

ARTICLE

Acting and believing on the basis of reasons

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Abstract

This paper provides an opinionated guide to discussions of acting and believing on the basis of reasons. I aim to bring closer together largely separate literatures in practical reason and in epistemology. I focus on three questions. First, is basing causing? Causal theories of basing remain popular despite the notorious Problem of Deviant Causal Chains. Causal theorists in both the epistemic and practical domains have begun to appeal to dispositions to try and solve the problem. Second, how unified are acting and believing on the basis of reasons? I consider an important challenge to their unity due to Setiya. I sketch a response, which posits unity of causal structure across acting and believing on the basis of reasons. Third, how does acting or believing on the basis of a good reason relate to acting or believing on the basis of a reason *simpliciter*? I generalize a recent argument of Lord and Sylvan's to include acting as well as believing. The conclusion is that, for both believing and acting, ϕ ing on the basis of a good reason does not amount to ϕ ing on the basis of a reason that just so happens to be good.

1 | INTRODUCTION

That it is raining is a reason I have to bring the umbrella. But the reason for which I bring the umbrella is that it complements my outfit. Fashion, rather than function, provides my basis for bringing the umbrella. In general, the relation between an agent's ϕ ing and the basis on which they ϕ is the *basing relation*.

The basing relation underpins a distinctive kind of explanation: *basing explanation*. When we explain an agent's ϕ ing by giving the agent's basis, we mark their ϕ ing as more than a mere churning of the causal order. Their ϕ ing is a manifestation of the agent's rational capacities. The agent's ϕ ing needn't be particularly rational, as perhaps when I'm (tragically) mistaken about my umbrella's sartorial synergy. Nonetheless, by citing that it complements my outfit as my basis for bringing the umbrella, we mark my bringing it as a manifestation of my rational agency. Following

Davidson's (1963) terminology, in giving the basis we *rationalize* the agent's ϕ ing, not in the colloquial sense but in the sense that we make their ϕ ing intelligible by the agent's own lights.¹

Two terminological notes need making. First, the basis on which an agent ϕ s is also called a "reason for which," "motivating reason," or "operative reason." Bases contrast with what are often called "normative reasons." A normative reason for ϕ ing is a consideration that counts in favor of ϕ ing.² The motivating reason on which one ϕ s may or may not be a normative reason for ϕ ing (Dancy, 2000, 1–5). Perhaps the umbrella really does complement my outfit, and that counts in favor of my bringing it, but I may be mistaken. Here I'll use "basis" and "motivating reason" interchangeably. I'll use "reason" unqualified in a way that is neutral between normative reasons and motivating reasons.

Second, the term "basing relation" has been used primarily by epistemologists for the relation between bases and doxastic attitudes. I'll use "basing relation" and "basing" more broadly to cover any ϕ ing on the basis of a reason. In particular, I'll use "practical basing" and "epistemic basing" to refer to acting and believing on the basis of reasons, respectively. The literatures on practical and epistemic basing have remained largely separate, but considering them together has the potential to bear philosophical fruit. Having one term to cover both practical and epistemic basing encourages seeing them as related phenomena, rather than two distinct areas of inquiry.

The paper proceeds as follows. §2 does some set up, by considering the relata of the basing relation. §3 investigates the role of causation in accounts of basing. The final two sections focus on questions that have only recently emerged in the literature. §4 asks whether acting and believing on the basis of reasons are unified, or whether they are importantly different phenomena. After considering the extant debate, I sketch an argument for unity. §5 asks whether ϕ ing on the basis of a normative reason can be understood in terms of ϕ ing on the basis of a merely motivating reason and independent further factors. I generalize Lord and Sylvan's (2020) argument that it cannot, and suggest avenues for further exploration.

2 | THE RELATA OF THE BASING RELATION

When one ϕ s on the basis of a reason, what kind of thing is the ϕ ing and what kind of thing is the reason? Start with the ϕ ings. Consider:

- (1) I tickle my niece (her giggle is a delight).
- (2) I let my dog lick peanut butter off my finger (she's been so very good).
- (3) I believe that it will rain (the clouds have an ominous look about them).
- (4) I hope that I'll finish the race in under two hours (it would be great to set a personal record).
- (5) I become angry with you (yet again, you traipsed mud through the house).

The ϕ ings in (1)–(5) differ. (1) is an intentional action; (2) is something I intentionally let happen.³ (3) and (4) involve attitudes, doxastic and nondoxastic respectively. (5) involves a change in emotional state.

Despite their differences, (1)–(5) all are plausibly instances of basing. Anscombe (1963, §5) delineated "a certain sense of the question 'Why?'... in which the answer, if positive, gives a reason for acting."⁴ Although Anscombe was focused on intentional action, one might ask "Why did you do that?" for any of (1)–(5), and I might give the parenthetical remark in response. That is, I answer Anscombe's "Why?" question positively by giving my basis for what I do.

