

# Are epistemic reasons normative?

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*Abstract:* According to a widely held view, epistemic reasons are normative reasons for belief – much like prudential or moral reasons are normative reasons for action. In recent years, however, an increasing number of authors have questioned the assumption that epistemic reasons are normative. In this article, I discuss an important challenge for anti-normativism about epistemic reasons and present a number of arguments in support of normativism. The challenge for anti-normativism is to say what kind of reasons epistemic reasons are if they are not normative reasons. I discuss various answers to this challenge and find them all wanting. The arguments for normativism each stress a certain analogy between epistemic reasons and normative reasons for action. Just like normative reasons for action, epistemic reasons provide partial justification; they provide premises for correct reasoning; they constitute good bases for the responses they are reasons for; and they are reasons *for which* agents can show these responses without committing a mistake. In each case, I argue that the relevant condition is plausibly sufficient for the normativity of a reason, and that normativism is in any case in a much better position to explain the analogy than anti-normativism.

Evidence provides reasons for beliefs – that much is almost universally agreed upon among philosophers. There is disagreement about whether in addition to such *epistemic* reasons, there are also *pragmatic* reasons for belief.<sup>1</sup> There is also disagreement about whether things other than evidence can provide epistemic reasons.<sup>2</sup> Only very few, however, would deny that at least other

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Shah (2006); Way (2016); and Leary (2017).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. Foley (1993, 27–30); Schroeder (2015); Sylvan (2016, 370–71).

things being equal, a person who is in possession of evidence for *p* thereby has an epistemic reason for believing *p*.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly does this claim amount to?

According to the standard view, epistemic reasons are normative reasons for belief – much like prudential or moral reasons are normative reasons for action. This is not to say that there aren't interesting differences between epistemic and practical reasons (surely there are). But it is to say that despite their differences, epistemic and practical reasons are members of a common kind, that both are subclasses of a more general class of reasons. This more general class is commonly referred to as the class of *normative reasons* – the class of reasons that *count in favour of*, or provide partial justification for,<sup>4</sup> certain responses.<sup>5</sup> I will call this view *normativism about epistemic reasons*, or just *normativism*.<sup>6</sup> The question that I am concerned with in this article is whether normativism is true, i.e. whether epistemic reasons really belong to the same general class of reasons to which practical normative reasons belong.

Epistemic reasons are a subclass of what are sometimes called “object-given” or “right-kind” reasons for attitudes.<sup>7</sup> The nature of the distinction between the right and the wrong kind of reasons is a matter of debate, but it seems fairly uncontroversial to say that the right kind of reasons for attitudes are essentially linked to the constitutive correctness standards for the attitude in question, while the wrong kind of reasons aren't. The right kind of reasons for belief, for example, are essentially linked to the correctness standard for belief, which (I assume) is truth: only what bears on the truth of a proposition can provide a right kind of reason for belief in that proposition. The

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<sup>3</sup> Why other things being equal? Possibly, evidence provides reasons only if certain background conditions are satisfied – for example, the condition that the person who possesses the evidence is able to have the belief in question, or is able to grasp the evidential support relation between her evidence and the supported proposition.

<sup>4</sup> An anonymous referee pointed out to me that one might accept the view that epistemic reasons are normative in virtue of *providing partial justification* while being sceptical that they *count in favour of* beliefs. Although it seems to me natural to think that normative reasons always favour, I don't think that anything in the following discussion hinges on this assumption.

<sup>5</sup> Some authors maintain that some reasons count in favour of responses only relative to certain standards, and they distinguish such standard-relative reasons from “robustly normative” (Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn 2018, 151), “substantially normative” (Mantel 2019, 215), “authoritatively normative” (Maguire and Woods 2020, 217), or “genuinely normative” (cf. Paakkunainen 2018) reasons (see below for a discussion of this view). As I am using the term ‘normative reason’, it refers to a reason that counts in favour of a response not relative to a certain standard, but *simpliciter*. I assume that moral and prudential reasons are normative reasons in this sense.

<sup>6</sup> I adopt this name from Glüer and Wikforss (2018). Proponents of normativism include Scanlon (1998, 18–19); Stratton-Lake (2002, xxv–vi); Cuneo (2007); Kelly (2007a); Grimm (2009); Kearns and Star (2009); Raz (2009b); Skorupski (2010, Ch. 2); Parfit (2011, esp. Chs. 1–5); Berker (2013); Gibbons (2013); Talbot (2014); Gregory (2016); Kiesewetter (2016; 2017); McHugh and Way (2016); Streumer (2017, 114–18); Way (2017); Wedgwood (2017); Lord (2018) and Schroeder (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> See Parfit (2001) for the object-given/state-given distinction, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004) for the right-kind/wrong-kind distinction, and Gertken and Kiesewetter (2017) for a recent survey of the relevant literature.

right kind of reasons for admiration are linked to the correctness standard for admiration, which (I assume) is admirability: only what bears on a person's admirability can be a right kind of reason for admiring this person. The right kind of reasons for fear are linked to the correctness standard for fear, which is dangerousness, etc. By contrast, pragmatic reasons for belief and other attitudes (if indeed there are any such reasons) are not essentially related to the correctness standards for attitudes; they are paradigmatic examples of reasons of the wrong kind. I am interested not only in the specific question of whether epistemic reasons are normative, but also in the more general question: are the right kind of reasons for attitudes normative reasons? In other words, are reasons for attitudes that are linked to constitutive correctness standards – rather than, for example, the benefits of having the attitudes in question – normative reasons? I hope to make progress on this more general question by way of answering the more particular question about epistemic reasons.

In recent years, a number of philosophers have started to question normativism, some less explicitly and some more so. For example, in “There Are No Norms of Belief”, Papineau argues that “there is no distinctive species of normativity attaching to the adoption of beliefs. [...] ... Valid prescriptions that apply to the adoption of beliefs [...] arise from considerations of moral value, or personal value, or possibly aesthetic value” (2013, 64). Papineau doesn't address the notion of an epistemic reason, but his view seems to entail that there are no normative reasons for belief that are essentially linked to the correctness standard of beliefs. Supposing that there are such things as epistemic reasons for beliefs to begin with, Papineau must think that they aren't normative reasons.<sup>8</sup> More explicitly, Rinard argues that “the only *genuine* reasons for believing a proposition are pragmatic considerations in favour of so believing” (2015, 217). Assuming that by “genuine reasons”, Rinard means “genuinely normative reasons”, it follows that epistemic reasons for belief are not normative reasons. Similarly, Steglich-Petersen maintains that “it is doubtful whether epistemic reasons have normative ‘force’” (2011, 26), and Cowie suggests that “epistemic reasons for belief – as opposed to normative reasons for belief – are not necessarily normative” (2014, 4014). In the same vein, Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn hold that epistemic reasons “lack robust normative authority” (2018, 160) and according to Mantel, “epistemic reasons are not substantially normative” (2019, 215). Maguire expresses an analogous kind of scepticism when he argues that “so-called *right kind* of reasons for affective attitudes”, i.e. the right kind of reasons for attitudes like desire,

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<sup>8</sup> Compare Nolfi who interprets Papineau as claiming that “epistemic reasons aren't [...] genuinely normative reasons for belief” (Nolfi 2018, 180, n. 3). On an alternative reading, Papineau is a nihilist rather than anti-normativist about epistemic reasons (see below for this distinction).

admiration, or fear, are not normative reasons.<sup>9</sup> Together with Woods, he defends a similar view about epistemic reasons, according to which “only practical reasons are authoritative reasons” (Maguire and Woods 2020, 229). In a recent discussion of the normativity of reasons for belief, Glüer and Wikforss conclude that the “widely endorsed [view] that epistemic reasons are essentially normative” (2018, 598) is “not supported” (576).

My aim in this article is to rectify this situation by formulating, discussing, and defending a number of arguments in support of normativism. The force of these arguments is, I admit, limited: I hope to be able to support those who are sympathetic to normativism as well as to tempt the undecided, but the committed anti-normativist will find ways to escape these arguments. Although I think that these escape routes have costs, I cannot render them ultimately untenable. My aim is the relatively moderate one of, firstly, making explicit what counts in favour of normativism – a view that is usually taken for granted by its proponents – and secondly, working out some of the theoretical costs and challenges for the anti-normativist position.

Needless to say, normativism faces its own challenges. One important source for skepticism about normative epistemic reasons is that the existence of normative reasons for belief seems to presuppose a certain kind of responsibility for our beliefs that one might doubt because we lack voluntary control over our beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Another major worry is that it is difficult to see that conforming to epistemic reasons is necessarily conducive to some value or goal, which conflicts with a widespread conception of normativity according to which normative reasons are to be explained teleologically. While a comprehensive treatment of normativism and anti-normativism would have to involve discussing these and other challenges for normativism as well, this cannot be accomplished in this article. Fortunately, these challenges have already been extensively discussed in the literature. For example, a number of normativists have argued that the kind of responsibility that is presupposed by the existence of normative reasons is ensured by the capacity of reasons-responsiveness, which does not require the ability to voluntarily control attitudes.<sup>11</sup> Some normativists have defended a teleological conception of epistemic reasons, while others have

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<sup>9</sup> More exactly, Maguire claims they are not reasons, but he also says that by ‘reason’ he generally refers to ‘normative reason’ (cf. Maguire 2018, 783). The essential claim of Maguire is that the relation between “so-called right kind of reasons for affective attitudes” and these attitudes is different from the relation between normative reasons for action and actions – it is not the normative reason relation.

