Practical Conflicts as a Problem for Epistemic Reductionism About Practical Reasons

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Abstract: According to epistemic reductionism about practical reasons, facts about practical reasons can be reduced to facts about evidence for ought-judgements. We argue that this view misconstrues practical conflicts. At least some conflicts between practical reasons put us in a position to know that an action ϕ is *optional*, i.e. that we neither ought to perform nor ought to refrain from performing the action. By understanding conflicts of practical reasons as conflicts of evidence about what one ought to do, epistemic reductionism fails to account for this. In conflict cases in which ϕ-ing is optional, epistemic reductionism suggests that we have equally strong evidence for and against assuming that we ought to ϕ, and thus cannot be in a position to know that it is not the case that we ought to ϕ. This is a serious flaw.

I.

Although the notion of a practical reason can intuitively and somewhat helpfully be paraphrased as 'something that counts in favour of an action', it is natural to ask whether a more informative and substantial analysis can be given. A recent proposal, which has been suggested independently by Stephen Kearns and Daniel Star (2008; 2009) and Judith Jarvis Thomson (2008: Ch. 9), holds that facts (or propositions) about reasons can be reduced to facts (or propositions) about evidence for ought-judgements. We will refer to this view as *epistemic reductionism about practical reasons* (ER, for short):

(ER)   For R to be a reason for A to ϕ is for R to be evidence that A ought to ϕ.[1]

A number of considerations make ER attractive. ER constitutes an informative analysis, which can be applied to both practical and epistemic reasons and is thus well-situated to account for the unity of normative reasons. It is also in a good position to explain several plausible features of reasons, such as the fact that reasons figure as premises in reasoning about what ought to be done, or the fact that reasons come with different strengths.[2]

But ER is not without problems. A number of authors have presented counterexamples that are meant to show that ER is extensionally inadequate. For example, there can be evidence that one ought to ϕ even if in fact one cannot ϕ, and thus ER entails reasons for actions that one cannot perform. Further, in some circumstances the fact that one can ϕ, or the fact that one has no reason not to ϕ, or the fact that a reliable person has testified that one ought to ϕ, can be evidence that one ought to ϕ; ER entails that these would then be *reasons* to ϕ, which seems questionable.[3] Proponents of ER typically respond by arguing that the implications should be accepted on reflection. Opponents to ER insist that these implications are counterintuitive, while proponents maintain that intuitions about which facts are and are not reasons are not reliable enough to settle the issue.[4]

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[1] See esp. Thomson (2008: 146). Kearns and Star's discussion focuses on the biconditional "X is a reason for an agent N to F if and only if (iff) X is evidence that N ought to F" (Kearns & Star 2008, 37), which is entailed by, but weaker than, ER. However, elsewhere they make clear that this focus is for merely strategic reasons, and that they also believe that "the property of being a reason and the property of being evidence of an ought are identical" (2009: 219). Kearns and Star extend their analysis to reasons for beliefs, and Thomson (2008: Ch. 8) provides a reductive account of reasons for mental states in the same spirit of ER. In this article, however, we are only concerned with epistemic reductionism about reasons for actions and omissions.

[2] For these and other points, see esp. Kearns and Star (2009).

[3] For discussion of these and other counterexamples, see e.g. Broome (2008), Brunero (2009; 2018), McNaughton and Rawling (2011), McKeever and Ridge (2012), Fletcher (2013), McBride (2013); Littlejohn (2016); Kiesewetter (2017: 187–9); and Schmidt (2017). For some responses, see Kearns and Star (2011; 2013a; 2013b) and Star (2015; 2016; 2018: 7–8).

[4] See esp. Star (2018: 7).