To keep things manageable, we'll focus on cases like (1) and (3). That is, we'll focus on acting and believing on the basis of reasons.⁵

What bases themselves are has been much disputed. Here I give only a brief sketch of the option space to help frame the subsequent discussion.⁶ The three most popular candidates for bases are: mental entities, like beliefs and desires (Davidson, 1963; Smith, 2012; Turri, 2009); concrete non-mental entities, like facts or obtaining states of affairs (Dancy, 2000, ch. 5; Littlejohn, 2012, ch. 3; Alvarez, 2018); and abstract entities, such as (possibly false) propositions (Hyman, 2015, ch. 6; Singh, 2019). I won't take a stand on these issues.⁷ Since it eases exposition, I'll

assume that bases are propositions that can either be false or, when they correspond to normative reasons, true. I'll also assume that an agent typically ϕ s on the basis of a single reason, though we can and often do ϕ on the basis of multiple reasons.

I make two further assumptions that I'll revisit in §4 and §5. First, practical and epistemic basing are importantly unified. That is, acting and believing on the basis of reasons are instances of the same phenomenon, or are at least species of the same genus. Second, the basing relation is the same no matter whether one ϕ s on the basis of a normative reason or on the basis of a *merely* motivating reason, a consideration that does not count in favor of ϕ ing. These assumptions have both been widely held and recently importantly challenged. But first we should grapple with one of the central questions concerning the basing relation.

3 | BASING AND CAUSING

When an agent ϕ s on the basis of a reason, does her basis cause her ϕ ing?⁸ Until 1963, the standard answer to that question for practical basing was “no.” Bases do not cause ϕ ings based on reasons.⁹ Davidson changed the orthodoxy. He argued that the basing relation is causal and that basing explanation “is a species of ordinary causal explanation” (Davidson, 1963, 685). Davidson took bases, or “primary reasons,” to be pairs of mental states: a belief and a “pro-attitude,” like a desire or an inclination. An action based on a reason consists in the basis causing (in the right way) the action.¹⁰ For instance, my bringing the umbrella (because it complements my outfit) is caused in the right way by my belief that the umbrella complements my outfit and my desire to look stylish.

Abstracting away from the details of Davidson's view, we get:

Causal Theory. S 's ϕ ing on the basis of r consists in: r causes (in the right way) S 's ϕ ing.¹¹

Three things are worth noting. First, while Davidson's focus was practical basing, the Causal Theory has also come to dominate theorizing about epistemic basing.¹² Second, Davidson held that bases are (pairs of) mental states, but those with other views about the ontology of bases have also held versions of the Causal Theory. For instance, on the view we assumed in §2, bases are propositions. Hence, causation by a basis is indirect: the basis is the object of a mental state that is directly causally involved in the agent's ϕ ing.¹³ Third, the parenthetical “in the right way” is crucial: proponents of the Causal Theory hold that all basing is causing, but not that all causing is basing. More on this shortly.

The main argument for the Causal Theory is the *Argument from Normative Overdetermination*.¹⁴ The argument turns on the fact that an agent typically has many normative reasons to do something, but what she does is not based on all of them. I have many normative reasons to bring the umbrella: it's raining, the umbrella complements my outfit, it serves as a decent walking stick, and so on. Which is my basis? The Argument from Normative Overdetermination claims that we cannot answer this question adequately without invoking the notion of causation. Causal relations constrain the normatively overdetermined option space in a way that would otherwise leave mysterious an agent's basis.¹⁵

3.1 | The Problem of Deviant Causal Chains

Despite its influence, the Causal Theory is vulnerable to a serious objection: the *Problem of Deviant Causal Chains*.¹⁶ The problem is to specify precisely what the right way amounts to such that causation in *that* way yields ϕ ing on the basis of a reason, whereas causation in other ways does not. To make the problem vivid, consider a pair of cases.

Email. Aidan receives yet another irritating email at the end of a loathsome back and forth. He drafts a scathing reply. His finger hovers over the mouse button, the cursor poised over “Send.” He sends the email because it will feel so good to finally let them have it.

Deviant Email. Diana receives yet another irritating email at the end of a loathsome back and forth. She drafts a scathing reply. She doesn't intend to send the email, but it's cathartic to draft it. Once the email is drafted, Diana considers how good it would feel to finally let them have it. This causes Diana's finger to tremble with righteous excitement, clicking the hovering-over-send mouse: the email is sent.

That it will feel so good to finally let them have it is a reason that each agent has to send the email. Moreover, each agent's sending the email is caused by (consideration of) that reason. But only Aidan's sending the email is an action based on the reason, and is thereby amenable to basing explanation. Diana's sending the email is not a manifestation of her rational agency. The Problem of Deviant Causal Chains is to account for this difference between ϕ ings based on a reasons and similarly caused *mere* ϕ ings.