<sup>10</sup> Alston (1988) similarly argues that the deontological conception of epistemic justification presupposes that we have voluntary control over beliefs. Owens (2000) calls the problem that epistemic normativity requires responsibility for states that we cannot voluntarily control “the problem of epistemic normativity”.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Shah (2002); Hieronymi (2006); Chuard and Southwood (2009); McHugh (2014).

rejected the underlying assumption that normativity is to be explained teleologically.<sup>12</sup> While these debates are beyond the scope of this article, the arguments presented here can have an indirect impact on them. For example, if Williams (1970) and others are right to reject the doctrine of doxastic voluntarism, then an independent argument for the normativity of epistemic reasons strengthens the case for the view that voluntary control over an attitude is not a necessary condition for the existence of normative reasons for this attitude. And if Berker (2013) and others are right to reject a teleological conception of epistemic reasons, then such an argument is likewise an argument against a teleological conception of normativity. It will thus be worth studying the arguments presented here even if one is primarily interested in these other questions.

I will start, in Section 1, by discussing an important challenge for anti-normativism, which is to say what kind of reasons epistemic reasons are if they are not normative reasons. Sections 2–5 each present an argument for normativism that is based on a structural analogy between epistemic reasons and normative reasons for action: Just like normative reasons for action, epistemic reasons provide partial justification (Section 2), they provide premises for correct reasoning (Section 3), and constitute good bases for the responses they are reasons for (Section 4); finally, they are reasons *for which* agents can show these responses without committing any kind of mistake (Section 5). In each case, I argue that the relevant condition is plausibly sufficient for the normativity of a reason, and that normativism is in any case in a much better position to explain the analogy than anti-normativism.

## 1. ANTI-NORMATIVISM AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EXHAUSTION

Let me begin by introducing a distinction that is sometimes neglected although it seems highly relevant for the dialectic between normativists and anti-normativists. Skepticism about normative epistemic reasons can take two forms: nihilism and anti-normativism. Nihilists about epistemic reasons deny that there are any epistemic reasons, while anti-normativists deny that epistemic reasons are normative. If you go back to the quotes I gave in the introduction, you will find that only some of them are explicitly anti-normativist, while others might be understood in either way. But nihilism about epistemic reasons is an extremely unattractive position. Which philosopher would want to take side with those who maintain that there are no epistemic reasons to believe in climate change? Nihilism entails that all ordinary statements that assert the existence of epistemic

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. Finlay (2019, §2) for the former view, and Way (2013) and Kiesewetter (forthcoming-a) for the latter.

reasons are literally false; it even entails that there are no epistemic reasons to believe nihilism itself. And believing in a view that entails that there are no epistemic reasons to believe in it is quite a difficult task to undertake (if it is possible at all). While this doesn't entail that nihilism is false,<sup>13</sup> it still suggests that it is close to absurdity, and in any case only very few would want to see themselves committed to it. So if you're a skeptic about normative epistemic reasons, you seem much better off with anti-normativism.

This may well be part of what explains the increasing popularity of anti-normativism in recent years. Many philosophers have sympathies with a general teleological outlook in the theory of normativity, which takes all normative reasons to be grounded in desires or valuable goals. Teleological accounts of epistemic norms and reasons have met with considerable resistance, however, and they face notorious difficulties, in particular when it comes to epistemically supported trivialities.<sup>14</sup> Faced with the threat of nihilism, anti-normativism about epistemic reasons looks like a safe haven for teleologists about the normative.

Anti-normativism allows those who are skeptical about the existence of normative epistemic reasons to maintain that there is nothing wrong with ordinary discourse about epistemic reasons, because it interprets this discourse as being about a non-normative subject matter. While making this move avoids a lot of the grossly implausible implications of nihilism, it comes with a certain burden, which anti-normativists have paid surprisingly little attention to. Anti-normativists owe us, firstly, a clarification of the non-normative notion of a 'reason' they operate with, and secondly, a justification of the assumption that this notion is actually the one we use in ordinary discourse about epistemic reasons. For in order to avoid the grossly implausible implications of nihilism, it is surely not enough to use the term 'reason' in a stipulative way in which it does not appeal to something normative. One needs to make it plausible that the ordinary statements about epistemic reasons that one does not want to deny can be understood as employing a non-normative notion of a 'reason'. I will address this conceptual challenge for anti-normativism by way of discussing the following argument:

### *The argument from exhaustion*

1. All reasons are either normative reasons, explanatory reasons, or motivating reasons.

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<sup>13</sup> As emphasized by Streumer (2017).

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Kelly (2007a), Grimm (2009), Steglich-Petersen (2011, 19–20), Côté-Bouchard (2017), Joyce (2020, 61). Note that even Steglich-Petersen, who purports to show “how to be a teleologist about epistemic reasons” eventually turns out to deny the normativity of epistemic reasons (see the quote cited in the introduction).

2. Epistemic reasons are (as such) neither motivating reasons, nor explanatory reasons.
3. Therefore, epistemic reasons are normative reasons.

This argument calls into question that there is the kind of conceptual space that anti-normativism lays claim to. I will start with premise (2), discussing the question of whether epistemic reasons could be understood as motivating or explanatory reasons. Subsequently, I will turn to premise (1), discussing views according to which epistemic reasons form a category of reasons beyond the commonly accepted reason categories.<sup>15</sup>

### *1.1 Epistemic reasons as motivating or explanatory reasons?*

Premise (2) claims that epistemic reasons aren't motivating or explanatory reasons. I will leave open the controversial questions of what motivating reasons are, ontologically speaking, and whether they are a subclass of explanatory reasons.<sup>16</sup> We need not resolve these issues in order to see that epistemic reasons are not, as such, motivating reasons. Even though some motivating reasons are plausibly epistemic reasons, it is certainly possible for there to be an epistemic reason for A to believe p without it being the case that A believes p or is moved towards believing p, and so epistemic reasons do not as such belong to the class of motivating reasons.

But could epistemic reasons be understood as explanatory reasons? According to some philosophers, epistemic reasons are reasons that explain some normative fact, such as the fact that

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<sup>15</sup> As noted above in note 5, I use the terms 'normativity' or 'normative reason' to refer to what some (but not all) of my opponents call "genuine" or "authoritative" normativity or "genuinely" or "authoritatively" normative reasons. I take this to be standard terminological practice; in nearly all philosophical works on normative reasons the terms are used in just this way (and this includes works advocating anti-normativism). However, some of those that I call anti-normativists hold that epistemic reasons belong to a category of reasons that they would refer to as "formally normative" rather than "authoritatively normative" (see n. 5 for references). These philosophers are likely to think that epistemic reasons belong to a category besides explanatory, motivating and what they call "authoritatively normative" reasons. According to the way I use the term 'normative reason', proponents of this view must therefore be understood as denying premise (1) – even though there is also a way of using the term 'normative', according to which they could embrace this premise (which is also the way according to which they would have to embrace the thesis that epistemic reasons are normative). Ultimately, this is just a matter of terminology. In substance, the view that epistemic reasons are "formally rather than authoritatively normative" is equivalent with the view that epistemic reasons are what Joyce (2001) has called "institutional reasons", and this view is discussed below when I consider the option of denying premise (1).

<sup>16</sup> Proponents of psychologism, such as Davidson (1963) and Smith (1994, Ch. 4), take motivating reasons to be psychological states, while anti-psychologists take them to be states of affairs (Dancy 2000, Ch. 5), truths (Alvarez 2010, Ch. 5) or believed propositions (Schroeder 2007, 14). Those who allow for false propositions as motivating reasons while accepting the factivity of explanation must reject the view that motivating reasons are explanatory reasons. See Singh (2019) for a helpful recent discussion of these questions.

one ought to believe something.<sup>17</sup> We can disregard this proposal here, since it would not yield a non-normative understanding of epistemic reasons.<sup>18</sup> Another suggestion is that epistemic reasons explain beliefs. But this is ruled out for the same reason as the proposal that epistemic reasons are motivating reasons: there can be epistemic reasons for beliefs that nobody holds. A more promising proposal is that epistemic reasons for beliefs are really reasons explaining the belief's *object*. According to this proposal, an epistemic reason to believe *p* is a reason that explains why *p*. If this were right, it would give us a non-normative understanding of epistemic reasons.

