefer a view that origins don’t matter. You could be the product of evolution by natural selection, or a random accident. Either way, you are rational in believing your rules are reliable, and so you have reasons for the beliefs so formed. We conclude that T&W have not identified an internal problem for Dogramaci’s view.

That said, do we agree with Dogramaci’s position? We do find it interesting and worthy of further discussion. But we don’t agree, at least not yet. Perhaps we need a few more rounds of epistemic evaluation.

Contact details: peter.graham@ucr.edu, zachary.bachman@email.ucr.edu, meredith.mcfadden@email.ucr.edu, megan.stotts@email.ucr.edu

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