3.2 | The dispositional turn

Some causal theorists have begun to appeal to dispositions to solve the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains.¹⁷ There is a difference between something's *manifesting* a disposition and something's behaving in way that merely accords with the manifestation of a disposition. Sosa (2015, 15) offers a helpful case.¹⁸

Zapped Vase. The vase is fragile. Ordinarily when dropped on the floor, the vase manifests its fragility by shattering. On this occasion, the vase does shatter when dropped. But the shattering does not manifest its fragility. Instead, a nearby demon (who hates it when fragile things collide with hard surfaces) zaps the vase at the moment of impact with a powerful ray blast.¹⁹

The vase's shattering is dependent on its fragility, but not in the right way, that is the way that manifests the vase's fragility.

Proponents of the dispositional turn seek to explain causation in the right, nondeviant, way by appealing to the manifestation of a relevant disposition.

Dispositional Causal Theory. *S*'s ϕ ing on the basis of *r* consists in: *r* causes *S*'s ϕ ing in such a way that *S*'s ϕ ing manifests a relevant disposition.

The relevant disposition can be spelled out in different ways. For simplicity, let it be a disposition to treat *r* as a normative reason to ϕ .²⁰ Treating *r* as a normative reason ϕ is more than just being caused to ϕ by *r* (or the mental states that represent *r*). When one treats *r* as a normative reason to ϕ , one is disposed to give *r* as one's basis for ϕ ing when asked about it. One is also disposed *ceteris paribus* not to ϕ (or not to continue ϕ ing) if presented with evidence against *r* or that undercuts *r*'s support for ϕ ing, and so on.

Given this, Aidan's sending the email is an action based on a reason because his sending the email manifests a disposition to treat *that it will feel so good to let them have it* as a normative reason to send the email. However, Diana's sending the email does not manifest such a disposition and so is not an instance of basing.

The Dispositional Causal Theory is a promising way of addressing the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains, but it is not without problems. Here are two.²¹

First, it's not clear that appealing to the manifestation of a disposition helps us get a better grasp on the target notion of basing.²² The distinction between manifesting a disposition to treat something as a normative reason in ϕ ing and ϕ ing in a way that merely accords with that disposition, one might worry, does not amount to much more than the target distinction between ϕ ing on the basis of a reason and merely ϕ ing. In particular, distinguishing between the manifestation of the relevant disposition and mere accordance with it seems to require already having solved the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains. But we made the dispositional turn precisely to solve that problem.

Proponents of the Dispositional Causal Theory can respond to this worry in at least three nonexclusive ways. First, they can mount a challenge on behalf of the particular disposition in question. For instance, some would deny that basing involves treating r as a normative reason to ϕ .²³ Whether that is correct, that it is a point of contention suggests that we can independently grasp manifesting a disposition to treat r on the basis of a normative reason, and ϕ ing on the basis of r . Second, one can take the notion of disposition manifestation in general as primitive, and try otherwise to elucidate the particular disposition manifested in basing.²⁴ Third, even if disposition manifestation is not primitive, it is a much broader phenomenon than basing. So we can make progress with respect to basing by subsuming the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains under a much more general phenomenon that spans many domains.²⁵

The second issue for the Dispositional Causal Theory is that it's not obvious what work *causation* is doing. In particular, with the distinction between disposition manifestation and mere accordance with a disposition in hand, the Argument from Normative Overdetermination risks being undercut. Consider:

Dispositional Theory. S 's ϕ ing on the basis of r consists in: S 's ϕ ing manifests a relevant disposition.

The Dispositional Theory does not impose a causal condition. The Argument from Normative Overdetermination has it that causation is necessary to distinguish between the normative reasons for an agent to do something and her basis for doing it. But it's not clear that the Dispositional Theory struggles to pick out an agent's basis from the many reasons that she has for acting. Despite having many reasons to bring the umbrella, my basis for doing so is that it complements my outfit. My bringing the umbrella might manifest the relevant disposition in such a way that picks out my basis, even without the basis being causally relevant to my bringing the umbrella. Perhaps, for instance, my bringing the umbrella noncausally depends on a representational state that picks out the fashion-related consideration as my basis.²⁶

More work needs to be done to see whether the dispositional turn will allow the Causal Theory to solve the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains, or whether it will rehabilitate noncausal accounts of basing.

4 | THE UNITY THESIS

It's time to revisit two assumptions made in §2. Start with the assumption that acting and believing on the basis of reasons are importantly unified.

It's agreed on all sides that one can act on the basis of a reason and that one can believe on the basis of a reason. And it's agreed on all sides that, in either case, ϕ ing on the basis of a reason in *some* way implicates one's agency. In ϕ ing on the basis of a reason one is answerable or responsible for ϕ ing in ways that one would not be if one's ϕ ing were, say, the result of being bumped on the head. But it's controversial whether acting on the basis of a reason and believing on the basis of a reason are unified, such that there is a single basing relation spanning both the epistemic and practical domains. Call the claim that they are the *Unity Thesis*.