One problem with this view is that it cannot be generalized to other reasons of the right kind: surely the right kind of reasons for desiring that *p*, or hoping that *p*, for example, aren't reasons why *p*. But even if we leave this issue aside, the proposal faces two straightforward objections. The first objection is that explananda must be the case, while beliefs supported by epistemic reasons need not be true. *R* might be a reason to believe that it will rain, even if it won't in fact rain, but if it won't rain, neither *R* nor anything else can explain why it will rain. Therefore, an epistemic reason to believe *p* cannot be understood as an explanatory reason why *p*.<sup>19</sup> The second objection is that purely evidential or probabilistic connections can provide epistemic reasons even if they aren't explanatory. For example, the fact that the weather forecast said it would rain is an epistemic reason to believe that it will rain, but it does not explain why it will rain.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, epistemic reasons for beliefs can neither be understood as reasons that explain these beliefs nor as reasons that explain these belief's objects. Of course, there are in principle various further possibilities of how one might understand epistemic reasons in terms of explanatory reasons. Perhaps epistemic reasons could be understood in terms of reasons why agents of a certain sort *would* believe something under certain circumstances. Or perhaps epistemic reasons could be

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<sup>17</sup> For different variants of this view, see e.g. Broome (2004; 2013, Ch. 4); Finlay (2019); Nebel (2019). I assume here that the notion of 'ought' referred to in this analysis is normative in a not merely standard-relative or institutional sense. I discuss institutionalist readings of epistemic reasons below in Sec. 1.3.

<sup>18</sup> Moreover, for the reasons mentioned at the end of this subsection an analysis of epistemic reasons in terms of explanantia of normative facts should not be understood as involving the claim that epistemic reasons are *identical* with explanatory reasons. It therefore does not support the rejection of premise (2). (The same holds for an analysis of epistemic reasons in terms of explanantia of institutional 'oughts'.)

<sup>19</sup> Nebel (2019) has recently put forward linguistic evidence that casts doubt on the factivity of 'R is a reason why p' in cases in which *p* contains a modal verb (including 'ought' and 'should'). However, as epistemic reasons can support false beliefs in propositions that do not contain a modal verb, the objection stands no matter whether Nebel is right about these cases.

<sup>20</sup> This is not to deny that we can refer to such epistemic reasons in because-sentences, such as 'It will rain, because the weather forecast has said so'. This is the so-called "evidential use of *because*" (Morreall 1979), and it is important to note that "the *because* clause in these sentences does not provide an explanation for the event or state of affairs in the main clause" (Morreall 1979, 233). This is shown *exactly* by the fact that such sentences cannot be reformulated in terms of reasons *why*.



understood in terms of reasons why having certain beliefs satisfies a certain standard (where the standard in question is not intrinsically normative). However, it seems that on no such proposal could epistemic reasons plausibly be *identified* with explanatory reasons – the best that such proposals could hope for is to establish that epistemic reasons are *grounded* in some kind of explanatory reason. Epistemic reasons are reasons for (or against) beliefs or other doxastic attitudes towards propositions, and statements about epistemic reasons assert some sort of relation between the reason R and a doxastic attitude or proposition  $\phi$ . Although I’ve just argued that this view is false, it is at least a comprehensible view that this relation between R and  $\phi$  can be identified with the explanatory relation. But it is difficult to see how the relation between R and  $\phi$  could be identified with an explanatory relation between R and *something other than*  $\phi$  – such as the fact that agents of a certain sort would believe something under certain circumstances. Two relations cannot be one and the same if they have different relata. Rather, the idea of such a proposal must be that the epistemic reason relation between R and  $\phi$  is *grounded in* some explanatory relation between R and something other than  $\phi$ , where the explanatory relation is *metaphysically more fundamental than* rather than *identical with* the epistemic reason relation.<sup>21</sup>

It follows from this that unless epistemic reasons can be understood as reasons that explain what they are reasons for, epistemic reasons are not identical with explanatory reasons. And since epistemic reasons cannot be understood as reasons that explain what they are reasons for, and since they are also not motivating reasons, anti-normativists have to deny premise (1) of the argument from exhaustion. They are committed to the view that there is a further category of reasons besides motivating, explanatory, and normative reasons.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Note that this doesn’t mean that epistemic reasons cannot be *reductively analysed* as explanantia of something other than  $\phi$ , as long as one does not take such a reduction to entail that the epistemic reason relation is *identical with* the explanatory reason relation. For a defence of the view that reduction should not be understood in terms of identity, see Schroeder (2007, Ch. 4).

<sup>22</sup> Some of those that I (drawing on Glüer and Wikforss 2018) call anti-normativists might prefer to say that they accept not a further category of reasons, but rather a distinction within the third category of reasons besides motivating and explanatory reasons, namely the distinction between “authoritative” and “non-authoritative” or “institutional” reasons (see Sec. 1.3 below). And they might use the term “normative reason” to refer to this third category of reasons rather than to the category of reasons that I call “normative reasons” and they call “authoritative reasons” (see n. 15 above). My conclusion that anti-normativists are committed to a further category of reasons besides motivating, explanatory and normative (in my sense) reasons, is not meant to rule this out. Having said this, I also think there is reason to be skeptical about the underlying assumptions of this way of seeing things. I take it that all sides can agree that if there is such a property as being an institutional reason, this property is very different from the property of being an (authoritatively) normative reason. The assumption that both institutional and (authoritatively) normative reasons belong to a unified category of reasons therefore seems to me anything but self-evident.

### 1.2 *Epistemic reasons as evidence?*

So what is this further category of reasons? A natural suggestion is that the property of being an epistemic reason for a doxastic attitude towards *p* can be identified with or reduced to the property of being evidence bearing on *p* or the property of affecting the probability of *p*, where ‘evidence’ or ‘probability’ are understood as non-normative properties.<sup>23</sup> It is important not to confuse this thesis with the widely held view that all and only pieces of evidence provide epistemic reasons, which does not entail that epistemic reasons are reducible to evidence.

Both of these views share extensional problems, as some epistemic reasons seem not to be constituted by evidence. For example, the fact that you have *no* evidence bearing on *p* seems to be a good epistemic reason for withholding belief in *p*, but far from being evidence bearing on *p*, that fact implies the absence of any such evidence.<sup>24</sup> A second, independent worry is that it isn’t clear whether a notion of evidence that is extensionally suitable for a reduction – i.e. a notion of evidence that has the right connections to epistemic reasons, epistemic justification and epistemic rationality – could be a *non-normative* notion of evidence. Some philosophers have argued that ‘evidence’ in the relevant sense comprises the notion of a normative reason for belief.<sup>25</sup>

But here I wish to focus on another problem, which is that – just like the view that reduces epistemic reasons for believing *p* to explanatory reasons why *p* – the view that being an epistemic reason to believe *p* reduces to being evidence that *p* cannot be generalized to other right-kind reasons. Surely, being a right kind of reason to hope, or fear, or desire that *p* cannot be reduced to raising the probability that *p*. So it looks like on the proposal under discussion *one* further category of reasons won’t do; we will need to assume further categories of reasons for other right-kind reasons for attitudes. But this is surely unattractive – not only because multiplying categories is generally not regarded as a theoretical virtue, but also because the idea that epistemic reasons and at least some other right-kind reasons for attitudes are reasons of the same kind is independently very plausible, no matter what one thinks about their normative status.

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<sup>23</sup> This seems to be the view favoured by Glüer and Wikforss (cf. 2018, 584–88); see also Cowie (2019, 101). I here discuss the view that epistemic reasons reduce to evidence as a possible component of an anti-normativist conception of epistemic reasons, but I do not wish to suggest that this reductive view itself entails or supports anti-normativism (whether this is so depends on further assumptions about the reducibility of the normative that are beyond the scope of this article).

<sup>24</sup> See Schroeder (2015, 165–66) and Littlejohn (2018, 132).

<sup>25</sup> See esp. Kim (1988, 390–91) and Kelly (2007b, 467–71) for this claim, and Brössel et al. (2013, 289–99) for a defense of a non-normative conception of evidence.

According to a more sophisticated version of the view that epistemic reasons reduce to evidence, for R to be an epistemic reason for a doxastic attitude towards p is for R to be evidence bearing on the *correctness* of believing p, or evidence bearing on some sufficient condition of that belief's correctness. The view shares some of the potential problems of the simple reduction to evidence, namely that it cannot accommodate cases of epistemic reasons that aren't evidence, and that it needs to make good on the assumption that the relevant notion of 'evidence' isn't normative. It incurs further potential burdens by appealing to the notion of 'correctness', which some have claimed to incorporate the notion of a normative reason.<sup>26</sup> But it might be argued to have the crucial advantage of being applicable to other reasons of the right kind. For according to some philosophers, R's being a right kind of reason for an attitude can generally be understood in terms of R's being evidence for a sufficient condition of the attitude's correctness.<sup>27</sup> For example, a right kind of reason for admiration would be evidence for admirability; a right kind of reason for fear would be evidence for danger, etc.

The proposal might also be seen as having a significant advantage with respect to the relation between epistemic reasons and rationality. This is because proponents of this view might argue that the rationality of an attitude is, quite generally, a matter of responding to one's evidence for the attitude's correctness rather than a matter of responding to normative reasons. And provided that this is so, the view can meet another important desideratum, which is to explain the point of assuming a further category of reasons besides motivating, explanatory and normative reasons. If rationality is a matter of responding to evidence for correctness, it is useful to subsume those things that are evidence for an attitude's correctness under a common concept, and it makes sense that we use a term for this category that is etymologically related to the term 'rationality'.