While we agree with the opponents that ER is vulnerable to counterexamples, we hope to advance the debate by presenting a different kind of objection to ER, which does not rely on intuitions about which facts are reasons and which aren't. We will argue that ER misconstrues an important class of practical conflicts. The core idea that we pursue in this article is the following: There are conflicts between practical reasons that put us in a position to know that an action ϕ is *optional*, i.e. that we neither ought to perform nor ought to refrain from performing the action. By understanding conflicts of practical reasons as conflicts of evidence about what one ought to do, ER fails to account for this. In conflict cases in which ϕ-ing is optional, ER suggests that we have equally strong evidence for and against assuming that we ought to ϕ, and thus cannot be in a position to know that it is not the case that we ought to ϕ. This is a serious flaw, and one that exists independently of whether or not ER is extensionally adequate.[5]

We start, in Section II, by defining the kind of practical conflict we are concerned with and by pointing out that agents are typically (if not necessarily) in a position to know that acting in such cases is optional for them. In Section III, we present an argument to the effect that ER entails that we are *never* in a position to know that acting is optional in such cases, a conclusion that we take to provide a *reductio* of ER. In Section IV, we consider what seems to us the only available escape route for proponents of ER. We argue that taking this route incurs a major challenge for ER that has not been addressed or even acknowledged by proponents of this view, and show that there are reasons to be skeptical that this challenge can be met. Finally, in Section

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[5] Note that even though it also builds on practical conflicts, our objection is very different from the one that Kearns and Star (2009: 238–9) ascribe to Ralph Wedgwood, and which employs Buridan's ass as a counterexample to ER. According to Wedgwood's objection, ER falsely entails that for each pile of hay, there is evidence that the ass ought to eat it. Like Kearns and Star, we think that this implication can be defended by emphasizing the fact that evidence is defeasible. Our objection does not dispute this implication and thus cannot be rejected in this way. Rather, what we dispute (and argue to be implied by ER) is that Buridan's ass cannot be in the position to know that eating a specific pile of hay is optional.

V we discuss the possibility of modifying ER in terms of evidence for permissibility-judgements rather than ought-judgements, and argue that this view is in no better position to account for practical conflicts.

II.

Let us begin by defining the kind of practical conflict we are concerned with. We will call a situation that satisfies the following four criteria a *symmetrical practical conflict:*

(1)   P is a reason for agent A to perform action φ.

(2)   Q is a reason for A to not-φ.

(3)   None of these reasons is stronger than the other.

(4)   There are no other reasons for A to φ or to not-φ (or to take any relevant alternative option).

It strikes us as plausible to assume that in all symmetrical practical conflicts, φ-ing is *optional,* by which we mean that it is neither the case that A ought to φ, nor that A ought to not-φ. This assumption rules out the view that symmetrical practical conflicts can give rise to tragic deontic dilemmas, i.e. situations in which A ought to φ and A ought to not-φ. We find it indeed hard to accept that such dilemmas are possible, especially given that the notion of 'ought' that ER is concerned with is not the moral 'ought', but the all-things-considered 'ought'. Even proponents of tragic *moral* dilemmas usually accept that there cannot be such dilemmas on the level of the all-things-considered 'ought'.[6] However, to avoid unnecessary controversy, we will only consider

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[6] Compare Williams (1965: 123–24). For a recent argument against such deontic dilemmas, see Kiesewetter (2015; 2018).

cases of symmetrical practical conflicts that are *non-tragic* and satisfy the following additional condition:

(5)   It is not the case that [A ought to ϕ and A ought to not-ϕ].

This is an innocuous assumption, since even if *some* symmetrical conflicts give rise to tragic dilemmas, clearly *not all of them* do. All cases that satisfy conditions (1)-(5), then, are uncontroversially cases in which ϕ-ing is optional:

Optionality: Necessarily, if (1)–(5) hold true, then ϕ-ing is optional for A.

Next, let us assume that conditions (1)-(5) are *transparent* to A and that A has no further relevant evidence:

(6)   A knows (1)-(5).

(7)   Besides the evidence entailed by (1)-(5), A has no further evidence that bears on whether or not ϕ-ing is optional for A.