Unity Thesis. Acting on the basis of a reason and believing on the basis of a reason are importantly unified.²⁷

I intend "importantly unified" to be a locus for further debate. The Unity Thesis is compatible with minor differences between practical and epistemic basing (one involves action, the other belief, after all). Nonetheless, for the thesis to be compelling, there must be some limit on the differences tolerated between practical and epistemic basing. For

instance, that both kinds of basing underpin basing explanation is not enough similarity if there are deep differences in their metaphysical structure.

There has been little explicit discussion of the Unity Thesis, except for a recent exchange between Setiya (2013) and Neta (2020).

Setiya challenges the Unity Thesis as follows.²⁸

- (6) **Epistemic Basing as a Conjunction of Beliefs (EBB).** Believing that p on the basis of q consists in believing that p and believing that q is evidence for p .²⁹
- (7) **Deflationism about Epistemic Basing.** There is nothing more to epistemic basing than EBB. In particular, epistemic basing does not depend on causation.
- (8) **Inflationism about Practical Basing.** There is more to practical basing than the conjunction of acting and of believing that one's basis supports so acting. In particular, practical basing *does* depend on causation.
- (9) Therefore, epistemic and practical basing are disunified.

In effect, Setiya argues that while some version of the Causal Theory holds for practical basing, we can give an adequate account of epistemic basing that is not causal. If Setiya is right that practical and epistemic basing differ in their causal structure, the Unity Thesis is trouble.

Neta responds that Setiya is wrong about the causal dissimilarity, for two reasons. First, he argues that EBB does not entail Deflationism about Epistemic Basing. Second, he argues against EBB.

EBB does not entail Deflationism about Epistemic Basing, Neta argues, because believing that q is evidence for p might itself involve an agent's capacity to cause something. That is, even if epistemic basing consists in nothing over and above a conjunction of beliefs, one of those conjuncts might itself depend on an agent's causal capacities. Neta (2020, 194) argues in particular that having the concept *evidence* involves a capacity to causally transition between certain mental states. Hence, for an agent to be able to believe that q is evidence for p requires them to have the capacity to cause something. So epistemic basing depends on causation after all.

However, even if Neta is right about what it takes to have the concept *evidence*, Setiya's challenge can be sustained. Consider two different ways of understanding the claim that epistemic basing does not depend on causation.

Deflationism General. The general ability to base beliefs on reasons does not depend on a general causal capacity.

Deflationism Specific. Specific instances of believing on the basis of a reason do not depend on causal relations between bases and beliefs.

Neta's argument undermines Deflationism General, but leaves Deflationism Specific intact. That leaves room to insist, in favor of Setiya's challenge, that both Deflationism Specific is true and that a specific reading of Inflationism about Practical Basing holds. That is, each *instance* of acting on the basis of a reason depends on a causal relation between the basis and the acting. For all Neta has shown, this needn't be the case for epistemic basing, even if the general ability to base beliefs on reasons depends on a general causal capacity.

Neta's second line of argument is to give a version of the Dispositional Theory that is unified across belief and action, directly bolstering the Unity Thesis against Setiya's challenge.³⁰ Neta appeals to a distinctive kind of representational state. Its distinctiveness is twofold.³¹ First, the representational state cannot exist without the agent's manifesting a disposition for r to guide the agent's ϕ ing. Second, the agent is guided by r in ϕ ing in virtue of her having the representational state with the content that r justifies her ϕ ing.

Whether Neta's account succeeds, I'll let the reader decide.³² It's worth flagging, however, that the account is neutral about whether each instance of the basing relation (whether practical or epistemic) depends on causal relations. So, if successful, Neta's account is a *noncausal* way of defending the Unity Thesis. According to Neta, the unity

of epistemic and practical basing lies not primarily in shared causal structure (though it is compatible with that). Rather, the unity of basing lies in a kind of disposition manifestation bound up with a distinctive representational state.

What are the prospects of meeting Setiya's challenge by invoking causal relations in both the epistemic and practical domains? Particular versions of the Causal Theory that seek to bolster the Unity Thesis will have to be evaluated on their own merits. But there is a general case to be made for unified causal structure across practical and epistemic basing. Grant Inflationism about Practical basing, read in the specific way: every instance of acting on the basis of a reason depends on reason-action causal relations. As we saw in §3, the Argument from Normative Overdetermination supports Inflationism about Practical Basing. Only by invoking causal relations can we properly secure the difference between the normative reasons an agent has to act and her basis for acting. The argument extends to epistemic basing.³³ Consider a case.

Driving. Chun believes that they drove a long distance after filling up the car yesterday. Chun's basis for the belief is that they remember doing so. Today, Chun sees that the car's fuel gauge reads half full. Chun believes that \langle the fuel gauge reads half full \rangle is evidence that they drove a long distance after filling up the car yesterday.

Does Chun believe that they drove a long distance after filling up the car yesterday in part on the basis that the fuel gauge reads half full? According to EBB, the answer must be "yes." I concede that, in some versions of Driving, Chun might integrate the fuel gauge reading into their basis for their belief. But EBB rules impossible versions of the case where Chun does not so integrate their evidence. Perhaps if Chun fails to believe in part on the basis of the fuel gauge reading, they are irrational. But at issue is the possibility of such a case, not the rationality.