Below, I will argue that even if this view succeeds in unifying the right kind of reasons for attitudes, it still fails to explain a number of salient analogies between such reasons and normative reasons for *actions*. But for now, I wish to point out that it is questionable that the view actually succeeds in unifying the right kind of reasons. The problem is that it does not seem right to say that every piece of evidence for an attitude's correctness is a reason (of the right kind) for this attitude. For example, if a reliable source tells you that A is admirable, then this is evidence that A

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<sup>26</sup> See e.g. Schroeder (2007, 134).

<sup>27</sup> See e.g. Thomson (2008, ch. 8), Sharadin (2016, 394), and Smith (2018, 58–60). As I understand them, these authors need not be understood as defending an anti-normativist conception of epistemic and other reasons of the right kind. Instead, they may be understood as providing an analysis of normative reasons for attitudes (or a certain class thereof).

is admirable, or that admiration of A is correct. But it is not itself a reason for admiration. Even though you could rationally *believe* upon testimonial evidence that A is admirable, you couldn't rationally *admire* A upon such evidence. A right kind of reason for admiring A must be something that could make it the case that A is admirable, such as the fact that A is witty, modest, or generous. Evidence of admirability need not be able to make such a contribution, however. Hence, the analysis of reasons of the right kind in terms of evidence for correctness is extensionally inadequate.<sup>28</sup>

A natural move to make at this point is to suggest that right kind of reasons can be analysed as 'correctness-makers' rather than 'correctness-indicators'.<sup>29</sup> While this proposal fares better with respect to admiration, however, it seems to face problems with belief. This is because of a reason that I mentioned already when discussing epistemic reasons as explanatory reasons: purely evidential considerations provide epistemic reasons without even potentially determining or contributing to an explanation of a belief's correctness (recall the weather report).<sup>30</sup>

What is more, suppose that we could identify a property related to evidence or correctness that does not presuppose the notion of a normative reason and that is extensionally suitable for reducing epistemic and other right-kind for attitudes. This would not be enough for escaping the argument from exhaustion. Anti-normativists have to claim, in addition, that the relevant property grounds a *sui generis* property of being a non-normative reason rather than the familiar property of being a normative reason. In other words, they have to rule out the alternative, *constitutivist* view, according to which the relevant property grounds normative reasons for attitudes. But in comparison, the constitutivist view looks not only more parsimonious, it also seems in an advantageous position with respect to explaining the commonalities between right-kind reasons for

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<sup>28</sup> A similar objection would seem to apply to Wedgwood's claim that rationality requires minimizing expected incorrectness (2017, 217). The expected correctness of admiration may be very high on purely testimonial evidence, even though it would still be rationally required to abstain from admiration. This may be part of the reason why Wedgwood restricts his claim to the rationality of belief and intention. This restriction, however, poses the question of what the rationality of belief and intention has in common with the rationality of affective attitudes.

<sup>29</sup> Compare Chappell's and Howard's analysis of the right kind of reasons as "features in virtue of which an [attitude] is fit[ting]" (Chappell 2012, 688) or explanantia of fittingness (Howard 2019, 232) (both take these reasons to be normative and extend their analysis to all normative reasons). Compare also Maguire's talk of the right kind of reasons for affective attitudes as "fit-making facts" (2018, 782).

<sup>30</sup> Hieronymi's proposal that reasons of the right kind are considerations that "bear on a question, the settling of which amounts to forming the attitude" (Hieronymi 2005, 449) faces a similar dilemma. Either p's probabilizing q suffices for p to bear on the question of whether q, or not. If not, it follows from Hieronymi's account that probabilistic evidence for p does not provide the right kind of reasons for believing p, which seems false. And if yes, then it follows from Hieronymi's account that testimony of admirability provides the right kind of reasons for admiration, which also seems false.

attitudes and normative reasons for action that I will be focusing on in later sections. So even if the extensional problems discussed in this section could be resolved, much work remains to be done if anti-normativists pursue this line of response to the argument from exhaustion.

### *1.3 Epistemic reasons as institutional reasons?*

What further categories of reasons could anti-normativists refer to? According to some philosophers, there is a category of reasons that behave very similar to normative reasons insofar as they recommend (in some sense) certain responses to certain agents, but which should be distinguished from normative reasons, because they are relativized to rules or standards that need not be inherently normative.<sup>31</sup> Following Joyce, I shall call such reasons “institutional reasons”. Joyce illustrates this notion with the example of Celadus the Thracian, who is forced to be a gladiator and has no moral, prudential or other normative reason to play by the rules of gladiatorial combat. According to Joyce, Celadus still has an institutional reason to conform to these rules, simply because he is subject to them.<sup>32</sup>

In this manner, anti-normativists might hold that for R to be an epistemic reason is for R to be an institutional reason – a reason relative to some set of epistemic rules applying to beliefs, where the epistemic rules are not understood in terms of normative reasons, but, for example, as conventional rules or as rules the acceptance of which is constitutive for participation in a certain practice (perhaps the practice of believing). On this picture, epistemic reasons need not be any more normative than institutional reasons for conforming with the rules of gladiatorial combat or chess.<sup>33</sup>

But why should we accept the existence of institutional reasons to begin with? Joyce argues that Celadus must have a reason to conform to the rules of gladiatorial combat because the rules entail an institutional ‘ought’ that relates an agent to an action, and any such ‘ought’ conceptually

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<sup>31</sup> See esp. Joyce (2001, 39–42), who draws on Mackie (1977, Ch. 3). This view is increasingly popular, see Olson (2011, 84–85), Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018, 159–160), Woods (2018), Cowie (2019, 59); Lord and Sylvan (2019), Mantel (2019, 215); Maguire and Woods (2020, §4).

<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Lord and Sylvan maintain that “for any standard of correctness, [...] considerations that bear on whether an act would help one conform to the standard” are “reasons of the right kind” relative to the standard (2019, 46). These are not “motivating or explanatory reasons” (48), but “for the standards that aren’t genuinely normative”, the relevant reasons are also “not normative” (51). Thus, Lord and Sylvan hold that institutional reasons are a *sui generis* category of reasons.

<sup>33</sup> This is the view proposed by Maguire and Woods (2020): epistemic reasons are like “chess-based reasons” (217) – institutional reasons provided by the rules of the “game of belief”. Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018) and Mantel (2019) seem to take a similar view.

entails a reason.<sup>34</sup> But an institutional ‘ought’-proposition seems to state no more than that an action is prescribed by a certain set of rules and is thus very different from the deliberative ‘ought’-proposition that conclude the process of weighing reasons for and against action. Just as there need not be a rule that prescribes  $\phi$ -ing if you ought to  $\phi$  in the deliberative sense, it’s difficult to see why there needs to be a reason to  $\phi$  if you ought to  $\phi$  in the institutional sense. Joyce maintains that the assumption of such reasons is implicit in the perspective “from inside the institution” (2001, 39; cf. Mackie 1977, 80–81): “Someone who endorses etiquette thinks that the rules of etiquette just do constitute reasons” (Joyce 2001, 39–40). But even if we concede this claim,<sup>35</sup> it does not follow that there are such things as non-normative institutional reasons. Insofar as endorsing a system of rules involves the assumption of reasons to follow the rules, it seems to involve the assumption of *normative* reasons to follow the rules. In any case, from the fact that something must be *taken* to be a reason in virtue of the endorsement of a system of rules, it does not follow that it actually is a reason, not even one that isn’t necessarily normative.

Hence, I am not convinced that we should accept institutional reasons as a separate category of reasons – one that is distinct from the categories of normative reasons we take ourselves to have in virtue of endorsing a standard, or, for that matter, conditional normative reasons (i.e., reasons we would have if we had reason to engage in a rule-governed activity).<sup>36</sup> As a consequence, I doubt that the proposal under discussion provides an account of epistemic reasons as actual reasons rather than pseudo-reasons, which means that it collapses into the view that all statements that entail the existence of epistemic reasons (in the ordinary sense) are strictly speaking false.<sup>37</sup> Of course, some error theorists about the normative accept this conclusion,<sup>38</sup> but anti-normativists about epistemic

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<sup>34</sup> See Joyce (2001, 38–39). Joyce accepts that there are senses of ‘ought’ that do not entail reasons, but these are senses that do not relate agents to responses.

<sup>35</sup> For the record, I believe that things are more complicated. Some systems of rules, including many religious rules, purport to state or establish normative reasons. Endorsing such a system thus means accepting certain normative reasons. Other rules are different. I can endorse the rules of chess and still think that these rules provide only conditional normative reasons for those who have reason to play chess (or reason to play chess by the rules), and it seems to me that something similar may well be true about etiquette.

