

Inquisitive Reasons and the Zetetic Instrumental Principle

In a previous paper, I discussed a thought experiment, IGNORING EVIDENCE,¹ introduced by Jennifer Lackey. This thought experiment is intended to illustrate a flaw with non-summative accounts of justified group belief — namely, that they are incapable of respecting our intuition that Phillip Morris has done something epistemically wrong in suspending their belief on the health hazards of smoking (351). In my paper, I disputed this conclusion by offering a way that non-summativists *can* respect this intuition. I argued that IGNORING EVIDENCE does demonstrate that *some* epistemic norm η is distributive — i.e., when η binds a group G , it binds the members of G . However, the non-summativist may deny that it is norms of *belief* that are distributive, rather than norms of inquiry. Phillip Morris' transgression, in particular, was not that it failed to have a justified belief, in a time-slice sense, but that it violated the following norm of inquiry, the *zetetic instrumental principle*:

ZIP: If A has a reason to figure out p , A ought to take the necessary means to figure out p , and A ought not to take means to prevent A from figuring out p .

Previously, I gave various theoretical reasons for the adoption of this view. However, a key point was left unanswered.² If Phillip Morris violated ZIP, then it must have had a reason to figure out whether or not smoking causes cancer and heart disease. But what sort of reason is this? In this essay, I develop the idea that Phillip Morris has an *inquisitive reason*, a kind of non-evidential epistemic reason, to figure out whether or not smoking causes cancer. This reason will justify the application of ZIP, and therefore complete my defense of non-summativism about justified group belief.

I

¹ IGNORING EVIDENCE: Philip Morris is a tobacco company. Each of its executives individually have scientific evidence on the health hazards of smoking, viz. its links with lung cancer and heart disease. Each of them have a justified belief that these health hazards provide a reason to put warning labels on their cigarette boxes. However, due to their financial incentives, each executive is unwilling to accept that the company has a reason to put warning labels on their cigarette boxes; therefore, Phillip Morris suspends belief on this matter.

² Many thanks to Daniel Friedman for the comment which inspired this point.

Before discussing inquisitive reasons, however, it is worth why other types of reasons cannot suffice for our purposes. The first sort of reason one might have to inquire is a cognitive reason: that is, you may *want* to figure out if *p*. It is this sort of reason that was the principal focus of ZIP as originally articulated by Jane Friedman: “if one wants to figure out *Q*, then one ought to take the necessary means to figuring out *Q*” (503). However, assigning cognitive reasons to a collective epistemic agent is philosophically problematic; though much work has been done on collective intentionality in recent years, it would be preferable for our account to avoid taking a stance on whether or not it makes sense to say (and mean, in a literal sense) that Phillip Morris *wants* anything. Perhaps more importantly, if Phillip Morris wants anything, it surely does *not* want to figure out whether or not smoking causes cancer. Quite the opposite: Phillip Morris’ financial and legal incentives are such that it would be best off if the health hazards of smoking never came to light in any institutional setting. It follows that Phillip Morris does not have a cognitive reason to figure out if smoking causes cancer. Similar logic also shows that it does not have a practical reason to this effect.

What, however, about moral reasons? Does Phillip Morris have a moral reason to figure out if smoking causes cancer? Certainly. It seems clear, regardless of theoretical details, that any satisfactory account of morality for collective agents³ would condemn Phillip Morris (and not just its members!) for profiting from the sale of cigarettes that pose severe health risks to their unknowing customers. However, our task is not to give an account of our intuition that something has gone wrong *simpliciter*, but to give an account of our intuition that something has gone wrong *epistemically*. Prima facie, Phillip Morris’ moral duty only gives it a moral reason to inquire, and not necessarily an epistemic one. Now, it could be the case that this moral duty *also* gives Phillip Morris an epistemic reason to inquire. But the idea

³ You might deny that there is such a thing as morality for collective agents. However, if you are on board with discussing *epistemic* norms for collective agents (as one must when investigating justified *group* belief), it is not much of a leap to begin discussing *ethical* norms for collective agents. Furthermore, it seems clear that both non-summativist and summativist views on group ethical norms would condemn the actions of Phillip Morris.

that epistemic standards are affected by the moral dimensions of a particular situation — i.e., the thesis of moral encroachment — is a philosophically controversial one. It would be best for the eventual goal of defending non-summativism to avoid tying it to a thesis that many philosophers find unacceptable.⁴ What we would prefer is to give an *epistemic* reason that Phillip Morris ought to inquire into the health hazards of smoking.

The principal challenge with this approach is that this epistemic reason cannot be evidential in nature — because, in Lackey’s original example, Phillip Morris does not have evidence on the health hazards of smoking, even if its members do. Similarly to the issue of moral encroachment, the existence of non-evidential epistemic reasons is not a settled matter. Nonetheless, in the remainder of this paper, I will argue that Phillip Morris has a certain sort of *non-evidential epistemic reason* to inquire into the health hazards of smoking.