If such a case is possible, then an agent can: (i) have multiple normative reasons for believing that p ; (ii) believe that some of those reasons are evidence for p ; (iii) believe that p on the basis of only one of those reasons. These conditions allow the Argument from Normative Overdetermination to take root. Invoking causation is the best way to identify which of the normative reasons is the agent's basis for believing that p .³⁴

The Argument from Normative Overdetermination encourages positing similar causal structure for epistemic and practical basing alike. This supports the Unity Thesis by rejecting Deflationism about Epistemic Basing, even on the Deflationism Specific reading.

Much more work needs to be done on the Unity Thesis and on Setiya's challenge to it. For now, let's tentatively accept it and consider a different way in which basing might be more heterogenous than has been assumed.

5 | ϕ ING ON THE BASIS OF A NORMATIVE REASON

The Unity Thesis concerns the homogeneity of basing with respect to ϕ ings. But an important recent development concerns the homogeneity of basing with respect to bases themselves.

It has been widely assumed that the basing relation is the same whether the agent ϕ s on the basis of a sufficient normative reason (SNR) or on the basis of a merely motivating reason.³⁵ Moreover, it is widely acknowledged that ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR involves more than ϕ ing on the basis of a reason that just so happens to be an SNR for ϕ ing. Consider two cases designed to show this for epistemic and practical basing respectively.

Fortunate Consequent Affirmer. Ebele's car is in the driveway. Folami believes the conditional: if Ebele has carpooled to work, then Ebele's car is in the driveway. Suppose Ebele's car being in the driveway is in fact an abductive SNR for believing that Ebele has carpooled to work. But Folami forms that belief not by abduction but by affirming the consequent on the conditional.³⁶

Fortunate Bomb Disposer. For this type of bomb, the wire's being blue is an SNR to cut it (in order to defuse the bomb). But Geri mistakenly believes that one can defuse *any* bomb by cutting *any* blue wire in the detonation apparatus. Geri cuts the wire on the basis of the wire's being blue.³⁷

In both cases: the agent ϕ s on the basis of a reason; that reason is an SNR for ϕ ing; nonetheless, the agent does not ϕ on the basis of an SNR. The agent's ϕ ing is not well founded or properly based. Consider that the agents would still have ϕ ed on the basis of those reasons even had they not been SNRs for ϕ ing. That is, even if it were Saturday and so Ebele's car being in the driveway was not evidence for their having gone to work, Folami would still have formed the belief that Ebele had carpooled to work on that basis. And even if the Geri were working on a bomb the detonation of which were triggered, rather than prevented, by cutting the blue wire, they still would have cut the wire on the basis of its being blue.

Lord and Sylvan (2020) argue that the upshot of these cases has not been adequately appreciated. They focus on epistemic basing, but I generalize their argument to include practical basing.³⁸ Consider the following view of what it is to ϕ on the basis of an SNR.

Composite View. ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR consists in: (i) ϕ ing on the basis of a reason, r ; (ii) r is an SNR to ϕ ; (iii) any further factors on the condition that (i) and (ii) hold independently of one another.³⁹

Cases like Fortunate Consequent Affirmer and Fortunate Bomb Disposer suggest that the Composite View is false. The independence of the agent's ϕ ing on the basis of r and r 's being an SNR to ϕ will leave room for cases of the Fortunate kind. These are cases where the agent's basis for ϕ ing just happens to be an SNR for ϕ ing. The fact that r is an SNR for ϕ ing plays no role in the agent's ϕ ing, which is why they would have ϕ ed anyway even if r hadn't been an SNR to ϕ .

Cunningham (2019, 3893–5) argues that Fortunate Consequence Affirmer can be ruled out by adding a further condition that is compatible with the Composite View. Namely, the agent's ϕ ing does not depend on an incorrect inference rule. We can extend Cunningham's point to cover Fortunate Bomb Disposer by precluding the agent from relying either on a false inference rule or on a false belief.

The dialectic is similar to the Gettier dialectic, with ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR standing in for knowledge, and ϕ ing on the basis of r conjoined with r 's being an SNR for ϕ ing standing in for justified true belief. Our extension of Cunningham's proposal mirrors the no-false-beliefs epicycle of the Gettier literature.⁴⁰ Perhaps Cunningham is right that the Composite View can deal with Fortunate Consequent Affirmer and Fortunate Bomb Disposer. But the fundamental problem runs deeper, in much the same way that JTB+ analyses of knowledge that insist on the independence of truth and the other conditions have failed to convince. Here's an argument with respect to basing, suggested by remarks of Lord and Sylvan's (2020, 167).

- (10) ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR is a distinctive achievement, over and above ϕ ing on the basis of a reason that happens to be an SNR for ϕ ing.
- (11) Securing the distinctive achievement of ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR requires precluding lucky or fortunate cases.
- (12) The only way to preclude such fortunate cases is to have the agent's ϕ ing on the basis of r depend on the fact that r is an SNR for ϕ ing.