It seems plausible to conclude that in such a *transparent non-tragic symmetrical* practical conflict, not only is ϕ-ing optional for A, but A is also in a *position to know* that ϕ-ing is optional. We thus hold:

Transparent Optionality: Necessarily, if (1)-(7) hold true, then A is in a position to know that ϕ-ing is optional.

Transparent Optionality strikes us as plausible because the conditions (1)-(5) not only guarantee that ɸ-ing is optional, but do so in a way that is particularly obvious or self-evident. However, it is worth mentioning that our core argument against ER only assumes that agents are *typically* or at least *sometimes* in a position to know that ɸ-ing is optional if (1)-(7) hold true. This assumption seems to us uncontentious.

To illustrate this point, consider an example. Anna has pre-ordered a menu for a business dinner, which involves tiramisu for dessert. Arriving at the restaurant, she learns that upon request, the restaurant is happy to serve chocolate mousse instead of the tiramisu. The prospect of a delicious chocolate mousse provides a reason to swap the dessert, but the prospect of a delicious tiramisu provides a reason not to swap the dessert. Based on her experience (she has previously tried both of these desserts in that restaurant and enjoyed each of their distinctive flavours), Anna concludes that neither of these reasons is stronger than the other. Assuming that this belief amounts to knowledge, and assuming that Anna also knows that there are no other relevant considerations in play, it seems compelling to think that she is in a position to know that swapping the dessert is optional for her, i.e. that it is neither the case that she ought to do it, nor that she ought to refrain from doing it. At the very least, the assumptions we have made about Anna should not rule out that she is in a position to know that swapping the desserts is optional.

III.

We now present an argument to the effect that ER is incompatible with this assumption. Together with ER, conditions (1)-(5) entail:

(1*)   P is evidence that A ought to ɸ (from ER and 1).

(2*)   Q is evidence that A ought to not-ϕ (from ER and 2).

(3*)   None of these pieces of evidence P and Q is stronger than the other (from ER and 3).[7]

(4*)   There is no further evidence that A ought to ϕ, or that A ought to not-ϕ (or that A ought to take any relevant alternative option) (from ER and 4).

(5*)   It is not the case that [A ought to ϕ and A ought to not-ϕ] (=5).

In addition, we will stipulate:

(6*)   A knows that (1*)-(5*) are the case (assumption).

Since "know" generates a hyperintensional context, (6*) does not follow from condition (6) under the assumption that ER is true. Therefore, we do not assume that proponents of ER are committed to (6*) being true in *all* transparent non-tragic symmetrical practical conflicts. We here merely assume that (6*) is satisfied in *some* such conflicts, given that ER is true. This assumption should be granted by proponents of ER: If reasons can be reduced to evidence in the way suggested by ER, it is difficult to see why it should be impossible to know what ER implies in symmetrical practical conflicts.

Finally, ER and (7) entail:

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[7] As introduced above, ER does not, strictly speaking, involve claims about the *strength* of reasons and evidence, but it seems clear that if reasons can be reduced to evidence in the way that ER suggests, the strength of reasons corresponds to the strength of evidence. Kearns and Star are explicit about this: "the strength of a reason to ϕ, R, depends on the degree to which R increases the probability that one ought to ϕ" (2009: 232).

(7*)   Besides the evidence entailed by (1*)-(5*), A has no further evidence that bears on whether or not ɸ-ing is optional for A (from ER and 7).

This follows because (7) excludes all relevant evidence that is not entailed by (1)-(5), and according to ER, (1)-(5) cannot contain any more information than (1*)-(5*).

These assumptions seem to rule out *Transparent Optionality*. The only relevant evidence entailed by (1*)–(5*) is the evidence for 'A ought to ɸ' and 'A ought to not-ɸ', none of which is more strongly supported than the other. An agent with this body of evidence is not in a position to know that ɸ-ing is optional; rather, she has to suspend judgement about this question.