<sup>36</sup> Here I agree with Streumer (2017, 117). Some might want to understand institutional reasons as explanatory reasons, i.e. reasons explaining why some act or response promotes conformity with a rule. Of course, I do not deny the existence of such explanatory reasons. As such, however, those explanatory reasons do not in any sense recommend or favour actions promoting conformity more than they recommend actions promoting violation. Even if institutional reasons are eventually understood as being grounded in explanatory reasons of the mentioned sort, the claim that such reasons exist goes beyond the uncontroversial claim that such explanatory reasons exist; it involves the assumption of a rule-relative favouring relation.

<sup>37</sup> It is no coincidence that proponents of institutional reasons often contrast them with “real reasons”, see e.g. Joyce (2001, 40) and Woods (2018, 224).

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Olson (2011) and Streumer (2017).

reasons need not have sympathies with the revisionary implications of the error theory, and error theorists on the other hand might well have hoped to maintain the assumption that there are epistemic reasons by denying their normativity.

Needless to say, anti-normativists are free to *stipulate* an institutional notion of a ‘reason’, according to which the existence of a reason amounts to no more than the existence of some standard. But as I pointed out at the beginning of this section, stipulating such a notion is not enough to escape the implausible implications of nihilism. To avoid these implications, anti-normativists must maintain that the institutional notion is familiar from ordinary reasons discourse, and, in particular, that ordinary discourse about epistemic reasons can be understood as employing this notion. These assumptions need to be defended.

To anticipate, later sections include a number of arguments against understanding epistemic reasons as institutional reasons that are independent of my general doubts about institutional reasons, and which apply to other non-normative conceptions of epistemic reasons as well. But before I turn to these arguments, let me briefly recap this section.

#### *1.4 Summary and intermediate conclusion*

Starting from the argument from exhaustion, I’ve been going through a number of possible non-normative conceptions of epistemic reasons. The prospects of identifying epistemic reasons with motivating or explanatory reasons looked dim, and so I turned to the idea that epistemic reasons are a category of reasons *sui generis*, alongside the common categories of normative, explanatory and motivating reasons. Here I focused on two ideas: (i) that epistemic reasons are a distinct category of reasons that can be reduced to evidence, and (ii) that epistemic reasons can be understood as institutional reasons. The reduction to evidence faces problems with extensional adequacy and applicability to reasons of the right kind for attitudes other than beliefs. The institutional account seems to make epistemic reasons mere pseudo-reasons, thus collapsing anti-normativism into nihilism about epistemic reasons.

I cannot claim to have ruled out any possible anti-normativist conception of epistemic reasons here. Rather, my aim was to emphasize that anti-normativists face an important challenge – namely to clarify the non-normative notion of ‘reason’ that they see as operative in epistemic discourse – and to raise some difficulties in meeting it. In what follows, I will ignore such complications and proceed on the assumption that there is an unproblematic non-normative conception of epistemic reasons available. For there is an important consideration in favour of

normativism that is independent of any such problems: epistemic (and other right-kind) reasons and practical reasons just have too many things in common for it to be plausible that they belong to different categories of reasons. Each of the arguments to come highlights an analogy between the roles these reasons play in justifying, motivating and reasoning towards responses. In each case, the analogy is well explained by the view that these reasons belong to a common category, while it remains unexplained on a view that takes these reasons to belong to different categories. This, I think, provides considerable support for normativism.

## 2. THE ARGUMENT FROM JUSTIFICATION

Perhaps the most natural argument for the normativity of epistemic reasons is that epistemic reasons rationalize or justify beliefs. I will focus on justification here, but I assume that analogous considerations apply to the rationality of belief.<sup>39</sup> Consider:

1. If R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a reason that provides partial justification for believing p.
2. If R is a reason that provides partial justification for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .
3. Therefore, if R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a normative reason to believe p.

Let's start with premise (1). Is there a plausible way of denying that epistemic reasons justify beliefs? Sometimes philosophers speak of epistemic reasons as justifying or counting in favour of *propositions* rather than beliefs. Could anti-normativists avoid the argument from justification by rejecting (1) in favour of the assumption that epistemic reasons for believing p provide justification *for p* rather than for believing p? It is difficult to see what is meant by saying that a proposition is justified if not that there is justification for *believing* that proposition. The distinction between so-called propositional and doxastic justification is one between justification that *one has* for a type of belief (no matter whether one holds a belief of that type or not), on the one hand, and on the other hand the justification of a token belief in terms of how this belief is based. Talk of 'justification for

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<sup>39</sup> Some authors deny that the rationality of belief has anything to do with epistemic reasons, but is a matter of satisfying certain coherence norms only (see e.g. Broome 2013; forthcoming; for the contrary view, see e.g. Kiesewetter 2017; forthcoming-b; Lord 2018). One reason to focus on justification is that it allows us to steer clear of this controversy.



p' is thus best understood as either referring to the justification one has for a belief of the type 'belief that p', or otherwise referring not to justification at all, but to evidential or probability relations between propositions that in turn can *provide* justification for beliefs. There is no need for the assumption that justification applies directly to propositions.

Taking into account the distinction between evidential and justificatory relations, anti-normativists might feel that they should reject (1) in favour of the view that (a) epistemic reasons increase the probability of propositions, and (b) epistemic reasons provide justification for belief in these propositions only if further conditions, such as the conditions that having a true belief about the subject matter would promote desires or values, are satisfied.<sup>40</sup> But this is implausible. If you are obsessed with counting the number of blades of grass in your garden, you might end up with a justified belief (and hence also with justification to believe) that the number of blades on your lawn is even, but unless we assume that having true beliefs is, as such, a valuable or universally shared end, it doesn't follow that having a true belief about that matter promotes any value or desire.<sup>41</sup> If, by contrast, we assume that having true beliefs is a valuable or universally shared end, then (a) and (b) provide no reason for rejecting (1).

Premise (1), therefore, seems hard to challenge. Yet premise (2) is similarly plausible: How can one deny that justifying reasons are normative reasons? At this point, anti-normativists are likely to make what I will call the *subscripting move*. "We agree that epistemic reasons provide justification for beliefs", they will say. "But crucially, this is *epistemic* justification, and we deny that *epistemic* justification involves normative reasons. Assuming that *epistemically* justifying reasons are normative reasons just begs the question against our view!" To assess this move, let's consider the two ways of interpreting the argument from justification once we explicitly distinguish between epistemic justification and justification *simpliciter*:<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Rinard (2017), who argues that whether a belief in p has some normative status, including the status of being justified, is determined by the same criteria that determine whether an action has this normative status. She takes this to entail that the relevance of evidential support for the justification of a belief in p is contingent on such factors as whether "believing what the evidence supports concerning p is the best means to your ends" (2017, 125).

<sup>41</sup> Note that it is not part of the example that you desire to know the truth about the number of blades; you merely desire to *count* them.

<sup>42</sup> The point of the subscripting move does not depend on the notion of justification *simpliciter*; it might be spelled out in terms of the distinction between epistemic and practical justification instead.

*The argument from epistemic justification*

- 1.\* If R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>epistemic</sub> for believing p.
- 2.\* If R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>epistemic</sub> for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .
3. Therefore, if R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a normative reason to believe p.

*The argument from justification simpliciter*

- 1.\*\* If R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>simpliciter</sub> for believing p.
- 2.\*\* If R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>simpliciter</sub> for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .
3. Therefore, if R is an epistemic reason to believe p, then R is a normative reason to believe p.

The anti-normativist response to the argument from justification is to reject a reading of (1) according to which epistemic reasons justify *simpliciter* (1\*\*) in favour of a reading according to which epistemic reasons only justify epistemically (1\*), and to reject a reading of (2) according to which epistemically justifying reasons are normative (2\*) in favour of a reading according to which reasons that justify *simpliciter* are normative (2\*\*).<sup>43</sup> According to anti-normativists, neither of the two ways of spelling out the argument from justification is sound.

I think that both of the assumptions that the anti-normativist disputes can be supported, however. Consider (2)\* first. As it stands, the premise might seem to beg the question against the anti-normativist; an argument for normativism cannot simply start from the assumption that *epistemically* justifying reasons are normative reasons. It is worth noting, however, that (2)\* follows from a more general principle about domain-specific forms of justification:

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<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Mantel (2019) accepts that epistemic reasons bear on an epistemic ought, but denies that such reasons are “substantially normative” (215), because in her view they do not bear on the ought *simpliciter*.

*Justifying Reasons*: For any domain of justification  $\delta$ , if R is a reason that provides partial justification $\delta$  for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .

This principle is a generalization of principles applying to specific domains of justification that are in the present context uncontroversial.<sup>44</sup> If R is a reason that provides partial *prudential* justification for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ , for example. If R is a reason that provides partial *moral* justification, then it is also a normative reason. If reasons providing domain-specific justification in other domains are normative reasons, why isn't the same true for epistemic reasons?