The conclusion entails the falsity of the Composite View. Lord and Sylvan put it by saying that the basing relation is *prime*.⁴¹

Rejecting the Composite View settles little about what ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR amounts to. Lord and Sylvan's positive account is a "two-relation" view, according to which "the" basing relation is really two relations that differ between ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR and ϕ ing on the basis of a merely motivating reason.⁴² Without getting into the fine details, Lord and Sylvan give two versions of the Dispositional Causal Theory.

I end with two remarks about whether ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR is prime.

First, although the issue of whether basing is composite or prime is different from the question of whether the Unity Thesis is true, they interact. I've argued that Lord and Sylvan's case for the primeness of epistemic basing (on

an SNR) generalizes to the primeness of practical basing. That is evidence for the Unity Thesis. However, if it turns out that, say, epistemic basing is composite while practical basing is prime, that would be evidence against the Unity Thesis.

Second, there may be more than two distinct achievements with respect to basing. Consider:

- (13) ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR.
- (14) ϕ ing on the basis of a normative reason that is not sufficient.
- (15) ϕ ing on the basis of a true consideration that is merely motivating reason.
- (16) ϕ ing on the basis of a false consideration.

Lord and Sylvan carve the space between ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR and the rest. But perhaps there are finer-grained distinctions to be made.⁴³ Here's a sketch of an argument for the conclusion that ϕ ing on the basis of a less-than-sufficient normative reason is (i) an achievement over and above ϕ ing on the basis of a merely motivating reason, but (ii) under and below ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR.

For (i), we only need vary Fortunate Consequent Affirmer in a small way. Suppose again that Folami's basis for believing that Ebele carpooled to work is Ebele's car is in the drive. Again, Folami arrives at their belief by affirming the consequent. This time, however, Ebele's car being in the drive is a less-than-sufficient normative reason for believing that Ebele carpooled to work; perhaps there's a nontrivial chance that Ebele took the train. I suggest the judgment is relevantly the same: Folami's belief is based on a merely motivating reason, which just so happens to be a less-than-sufficient normative reason for so believing.

For (ii), consider:

Reckless Bomb Disposer. For this type of bomb, the wire's being red is a sufficient normative reason to cut it. Suppose Hal mistakenly believes that the wire's being red is a normative reason, but a less-than-sufficient one. Perhaps they underestimate the probability of defusing the bomb by cutting the red wire. But Hal is reckless and cuts the wire on the basis of its being red.

I suggest that Hal ϕ s on the basis of a less-than-sufficient normative reason that just so happens to be sufficient. Evidence for this is that Hal still would've so ϕ ed were the reason not in fact sufficient, but would not have ϕ ed were it not a normative reason at all. Hal's cutting the wire is sensitive to whether the reason is a normative one, but not whether it is an SNR. If so, this kind of case suggests that ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR does not decompose into ϕ ing on the basis of a normative reason that happens to be sufficient.

These cases are not decisive, of course. I sketch them to illustrate the possibilities for future work that needs to be done with respect to basing's being prime or composite.

6 | CONCLUSION

The literatures on practical and epistemic basing have been largely separate. This paper has sought to narrow the gap. I focused on three questions. First, is basing causing? The dispositional turn is a promising way for causal theorists to avoid the Problem of Deviant Causal Chains. But it offers noncausal theorists hope of undoing the causal orthodoxy with respect to both practical and epistemic basing. Second, are practical and epistemic basing importantly unified? I suggested that they are, despite Setiya's challenge to the Unity Thesis. If the Argument from Normative Overdetermination works in both the practical and epistemic domains, acting and believing on the basis of reasons are importantly unified in their causal structure. Third, how is ϕ ing on the basis of an SNR related to ϕ ing on the basis of a merely motivating reason? I generalized Lord and Sylvan's case against the Composite View. I also tentatively argued that

there are more distinctive achievements in this vicinity, such as ϕ ing on the basis of a reason that is normative, but less than sufficient.