To see this, note that in order to be in a position to know that ɸ-ing is optional, A must be in a position to know that 'It is not the case that A ought to ɸ'. And in order to be in a position to know this proposition, it must be more strongly supported by the evidence than the contradictory proposition 'A ought to ɸ'. (This is a consequence of the general fact that one is in a position to know a proposition only if this proposition is more strongly supported by the evidence than its contradiction.) Now, (1*)–(5*) mention no direct evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ɸ' (¬Oɸ), but only for 'A ought to ɸ' (Oɸ) and 'A ought to not-ɸ' (O̶ɸ). Of course, given that Oɸ and O̶ɸ are known to be mutually exclusive (as implied by [5*]–[6*]), the evidence for O̶ɸ also supports ¬Oɸ. But since the evidence for O̶ɸ is not stronger than the evidence for Oɸ, we do not get *stronger* evidence for ¬Oɸ than for Oɸ, even if we assume that the evidence for O̶ɸ transmits with equal strength to ¬Oɸ. Thus, A cannot be in a position to know ¬Oɸ.

One might try to escape this conclusion by assuming that evidence in support of O̶ɸ necessarily provides *even stronger* support for ¬Oɸ. But this assumption is false. If we grant (for

the sake of the argument) that Oφ is logically or metaphysically stronger than ¬Oφ, it follows from standard assumptions about evidential probability that the latter proposition must be at least as likely as the former. But it does not follow that it must be *more* likely. If the only evidence for the weaker assumption is the evidence for the stronger assumption and there is no independent evidence for the weaker assumption, the weaker assumption is no more likely than the stronger one. And we have stipulated, in (7), that there is no such independent evidence. The assumption that evidence for Oφ is even stronger evidence for ¬Oφ is thus not warranted for the cases under discussion.

We are led to conclude that agents are never in a position to know that an action is optional in a symmetrical practical conflict. This contradicts *Transparent Optionality,* or any weaker assumption according to which agents are at least sometimes in a position to know that an action is optional in a symmetrical practical conflict, which constitutes a *reductio* of epistemic reductionism.

IV.

Our argument against ER may be summarised as follows:

i. The only evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to φ' that is entailed by (1)*–(5)* is the evidence for 'A ought to not-φ'.

ii. Besides the evidence entailed by (1*)-(5*), A has no further evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to φ' (from 7*).

iii.   Therefore, A's evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ' is not stronger than A's evidence for 'A ought to not-ϕ' (from i and ii).[8]

iv.   A's evidence for 'A ought to not-ϕ' is not stronger than the evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' (from 1*-4*).

v.   Therefore, A's evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ' is not stronger than A's evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' (from iii and iv).

vi.   Therefore, A is not in a position to know that 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ' (from v).

This argument seems valid, and it contains only one potentially controversial premise, namely premise (i). Against this premise, proponents of ER might hold that while (1*)–(5*) do not *mention* any further evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ', they do themselves *constitute* evidence to this effect. In other words, they could seek to avoid our objection by appeal to the following assumption:

> *Evidence for optionality (EFO):* That the evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' and for 'A ought to not-ϕ' is equally strong (in a transparent, non-tragic case) constitutes sufficient evidence that ϕ-ing is optional for A.

As far as we can see, appealing to EFO (or a relevantly similar assumption) is the only way to avoid the conclusion that (1*)–(7*) rule out *Transparent Optionality*. This, however, raises an

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[8] The step from (i) and (ii) to (iii) is validated by the following background assumption: If A's only evidence for p is the evidence for p that is entailed by the set of conditions C, and the only evidence for p entailed by C is the evidence for q, then A's evidence for p is not stronger than A's evidence for q.

important challenge for proponents of ER. Typically, the fact that there is equally strong evidence for two incompatible propositions p and q does not constitute sufficient evidence that p and q are false. Hence, epistemic reductionists owe us an explanation of why this should be so in the particular case in which p is the proposition that A ought to ϕ and q is the proposition that A ought to not-ϕ (as stated by EFO). And it is difficult to see how epistemic reductionists could provide such an explanation.