II

In *Pursuit and Inquisitive Reasons*, Will Fleisher introduces the idea of an *inquisitive reason*, a reason to perform an act ϕ on the basis that it promotes successful inquiry.

Fleisher’s first example of an inquisitive reason is a *promise reason*. A promise reason is an evaluation of a theory or hypothesis as “promising or pursuitworthy,” and occurs frequently as a motivator in science (3). However, this is not the only sort of inquisitive reason that Fleisher identifies. For our debate, the more important type of inquisitive reason will be the second: *social inquisitive reasons*. Social inquisitive reasons have to do with the “social circumstances” in which the inquirer exists. The binding force of each of these inquisitive reasons arises from their tendency to promote *successful collective inquiry*. Fleisher provides a few examples of social inquisitive reasons, such as distributing cognitive labor, avoiding premature consensus, and producing debate and disagreement (12). However, this is a “non-exhaustive list”; other reasons include “resistance against oppression,” “avoiding

⁴ On the other hand, if you — unlike me — are willing to buy into the thesis that you can have an epistemic reason to inquire on the basis of moral considerations, then you don’t need to buy in to the rest of the paper: you are already in a position to apply the zetetic instrumental principle as I have laid it out.

epistemic injustice and violence,” and, critically, “undercutting active ignorance” (14). This final reason will be the operative one: I contend that Phillip Morris has a social inquisitive reason concerning the avoidance of ignorance to investigate the health hazards of smoking.

Before this can be safely concluded, however, there are three points that must be made. Firstly, it is worth briefly discussing the grounds on which Fleisher concludes that inquisitive reasons are genuinely epistemic. Secondly, since Fleisher’s account was originally developed for individual agents, it is important to make sense of how social inquisitive reasons, which arise on the basis of collective inquiry, can apply to collective epistemic agents such as Phillip Morris. Finally, our brief suggestion above (that Phillip Morris’ obligation to investigate the health hazards of smoking arises from its social inquisitive reason to avoid ignorance) requires elaboration. After all, another company, say Standard Oil, might have a social inquisitive reason against ignorance, but this does not provide them any reason to investigate the health hazards of smoking.⁵ What is distinctive about this inquiry for Phillip Morris? We address each point briefly in turn.

- (1) Fleisher’s defense of inquisitive reasons as genuinely epistemic hinges on three features that inquisitive reasons share with other, more generic, epistemic reasons such as evidence: a connection to epistemic aims, explanatory independence, and the presence of a specific right-kind/wrong-kind reasons distinction (1). Importantly, these features are not only simply shared by evidence, but “have been used to argue for the existence of an independent epistemic domain of normativity to which evidence belongs.” (4) These features are precisely those that were used to carve out the normative realm of the epistemic; since inquisitive reasons also have these features, they must be genuinely epistemic.⁶

⁵ Many thanks to Michael Bratman for the comment which inspired this point.

⁶ For a longer defense of this point, see Section 4 of Fleisher’s paper; it is otherwise beyond the scope of our analysis.

(2) The theory of social inquisitive reasons was developed specifically to explain the behavior of individuals engaged in collective inquiry. How can it be applied to a collective (e.g. Phillip Morris) as a whole? This can seem puzzling, but indeed it is a red herring. Phillip Morris' social inquisitive reasons arise not from its atomistic existence as a single collective epistemic agent, but from its position in a broader social collective itself composed of various collective agents in a multi-level hierarchy of agents. In the language of Fleisher, Phillip Morris' social inquisitive reasons are not reasons to act on the basis that they promote successful collective inquiry *within Phillip Morris*. Instead, they are reasons to act on the basis that they promote successful collective inquiry *within the society in which Phillip Morris operates and is epistemically accountable to*.

(3) This point also explains why it is Phillip Morris, and not Standard Oil, that has a social inquisitive reason to figure out the health hazards of smoking: Phillip Morris and Standard Oil are in different positions within the society in which they both operate. In particular, Phillip Morris acts as a *cigarette company*, whereas Standard Oil acts as an *oil company*. This simple fact transforms Phillip Morris' general obligation to act against ignorance into its particular obligation to act against ignorance *about cigarettes*. It gives Phillip Morris a reason to figure out whether cigarettes cause cancer and, *qua* the zetetic instrumental principle, to take the steps necessary to figure out as much.

In this paper, I applied the concept of *inquisitive reasons* to the case of IGNORING EVIDENCE. Under my account, these inquisitive reasons provide a non-evidential epistemic reason for Phillip Morris to figure out the health hazards of smoking. This reason provides grounds for the application of the zetetic instrumental principle and completes my defense of non-summativism about justified group belief.

References

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