Although much work on basing has been done both by philosophers of practical reasoning and by epistemologists, there is plenty more to do. I hope that considering practical and epistemic basing together is more fruitful than pursuing two independent lines of inquiry.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ What this amounts to is controversial. In particular, does an agent need to take r to count in favor of ϕ ing in order to ϕ on the basis of r ? Many have answered affirmatively (Davidson, 1963; Gregory, 2013; Neta, 2019; Tenenbaum, 2009). See Setiya (2010) for criticism.
- ² r can be a normative reason for ϕ ing without being a normative reason that S possesses for ϕ ing. For instance, when r is completely beyond S 's epistemic ken. See Lord (2018, Part II) for discussion.
- ³ I won't assume that one ϕ s intentionally if and only if one ϕ s on the basis of a reason. Many theorists of practical basing, however, follow Davidson (1963, 688) in "defining an intentional action as one done for a reason." See especially the discussion and references in Aguilar and Buckareff (2010) and Setiya (2010, n. 8). Anscombe (1963, §17)'s critical discussion is still relevant. See also Hyman (2015, 142). Most epistemologists hold that one cannot believe intentionally (but see Steup (2017) for an exception), and so the issue has not arisen for epistemic basing.
- ⁴ Whether Anscombe's "reason for acting" is our "basis" is complicated, but we can set that aside. See Stoutland (2011), Hyman (2015, ch. 6) and Singh (forthcoming).
- ⁵ Epistemic basing includes being in the state of believing on the basis of a reason, as well forming a belief on the basis of reasons. Inference is one, but I won't assume the only, way of forming a belief based on the basis of reasons.
- ⁶ See Sylvan's (2016, §2) excellent overview in the context of bases for belief.
- ⁷ Fogal (2018) casts doubt on whether the debate about what bases are is worth having. Roughly, he argues that basing explanation is, like all explanation, context sensitive. Adequately explaining someone's ϕ ing by citing their basis for ϕ ing might involve citing different things in different contexts: a belief here, a desire there, a fact elsewhere. Given this, Fogal argues, we shouldn't privilege one class of entities as the ontological category to which bases belong. Rather, a whole group of diverse mental and non-mental entities are explanatorily relevant when one ϕ s on the basis of a reason. Which we cite in a given context will depend on features of that context.
- ⁸ Relatedly, but not necessarily equivalently: is basing explanation a kind of causal explanation?
- ⁹ See Melden (1961) for an example of the pre-Davidsonian orthodoxy. D'Oro and Sandis (2013) provide a historical overview of the debate about whether practical basing is causing.
- ¹⁰ Together with the definition of an intentional action as an action done on the basis of a reason, this yields what has come to be known as the "standard story of action" (Smith, 2012, 387): an intentional action is a bodily movement caused in the right way by a belief-desire pair.
- ¹¹ The causation at issue is efficient causation, the kind of causation involved in a rock's breaking a window (Paul, 2011).
- ¹² See Winters (1980), McCain (2012) and Bondy (2016). Detractors of the Causal Theory for epistemic basing include Tolliver (1982), Leite (2004) and Setiya (2013). Korcz (2000) holds that causation in the right way is necessary but not sufficient for epistemic. The Causal Theory is also popular with respect to drawing a conclusion on the basis of premises (Blake-Turner, 2020; Boghossian, 2014; Koziol, 2017; Longino, 1978), but for dissent about deduction see Valaris (2014) and Marcus (2020). Anscombe (1963) is standardly read as denying the Causal Theory with respect to practical basing (D'Oro & Sandis, 2013, 18; Singh, forthcoming; Stoutland, 2011, 26). More recently, Dancy (2000, ch. 8), Thompson (2008, chs. 6–7) and Sehon (2016) argue in different ways that basing explanation is not (straightforwardly) a kind of causal explanation.

nation. These are arguments against the Causal Theory on the assumption that if the Causal Theory is true, then basing explanation is (straightforwardly) a kind of causal explanation.