A powerful response to this argument would be to provide an independent counterexample to *Justifying Reasons*. If normativists about epistemic reasons have to concede cases of domain-specific justification via non-normative reasons, this would indeed suggest that (2)\* is an *ad hoc* assumption that begs the question against the anti-normativist. A potential source for such examples are forms of justification that we might call *norm-relative* rather than *normative*, i.e. forms of justification that are internal to certain institutions or systems of rules.<sup>45</sup> Being justified in the normative sense is a matter of being supported by normative reasons, while being justified in the norm-relative sense is a matter of conformity with a particular norm, where this is understood independently of whether there are normative reasons to follow that norm. For example, an action might be said to be *legally justified* even if one lacks normative reasons to perform it, simply because it is permitted by the law.<sup>46</sup> Drawing on this distinction, anti-normativists might argue that reasons providing legal justification aren't necessarily normative reasons, but merely "institutional" or "legal" reasons.

But this reply is unconvincing. While it is plausible to think that there are forms of justification that are internal to institutions and relative to certain systems of rules, it isn't plausible to think that such forms of justification are constituted by reasons. What provides legal justification are laws, judicial decisions, and perhaps other entities of that sort. Those entities may well be relevantly connected to *normative* reasons. Laws undoubtedly provide prudential reasons for compliance when they are enforced through punishment. Perhaps just laws provide fairness-related

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<sup>44</sup> The point I am making here is ineffective against more radical forms of anti-normativism (which might be entailed by certain versions of a desire-based conception of normative reasons) that would also deny that moral or prudential reasons are normative rather than institutional reasons. However, the target of this paper is not error theory about all categorical normative reasons.

<sup>45</sup> See Hattiangadi (2007, Ch. 3) for the distinction between normativity and norm-relativity.

<sup>46</sup> Thanks to Pekka Väyrynen for drawing my attention to legal justification.

or other moral reasons for compliance.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps for something to be a law, it has to claim to provide an authority-based moral reason for compliance,<sup>48</sup> and perhaps to *accept* a law as valid is to *accept* this claim and thus see it as a moral reason.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps for something to be a law, it even has to *be* a moral reason for compliance, or provide moral justification for enforcement.<sup>50</sup> But to say that independently of any of these or other potential connections to *normative* reasons, laws as such constitute non-normative “legal” reasons, is to introduce a merely stipulative notion of a ‘reason’ that cannot be used in argument against *Justifying Reasons*.<sup>51</sup> The same point applies *mutatis mutandis* to other domains of justification that are merely institutional.<sup>52</sup>

Anti-normativists might of course reject *Justifying Reasons* because it is incompatible with their view about epistemic reasons. But as far as I can see, anti-normativists have no *independent* reason to reject *Justifying Reasons* – a principle that is well-motivated by generalizing from principles about other kinds of justification that are in the present context uncontroversial.

A similar point can be made about the argument from justification *simpliciter*. Recall that anti-normativists aim to block this argument by limiting the idea that epistemic reasons justify (1) to the claim that they justify epistemically (1\*) and reject the assumption that they justify *simpliciter* (1\*\*). This move requires the rejection of the following principle:

*Justification Link*: If R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>δ</sub> for φ-ing, then R is a reason that provides partial justification<sub>simpliciter</sub> for φ-ing.

But again, this principle seems well-motivated by generalizing from the role reasons play for other domain-specific forms of justification such as prudential or moral justification. A reason that provides partial prudential justification or partial moral justification thereby provides partial justification full stop. In virtue of being a prudentially or morally justifying reason, it contributes

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Rawls (1971, esp. §18 and §52).

<sup>48</sup> See e.g. Raz (1979, 30).

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Wolff (1970, 5).

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Dworkin (1986, 109).

<sup>51</sup> It is no reply to refer to the fact that people naturally can refer to the law as their reason for doing something (cf. Tiffany 2007, 237–39). Utterances of this sort can be interpreted as referring to *moral* reasons to comply with the law (for example, fairness-based or authority-based reasons), and so the cited fact does not support the existence of purely legal reasons.

<sup>52</sup> Some anti-normativists will deny that the purely formal notion of a ‘reason’ is stipulated, but the only arguments in favour of this view that I am aware of are those of Joyce that I have discussed and rejected above in Sec 1.3.

to the all-things-considered justification of an act. Generalizing from these cases yields the very assumption that is needed for the argument from justification *simpliciter* to go through.

To sum up, both versions of the argument from justification can be supported by general principles about justification that have correct implications for the uncontroversial cases. As I pointed out above already, this does not mean that anti-normativists are forced to accept these principles – they might instead apply *modus tollens* and reject *Justifying Reasons* and *Justification Link* because of their implications for epistemic reasons (and possibly other reasons of the right kind). They might well argue that the general reasons they take to speak against normativism outweigh the considerations of explanatory simplicity, generality and unity in the theory of justification that speak in favour of *Justifying Reasons* and *Justification Link*. But this does not affect the point that it is a cost for anti-normativism that it rules out these principles, and that normativism is preferable with regard to simplicity, generality and unity in the theory of justification.

### 3. THE ARGUMENT FROM GOOD REASONING

The next argument that I wish to consider builds on an intuitive connection between reasons and good reasoning:

1. If R is an epistemic reason to believe that p, then there is a pattern of good reasoning from the belief that R to the belief that p.
2. If there is a pattern of good reasoning from the belief that R to  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .<sup>53</sup>
3. Therefore, if R is an epistemic reason to believe that p, then R is a normative reason to believe that p.

To illustrate (1), suppose that the fact that the weather report says that it's going to rain is an epistemic reason to believe that it's going to rain. It then follows from (1) that reasoning from the

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<sup>53</sup> See e.g. Setiya (2014, 222) and Way (2017, 254). Way (2017) proposes to analyse the notion of a normative reason in terms of good reasoning. This involves the assumption that all normative reasons to  $\phi$  entail good patterns of reasoning to  $\phi$ -ing, which may be denied in case of reasons for actions (see e.g. Broome 2013, 250). One response consists in a defence of the claim, often ascribed to Aristotle, that actions can be conclusions of reasoning (see e.g. Dancy 2018). Another reply is that reasons for action can be analysed as reasons for intentions (see e.g. McHugh and Way forthcoming). In any case, in contrast to Way's view, my assumption does not entail that all normative reasons correspond to good patterns of reasoning.

belief that the weather report says that it's going to rain to the belief that it's going to rain is good reasoning, or instantiates a good pattern of reasoning. This seems plausible as long as we assume that patterns of good reasoning can be defeasible.<sup>54</sup>

A worry about (1) is that there might be evidence for  $p$ , and thus epistemic reason to believe  $p$ , that is too weak in order to ever be on its own sufficient to justify a belief in  $p$ . It is doubtful that such reasons correspond to even a *defeasibly* good pattern of reasoning, since the relevant reasoning seems bad even in the absence of defeaters. For example, the fact that this  $X$  is  $F$  might well increase the probability of, and thus provide evidence for, the proposition that all  $X$  are  $F$ , but reasoning from 'This  $X$  is  $F$ ' to 'All  $X$  are  $F$ ' seems bad reasoning even in the absence of defeaters. In response, proponents of (1) might either challenge the assumption that evidence that is insufficient even in the absence of defeaters provides an epistemic reason. Or they might insist that the relevant reasoning is good *to some extent*, and maintain that the relevant defeater in such cases is a higher-order fact about the insufficient weight of the evidence rather than a first-order fact that constitutes contrary evidence. Instead of discussing the merits and demerits of these responses, however, I will suggest that the problem can be circumvented by focusing on *sufficient* epistemic reasons (i.e. reasons sufficient for epistemic justification):

- 1.\* If  $R$  is a *sufficient* epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ , then there is a pattern of good reasoning from the belief that  $R$  to the belief that  $p$ .
2. If there is a pattern of good reasoning from the belief that  $R$  to  $\phi$ -ing, then  $R$  is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .
- 3.\* Therefore, *sufficient* epistemic reasons are normative reasons.
4. If sufficient epistemic reasons are normative, then insufficient epistemic reasons are normative as well.
5. Therefore, epistemic reasons are normative.

The argument requires an additional premise (4), but that premise is both plausible and dialectically unproblematic. It is plausible because it seems clear that insufficient epistemic reasons are intrinsically the sort of things that can combine to become sufficient epistemic reasons. And it is

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<sup>54</sup> See Way (2017, 262–63).

dialectically unproblematic, because the dispute between the anti-normativist and the normativist does not concern the distinction between insufficient and sufficient epistemic reasons.

Thus, I take it that anti-normativists need to deny (2). To illustrate (2), suppose that there is a good pattern of reasoning from the belief that A needs help to the intention to help A. It then follows from (2) that the fact that A needs help is a normative reason for intending to help A. This seems plausible, as far as it goes. The sceptics will maintain, however, that in order for R to be a premise of a pattern of good reasoning *to a belief*, R need not be a normative reason but merely an epistemic reason for a belief. At this point, however, anti-normativists face the challenge to explain the similarity between epistemic reasons and other reasons. If the existence of a good pattern of reasoning to an intention entails normative reasons for intentions, then why doesn't a good pattern of reasoning to a belief entail a normative reason for a belief? In light of the analogous relation to patterns of good reasoning, the assumption that epistemic reasons for belief and, for example, normative reasons for intentions do not belong to a common category of reasons does not seem well motivated.