This is not to say that EFO could not be explained. Perhaps equally strong evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' and 'A ought to not-ϕ' is evidence for equally strong reasons for ϕ-ing and not-ϕ-ing, and *therefore* also evidence that ϕ-ing is optional. But this explanation essentially appeals to the assumption that (at least in non-tragic cases) equally strong reasons for ϕ-ing and not-ϕ-ing entail that ϕ-ing is optional (i.e., *Optionality*). As reductionists about practical reasons, proponents of ER cannot take this assumption for granted but need to explain it in terms of evidence for ought-judgements. The explanation of EFO would thus rest on the assumption that (at least in non-tragic cases) equally strong evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' and 'A ought to not-ϕ' entails that ϕ-ing is optional. In other words, it would rest on:

Optionality*: Necessarily, if (1)*–(5)* hold true, then ϕ-ing is optional for A.

But *Optionality** is no less in need of an explanation than EFO itself, for it is clearly not generally true that equally strong evidence for two inconsistent propositions entails that both propositions are false.

The problem is that while those who reject ER can explain *Optionality* by appeal to the assumption that 'ought to ϕ' conceptually implies 'stronger reason to ϕ than to not-ϕ' (or some

relevantly similar conceptual truth)[9], nothing in the concepts of 'ought' or 'evidence' seems to lend itself to an explanation of either EFO or *Optionality**. Hence, it seems that in order to explain EFO and escape the argument presented here, epistemic reductionists have to appeal to *substantive assumptions* about the relation between 'oughts' and evidence for 'oughts'. In particular, they could appeal to the following principle:

> *Epistemic Access Principle (EAP):* A ought to ϕ only if A has sufficient evidence that she herself ought to ϕ.[10]

Since A lacks sufficient evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' as well as for 'A ought to not-ϕ' if she has equally strong evidence for each of these judgements (in a transparently non-tragic case), EAP provides an explanation of *Optionality** and thereby also of EFO.

One problem with this explanation is that the epistemic access principle at issue is highly controversial. For example, it is subject to widespread general worries about luminosity that have not yet been dispelled.[11] It is also worth mentioning that adopting EAP is inconsistent with views that the main proponents of ER – Kearns, Star and Thomson – have committed themselves to.[12]

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[9] That this conceptual nexus holds is suggested by both of the main competitors to ER: the view that 'ought' reduces to 'stronger reason' (Schroeder, 2007: 130) and the view that reasons reduce to factors that play a certain role in a weighing explanation of an ought-fact (Broome, 2004). The above-mentioned assumption is not available to proponents of deontic dilemmas, but these might instead appeal to the assumption that 'ought to ϕ' conceptually entails 'either stronger reason to ϕ, or ought to not-ϕ'.

[10] See Kiesewetter (2016) for an independent argument for EAP.

[11] See Dutant and Littlejohn (2018) for this line of criticism and Fassio (2019) for further critical discussion.

[12] Thomson's objectivist view of 'ought' (e.g. Thomson, 1983) has undergone some revisions (Thomson, 2008: 191–99), but is still inconsistent with EAP. Kearns and Star (2008: 52) reject the principle "If one ought to F, then one has evidence that one ought to F", which is weaker than EAP. (Note that Kearns and Star's acceptance of the similar-looking principle "If one ought to F, then there is evidence that one ought to F" is not relevant in the present context. Since according to Kearns and Star, evidence that "there is" need not be available to the subject of the 'ought', this principle does not support EAP, which is a principle about evidence available to the subject.)