- ¹³ In both practical and epistemic cases, we should allow the causation to be sustaining as well as productive. My basis for sitting on the bench is that it is relaxing. That it is relaxing might be causally relevant both to my sitting down on the bench in the first place, and to my continuing to sit on the bench. Similar remarks go for forming a belief and being in the state of believing.
- ¹⁴ The argument (though not the name) originates with Davidson (1963, 691). See Mele (2013, §5) for a recent endorsement. I consider a version of the argument for epistemic basing in §4.
- ¹⁵ Another line of argument for the Causal Theory stems from the thought that without causation to knit together ϕ ings and their bases, bases risk being "epiphenomenal... mere bourgeois ideology" (D'Oro & Sandis, 2013, 7). Without the tractability of causation, we are unable to account for the "mysterious connection" between bases and ϕ ings based on them (Davidson, 1963, 693). For a response to both this line of worry and the Argument from Normative Overdetermination, see Löhner and Sehon (2016).
- ¹⁶ Early articulations of the problem come from Davidson (1973) himself and Frankfurt (1978). Attempted solutions with respect to practical basing include Peacocke (1979), Mitchell (1982) and Smith (2012). For epistemic basing, see McCain (2012) and Ye (2020).
- ¹⁷ Wedgwood (2006), Sosa (2015, ch. 1), Hyman (2015, ch. 6), Sylvan (2016), Mantel (2017), Lord (2018, chs. 5–6), and Vahid (2020).
- ¹⁸ Sosa explicitly focuses on intentional action, rather than on doing based on reasons. But Sosa aims to follow Davidson (1963) in accounting for intentional action in terms of the Causal Theory.
- ¹⁹ The blast is so powerful that it would've shattered a paradigmatically nonfragile object, like a dumbbell.
- ²⁰ Sylvan (2016, §3) and Lord (2018, ch. 6). See also Sosa's (2015, ch. 1) invocation of agential competence.
- ²¹ There is also the worry that dispositions are in general metaphysically suspect. For discussion, see Choi and Fara (2021).
- ²² For concerns of this sort, see Della Rocca (2020, ch. 4).
- ²³ For example, Setiya (2010).
- ²⁴ Some who take this route hold that *competences*, rather than dispositions and their manifestations, are primitive (Sosa, 2015, ch. 1; Sylvan, 2016, 382; Lord, 2018, 118). A competence is a disposition that secures success a relevant range of cases.
- ²⁵ Hyman (2015, ch. 5) makes this point in the context of intentional action.
- ²⁶ Neta (2020) defends a version of the Dispositional Theory that appeals to representational states to capture the idea that bases are formal causes of their ϕ ings. He is neutral about whether bases are also efficient causes of their ϕ ings.
- ²⁷ Stronger versions of the Unity Thesis would include ϕ ings on the basis of reasons beyond acting and believing: allowing, hoping, desiring, and so on.
- ²⁸ One might also challenge the Unity Thesis on the grounds that acting on the basis of a reason is coextensive with acting intentionally, but believing on the basis of a reason is not coextensive with believing intentionally, since the latter is impossible. But we should not assume that acting on the basis of a reason and acting intentionally are coextensive (see n. 3).
- ²⁹ Neta (2020, 192) interprets Setiya as holding that epistemic basing consists in believing a conjunction, rather than having a conjunction of beliefs. But Setiya (2013, 192) glosses EBB as the claim that epistemic basing involves "a mere conjunction of beliefs."
- ³⁰ The dialectic is somewhat more complicated than this. Neta argues that his account of basing does better by Setiya's own abductive lights than EBB.
- ³¹ The subsequent gloss is rough, but will serve our purposes. See further Neta (2019) and Neta (2020, 195–96).
- ³² One worry for any view, like Neta's, that requires the agent to represent r as justifying their ϕ ing is the threat of overintellectualization (McHugh & Way, 2016; Siegel, 2017, ch. 5). It seems a creature (for instance a young child) might be able to ϕ on the basis of reasons without having the relevant representational states. Neta (2019, 203–4) responds that creatures that can ϕ on the basis of reasons arguably do have such representational capacities, at least nonconceptually.
- ³³ If the upshot of the dispositional turn is that we don't need to appeal to causation to solve normative overdetermination, then there is hope for the friend of unity in solving that issue in the same way in both practical and epistemic cases. That is part of what Neta's version of the Dispositional Theory promises.

- ³⁴ I'm unaware of any explicit attempts to transpose the Argument from Normative Overdetermination from the practical to the epistemic context. A similar argument for epistemic basing is given, however, by Maclver (1958, 17), cited by Armstrong (1973, 95–96), who in turn is cited by Audi (1993, 228–2). We must invoke causation, Maclver argues, to distinguish between an agent's actual, spurious basis for their belief and the normative reason they cite when giving a rationalization (in the colloquial sense, not in Davidson's sense) of their belief.
- ³⁵ For epistemic basing, see the references cited by Lord and Sylvan (2020, 142–44). Turri's (2010) discussion and Lord and Sylvan's (2020, 153, 164–65) response on the difference between doxastic and propositional justification are also relevant. For practical basing, see the recent debate on the notion of moral worth (Arpaly, 2002; Johnson King, 2020; Markovits, 2010).
- ³⁶ I adapt the case from Lord and Sylvan (2020, 148). Turri (2010, 317) gives a similar case.
- ³⁷ One might object that a wire's being blue can't on its own be an SNR to cut it. That might be right. But if so, a car's being in the driveway can't on its own be an SNR for believing that its owner carpooled to work. In both cases, a network of background information enables the relevant proposition to do its normative work.
- ³⁸ Lord (2018, chs. 5–6) provides a similar argument for practical basing. See also Wedgwood (2006, 662–63) and Dancy (2018, 103–8), who give accounts of reasoning that focus on successful cases and are at least open to reasoning from bad premises involving a different relation.
- ³⁹ This is a more general formulation than (Lord & Sylvan, 2020, 142) give. The pressure to generalize comes from Cunningham (2019), whose objection to the Fortunate Consequent Affirmer case I consider shortly.
- ⁴⁰ See Gettier (1963), Lehrer (1965), Harman (1973, 46–50). For criticism, see Craig (1990, 77–81) and Zagzebski (1994).
- ⁴¹ This use of “prime” differs slightly from Williamson's (2000, ch. 3), which defines primeness as not decomposing into a conjunction of factors.
- ⁴² A two-relation view is not entailed by the primeness of on the basis of an SNR. Moreover, Lord and Sylvan (2020, n. 12) note that a two-relation view needn't be a disjunctivist view. Disjunctivism requires additional commitments, such as that the two relations have nothing important in common. See also Lord (2018, 176–79).
- ⁴³ For epistemic basing, Cunningham (2019) argues that believing on the basis of a true consideration is prime. Moreover, he argues that believing on the basis of a consideration that is true, whether or not the consideration is a normative reason, is an achievement over and above believing on the basis of a consideration that is false.

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