Anti-normativists might reply that considerations about formal standards or institutions can be premises of patterns of good reasoning and thus constitute counterexamples to (2).<sup>55</sup> Supposing that C is a consideration of chess strategy, which explains why making a certain move M would be conducive to winning, it is tempting to think that there is a pattern of good reasoning from C to the intention to M. But it does not seem right that C is a normative reason to intend to M, at least not unless we assume the presence of an independent reason to play chess (or to play chess with the intention to win). If this is right, then (2) must be qualified: premises of good reasoning patterns might only constitute *hypothetically* normative reasons – reasons whose normativity depends on the existence of a further normative reason to follow a certain standard. The only conclusion that this modified argument would license is that epistemic reasons are hypothetically normative, and this is a conclusion that anti-normativists can happily accept.

But we should deny that the pattern from the belief that C to the intention to M is a good one whenever C explains why M-ing is conducive to winning. If we specify the context as one in which there is no reason to play chess, it is no longer plausible to think that forming intentions to move chess figures on the basis of chess-strategic considerations is good reasoning, or that someone

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<sup>55</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this reply.

who reasons in this way reasons well.<sup>56</sup> The “chess pattern” thus cannot be counted as a pattern of good reasoning without further qualification.<sup>57</sup> In this respect, it *contrasts* with patterns that correspond to epistemic reason relations. Supposing that R is a (sufficient) epistemic reason to believe p, our judgement that reasoning from the belief that R to the belief that p is good reasoning remains *entirely unaffected* by specifying the context as one in which we lack certain other reasons, including contexts in which we lack a reason to form a belief about p. In such contexts, we might well think that it is not a good idea to *engage in reasoning*, but this does not change the fact that the reasoning is good *as* reasoning. Epistemic reasons stand in the same relation to good reasoning as other normative reasons; they are like practical normative reasons in this regard and *unlike* standard-relative considerations that are merely hypothetically normative.

#### 4. THE ARGUMENT FROM GOOD BASING

The argument from good reasoning appears successful if one accepts that premises of good reasoning to intentions constitute normative reasons for these intentions, or if one accepts that reasoning can conclude in actions, and the premises of such reasoning are reasons. These are the independent cases for the argument’s core assumption that premises of good reasoning are reasons (2). But anti-normativists might also adopt a more radical view that denies these assumptions. They might hold that reasons that correspond to patterns of reasoning are *all* right-kind reasons for attitudes, *none* of which are normative. According to this view, normative reasons for *action* can figure as premises in good reasoning to *intentions*, but in this function, they are right-kind reasons for intention rather than normative reasons. As normative reasons, they are reasons for action, and reasons for action in turn aren’t premises of reasoning, since there simply is no such thing as reasoning to an act. Although controversial (with respect to the assumption that one cannot reason to actions)<sup>58</sup> and perhaps counterintuitive (with respect to the assumption that normative reasons for actions are not normative reasons for intention), this seems a possible way to escape the

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<sup>56</sup> See Thomson (2008, 90) for a similar point. Some might want to insist that it is still good *chess* reasoning, although it strikes me as more plausible to conceive of good chess reasoning as a kind of *theoretical* reasoning that concludes in beliefs about what chess moves are strategically advantageous (rather than concluding in intentions to make certain moves, even in cases in which there is no reason to play chess). In any case, the argument was formulated in terms of good reasoning *simpliciter*, not good reasoning relative to a standard or kind. And with respect to good reasoning *simpliciter*, the example provided does not cast doubt on the soundness of (2) or any other premise of the argument.

<sup>57</sup> Note that this is not because it is *defeasible* (defeasibly good patterns may well be counted as good without further qualifications), but because it is *conditional* on factors that do not obtain.

<sup>58</sup> See Dancy (2018) for a recent defence of the view (often ascribed to Aristotle) that reasoning can conclude in action.



argument from reasoning. There is, however, a similar argument that cannot be escaped in this way. Consider:

1. If R is an epistemic reason to believe that p, then R would be a good basis (or a good motivating reason) for the belief that p.
2. If R would be a good basis (or a good motivating reason) for  $\phi$ -ing, then R is a normative reason to  $\phi$ .<sup>59</sup>
3. Therefore, if R is an epistemic reason to believe that p, then R is a normative reason to believe that p.

This argument resembles the argument from good reasoning, but it focuses on the notion of a basis or motivating reason rather than the notion of a premise in reasoning. Premise (1) faces worries about insufficient reasons similar to those discussed above: are outweighed epistemic reasons or reasons that are insufficient even in the absence of defeaters still good bases? It's not clear to me that one should deny that they are good *to some extent*: they are, after all, better bases than facts that do not increase the probability of what is believed at all, and that is true not merely in virtue of the fact that they are less bad than other bases (as probability-neutral facts might be argued to be better bases than probability-decreasing facts).<sup>60</sup> But for those who reject the claim that insufficient epistemic reasons can be genuinely good bases, a version of an argument in terms of *sufficient* reasons analogous to the one presented above is available.

Once we allow insufficient reasons to be good bases *to some extent*, or alternatively restrict (1) to sufficient reasons, it is difficult to see how that premise could reasonably be denied. Anti-normativists thus seem committed to denying (2). However, the strategy outlined above will not work for rejecting this premise. Even if there cannot be reasoning to actions, certainly actions can be based on reasons, or done for reasons. If the consideration for which someone acted is a good basis or good motivating reason, it seems to follow that it is a normative reason for the action.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See esp. Gregory (2016), who proposes to analyse the notion of a normative reason in terms of a good basis. Some will find it more natural to explain what a good basis or a good motivating reason is in terms of normative reasons, which is not open to Gregory. In contrast, my assumption is neutral with respect to the relative priority of normative reasons and good bases.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Gregory (2016, 2295–96).

<sup>61</sup> If one allows that considerations can be good motivating reasons without being true, premise (2) needs to be qualified in order to preserve the factivity of normative reasons. This does not affect the validity or soundness of the argument, however. We can simply add the proposition that R is the case to the consequent of (1) and the antecedent of (2).

Anti-normativists thus face the challenge to explain the asymmetry: if good bases for actions are normative reasons for action, why aren't good bases for beliefs normative reasons for beliefs? Moreover, the argument exhibits a structural analogy between normative practical reasons and epistemic reasons; both are linked in analogous ways to good basing. This speaks against the idea that these reasons belong to different categories of reasons.

#### 5. THE ARGUMENT FROM $\phi$ -ING FOR A REASON

The connection between normative and motivating reasons provides another argument for the normativity of epistemic reasons:

1. Necessarily,  $\phi$ -ing for the reason that R involves taking R to be a normative reason to  $\phi$ .
2. Assume that (i) A believes p for the reason that R; (ii) R is an epistemic reason, and not additionally a non-epistemic reason, for A to believe p; (iii) A is not mistaken.
3. A takes R to be a normative reason to believe p (from 1 and 2.i).
4. Assume for *reductio*: Epistemic reasons aren't normative reasons.
5. A is mistaken (from 2.ii, 3 and 4).
6. Therefore, epistemic reasons are normative reasons (*reductio* of 4, contradiction between 2.iii and 5).

'Taking' R to be a normative reason is sometimes construed as believing R to be a normative reason and sometimes as a different, perhaps weaker, attitude or disposition.<sup>62</sup> For the argument from  $\phi$ -ing for a reason to go through, there need only be one notion of 'taking' in which (1) is true – at least as long as this notion allows us to say that a person who takes R to be a normative reason if in fact it is no such reason is mistaken in some way.

The argument can, of course, be blocked by assuming that (2) is impossible. This, however, seems untenable. Surely it's possible to believe something for the reason that R without being mistaken and without R being a non-epistemic reason. Anti-normativists are thus committed to denying (1). There are two ways of doing this: they might either claim that not even *acting* for a reason involves taking oneself to have normative reason for the action, or they might accept this as

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<sup>62</sup> See Boghossian (2014) for discussion.

a truth about acting for reasons while denying it with respect to believing for a reason. Let's consider these options in turn.

That acting for a reason involves taking oneself to have a normative reason is a standard assumption in the literature.<sup>63</sup> This is no coincidence. Acting for a reason involves being guided by a reason, and it is difficult to see how a reason could guide action unless the agent takes that reason to count in favour of her action. So let us consider why one might deny that condition. For one, isn't it possible to act for a reason even if one explicitly believes that it's not a normative reason? For example, perhaps you've been told for a long time that the fact that things have always been done this way is a reason for doing things this way, but you've come to believe that it actually isn't. Notwithstanding your belief, you sometimes find yourself doing things for the reason that it has always been done in this way. This is not a counterexample to (1). You believe that the fact that it has always been done this way does not count in favour of the action, but it does not follow that you don't take it to be a normative reason. More plausibly, insofar as you find yourself acting for that reason, you also find yourself taking it to be a normative reason, despite your belief that it isn't.