But even putting these worries aside, we think that an explanation of EFO in terms of EAP faces severe difficulties. The first point to note here is that the view under consideration involves the assumption that ϕ-ing is optional in non-tragic symmetrical practical conflicts *because* oughts must be epistemically accessible in the way suggested by EAP. This is so because according to ER, *Optionality* must hold in virtue of *Optionality**, and according to the suggested explanation of EFO, *Optionality** holds because of EAP. But no matter whether or not one is sympathetic to the idea that 'oughts' must be epistemically accessible, it seems intuitively implausible to think that *the explanation of why actions are optional in symmetrical conflicts* is that oughts must be epistemically accessible. This explanation appears to be awkwardly indirect.

This intuitive impression can be substantiated by noting that EAP is a controversial normative principle, while *Optionality* seems to be a conceptual truth, in the minimal sense that it is a truth that anyone who is competent with the relevant concepts can grasp and come to know by reflection on these concepts alone. This is part of what makes it plausible to think that denying *Optionality* involves some kind of confusion, while the same cannot be said about EAP. If this is so, EAP cannot explain *Optionality*, for quite generally, a conceptual truth cannot be explained by a non-conceptual truth. Moreover, even if this were different and *Optionality* could be explained by EAP (perhaps because EAP turns out to be a conceptual truth, albeit one that is particularly hard to recognize), we would have strong reason to doubt that this would also yield an explanation of *Transparent Optionality*. This is because even if there was a sense in which all agents are in a position to know the highly controversial EAP (say, because it is an *a priori* truth), this would seem to be a much weaker sense than the sense in which all agents are in a position to know *Optionality*, which is a particularly obvious truth that competent speakers can hardly miss. So even if epistemic reductionists can explain why *Optionality* is true by appeal to

EAP as a non-obvious *a priori* truth, it remains difficult to see how they can explain why *Optionality* is obviously true.

To sum up, epistemic reductionists face severe challenges when they try to avoid our argument by appealing to EFO. EFO is in need of explanation, but several routes to such an explanation are not available to epistemic reductionists. Firstly, they cannot appeal to unreduced facts about practical reasons, because their reductionist ambitions commit them to explain everything in terms of evidence for ought-judgements. Secondly, analytical truths about evidence or actions that ought to be performed or omitted do not seem to have enough content to provide an explanation of EFO. Epistemic reductionists might appeal to a substantive normative principle like EAP in order to explain EFO, but any such principle will be highly controversial, and the suggested explanation involves implausible assumptions about how *Optionality* and *Transparent Optionality* are to be explained. There is thus reason to be skeptical that there is a tenable way for epistemic reductionists to escape the argument presented here.

V.

We have argued that symmetrical practical conflicts pose a significant problem for the thesis that a reason for A to ɸ can be reduced to evidence for 'A ought to ɸ'. In response, those sympathetic to the project of reducing practical reasons to evidence might abandon this thesis and claim instead that a reason for A to ɸ can be reduced to evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to not-ɸ'.[13] This proposal is in a better position to account for *Transparent Optionality*,

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[13] See Gert (2016: 166) and Kearns (2016: 180) for this suggestion.

because it does not entail that the evidence for 'A ought to ϕ' is not weaker than the evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ' in symmetrical practical conflicts.[14]

However, the proposal gains this advantage at the cost of losing the ability to account for the fact that such cases are *conflicts* at all. Evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to ϕ' simply does not conflict with evidence for 'It is not the case that A ought to not-ϕ'. Neither does the truth of one of the supported propositions preclude the truth of the other, nor would the truth of both propositions constitute a practical conflict.[15] We conclude that practical conflicts pose a significant problem for epistemic reductionism in either form.[16]

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[14] This is not to say that the proposal does not face its own challenges in accounting for *Transparent Optionality.* In particular, it is far from obvious why equally strong evidence for the permissibility of ϕ-ing and not-ϕ-ing should (in the absence of other relevant evidence) entail that this evidence is *sufficient.*

[15] Note that it does not help to hold a disjunctive account, according to which reasons are either evidence that one ought, or evidence that it is not the case that one ought not, as both Gert (2016) and Kearns (2016) suggest. We are free to stipulate that the conflicts we have in mind are conflicts of reasons of the same kind.

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