For another, isn't it possible, for example for young children, to act for reasons without having the concept of a 'normative reason'? In response to this overintellectualization worry, two points are in order. The first is that it isn't clear that it really is possible to act for reasons without possessing the concept of a 'normative reason'. It is natural to think that in order to act for reasons, you must have the conceptual resources to understand and answer requests for justification of the form "Why did you do A?" – if only in a very basic way, in which three-year-olds can answer such questions ("in order to get G"). But if you have the conceptual resources to understand such requests, you arguably have the concept of a normative reason.<sup>64</sup> Even if you do not express your beliefs by using the term 'reason', others can correctly ascribe to you beliefs about normative reasons, such as the belief that the fact that doing A helps to attain G is a reason to A. So I don't see why a theory of acting for reasons should not require possession of the concept of a normative reason.

However, suppose that it is possible to act for reasons without possessing this concept. In this case, acting for reasons need not involve taking something to be a normative reason, if 'taking' is construed as a belief or other propositional attitude the content of which contains the concept of a 'reason'. But it still doesn't follow – and this is the second point – that acting for reasons does not

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<sup>63</sup> See e.g. Scanlon (1998, 19); Thomson (2008, 161); Raz (2009a, 26–35); Alvarez (2010, 35); Enoch (2011, 225–26); Leary (2017, 535); Singh (2019).

<sup>64</sup> See Müller (2019, 6) for this point. A similar response to overintellectualization worries is defended by Singh (2019, 424–25).

involve taking something to be a normative reason in a weaker sense. Generally speaking, taking some X to have property P does not require possession of the concept of 'P'. Taking X to have P might simply amount to the disposition to treat X as if it had P, and one might have this disposition without having the concept of 'P'. For example, young children can take some utterance to mean something without having the concept of 'meaning'.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, they could take some consideration to be a normative reason for an action without having the concept of a 'normative reason'. For the argument from  $\phi$ -ing for a reason to go through, it is sufficient to maintain a version of (1) that employs a weak notion of 'taking', which does not require concept possession.

Once we take into account that taking something to be a normative reason is perfectly compatible with believing it not to be a normative reason and need not even be understood as involving possession of the concept of a 'normative reason', rejection of the assumption that acting for a reason R involves taking R to be a normative reason seems unmotivated. But could anti-normativists about epistemic reasons accept this claim about action and deny it with respect to belief? Again, believing for a reason involves being guided by that reason, and it is difficult to see how this is possible without the agent's taking it to be a normative reason. 'Why a *normative* reason?' the anti-normativist might ask. 'Why not merely assume that believing for (epistemic) reasons involves taking oneself to have an *epistemic* reason?'

Let's grant for the sake of the argument that there is an intelligible non-normative notion of an epistemic reason that could play this role, despite the worries discussed above. What the mentioned proposal fails to capture is that ' $\phi$ -ing for a reason' is a *unitary phenomenon*; that there is something that acting for a reason and believing for a reason have in common. This makes good sense on the standard, normativist picture, according to which practical and epistemic reasons are different kinds of a common species of reasons. Normativists can say that acting for a reason and believing for a reason both involve an explanation of a response in terms of the agent's taking herself to have normative reason for her response. On the anti-normativist picture, in contrast, the parallel between acting and believing for a reason looks more like a linguistic coincidence – a conjuncture that is due to the fact that we happen to use the term 'reason' to refer to quite different things.

Moreover, even if there was a way of unifying the ideas of taking something to be a normative reason and taking something to be a reason in some non-normative sense that would diminish this worry about coincident parallels, there is a further and deeper problem with the proposal at issue.

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<sup>65</sup> I owe this observation to Anders Nes.

Explanations in terms of the ‘ $\phi$ -ing for a reason’ locution serve to make responses intelligible (to some extent) by citing the considerations in light of which a person gave a response.<sup>66</sup> It seems clear how my believing R can serve to make my  $\phi$ -ing intelligible on the assumption that I take R to be a normative reason for  $\phi$ -ing. But it isn’t clear how this could be so if I take p to be a reason in some non-normative sense. For example, if we take it as given in a certain context that there is no normative reason to follow some formal standard, then citing my belief that an action is conducive to conforming to that standard does not seem to make it intelligible that I perform this action. But it seems that if I can truly be said to believe p for the reason that R, then my believing that R should make it intelligible that I believe that p. Since taking R to be a reason in some non-normative sense does not seem to explain why my believing R makes my believing p intelligible, it is difficult to see how an account of ‘believing for a reason’ that appeals to ‘taking R to be a reason’ in some *non-normative* sense of ‘reason’ could do justice to this important dimension of intelligibility.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In recent meta-normative and meta-epistemological debates, the view that epistemic reasons are normative reasons has come under attack. In this article, I have tried to clarify this anti-normativist position, and to put pressure on it. I will conclude by summarizing what I take to be the most important results. I have started by distinguishing anti-normativism from nihilism about epistemic reasons. Nihilism – the denial of the existence of epistemic reasons – has extremely revisionary implications, and it is a great advantage of anti-normativism that it can avoid these implications. But this advantage comes with the challenge of needing to elucidate the non-normative notion of a ‘reason’ that anti-normativists see as operative in discourse about epistemic reasons, and in Section 1, I have argued that this challenge is not easily met. Firstly, epistemic reasons aren’t merely motivating or explanatory reasons, and so anti-normativists are committed to the view that alongside normative, explanatory and motivating reasons, there is a further *sui generis* category of reasons. Secondly, different proposals to elucidate this further category face different problems and challenges. The view that epistemic reasons are evidence faces extensional worries and cannot be generalized to other reasons of the right kind. The view that epistemic reasons are institutional

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<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Dancy (2014, 95); Singh (2019, 421–23).

reasons does not seem to vindicate ordinary discourse about epistemic reasons and thus collapses into nihilism.

In Sections 2–5, I have then presented four arguments for the normativity of epistemic reasons, each of which highlighted an analogy between epistemic reasons and reasons that seem (in the present context) uncontroversially normative: just like practical normative reasons, epistemic reasons (i) provide partial *justification* for the responses they are reasons for; they (ii) constitute *premises for good reasoning* and (iii) are *good bases* for adopting these responses; relatedly, they (iv) can be the reasons *for which* agents give the response without thereby making any kind of mistake. In each case, I have argued that the condition in question is plausibly regarded as a sufficient condition for a reason's normativity.

The arguments presented in Sections 2–5 can be seen as sharing the following general form:

1. Epistemic reasons have property P.
2. Reasons that have property P are normative.
3. Therefore, epistemic reasons are normative.<sup>67</sup>

Conditions (i)–(iv) can be understood as instances of having property P. In each case, we have seen that anti-normativists have to deny the second premise: they have to deny that being a reason that provides justification, constitutes a premise of good reasoning or good basis, or that can be acted upon without mistake is a sufficient condition for being a normative reason. But this raises two important problems. The first is that the relevant conditions are sufficient for normativity in the case of *practical* reasons.<sup>68</sup> Anti-normativists thus owe us an explanation of why the same does not hold in the case of epistemic reasons. Secondly, the relevant property constitutes a significant analogy between (normative) practical reasons and epistemic reasons. This analogy is well-explained by normativism, which holds that both kinds of reasons are members of a common class, but it remains unexplained by anti-normativism, which denies this.

The arguments presented in this article are compatible with there being strong independent reasons for rejecting normativism, and these reasons may force us to accept that there is considerably less unity and generality in the theory of reasons than what is suggested by the various

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<sup>67</sup> This is least obvious in the case of the argument from  $\phi$ -ing for a reason, but this argument can also be reconstructed in the suggested way, by substituting 'being a reason for which one can give the response without thereby making a mistake' for 'having property P'.

<sup>68</sup> A possible exception is the condition on reasoning; see the discussion in §4.

analogies between them. This is why these arguments do not conclusively show that anti-normativism is false. What I take these arguments to show, however, is that far from being “unsupported” (Glüer and Wikforss 2018, 576), normativism’s status as the default view about epistemic reasons is in fact well-deserved. We need compelling reasons for rejecting the excellent explanation that normativism provides for the various analogies between normative practical reasons and epistemic reasons (as well as other right-kind reasons for attitudes). In the absence of such compelling reasons, it is most reasonable to believe that epistemic reasons are normative.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Earlier versions of this paper have been presented at the *Ethics of Mind* conference at FAU Erlangen (2017); the GAP.10 at the University of Cologne (2018); the *Norms and Reasons* conference at the University of Zurich (2018); the *Normativity and Reasoning* workshop at NYU Abu Dhabi (2019); the *Dimensions of Rationality* workshop at Goethe University Frankfurt (2019); as well as philosophical colloquia at HU Berlin (2018) and TU Dresden (2021). I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me and the participants for their feedback. In addition, I am very grateful to two anonymous referees for *Noûs*, Alexander Dinges, Philip Fox, Roman Heil, Felix Koch, Barry Maguire, Susanne Mantel, Tristram McPherson, Sebastián Sánchez Martínez, Sebastian Schmidt, Thomas Schmidt, Moritz Schulz, Jonathan Way, and, most of all, to Jack Woods for written comments and/or extensive discussion of earlier drafts. Work on this article was supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) through the projects *Principles of the Deliberative Ought* (project no. 275667980) and *Knowledge and Decision* (project no. SCHU-3080/3-2).

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