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PRACTICAL REASONS TO BELIEVE, EPISTEMIC REASONS TO ACT, AND THE  
BAFFLED ACTION THEORIST

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For me, who dabbled in action theory, speaking to epistemologists has always been a bit of a culture shock. Action theory, one might recall, is dedicated to explaining the difference between a person's hand rising and a person raising her hand, which is tightly related to the difference between voluntary doings and non-voluntary events. Epistemologists talk as if, when it comes to things like beliefs and changes in credence, the difference is unimportant and can easily be glossed over. I have asked epistemologists before about their use of the phrase "form a belief", a phrase that *only* philosophers use (other people "*come to believe* that cutting medicare is not the way to go" or "are *starting to think* that Suzy isn't going to show up"). "Does the use of this turn of phrase mean that you think belief is voluntary"? I asked. The reply I got was always "not necessarily, it probably isn't, at least normally it isn't, but it's just more convenient to talk about it as if it is". "Form" is at least a verb that *can* refer to a non-action, but apparently it is so convenient to discuss believing as if it were voluntary that epistemologists routinely say things like "after reading the report, *I lowered my credence* that the new drug works" or "I adjusted my credence that the new drug will work" (other people say "I read the report *and now I'm not as sure* the new drug works" or write "reading the report *lowered my confidence* that the new drug works"). It is clearly as if I, the agent, am actively doing the "lowering", as with lowering my cholesterol using pills. Again, when I ask for the reason for this weird use of the verb "to lower", I am told that it's more convenient to talk this way.

To be fair, it is less work to write "you have a duty to lower your credence that P" than it is to write, say, "it is the case that you would be irrational if you don't come to

have a lower credence that P” or something like that, but the action theorist in me worries that pretending that someone is raising her hand when in fact her hand is merely rising, even for the sake of better prose, is philosophically risky.

With this in mind, I will now argue that we have no practical reasons to believe, and then, in addition, argue that there are no epistemic reasons to act.

### **No Practical Reasons to Believe**

Consider the following view:

“Practical reasons are reasons for voluntary things, so if belief isn’t voluntary, there are no practical reasons for belief.”

John Heil tries to avoid this conclusion by arguing that accepting that there are practical reasons to believe requires accepting only a minimal form of the claim that belief is voluntary – so weak that we can all agree on it, including those who are not normally considered doxastic voluntarists. We can all agree, he says, that a person can take steps to bring about belief states in herself, or at least make it more likely that she be in a certain belief state, as Pascal taught us. Can’t we agree, then, as a harmless shorthand, that belief is voluntary?<sup>i</sup>

No, we cannot, on the pain of having to agree that erections are voluntary, as well as tears and seizures. An erection, after all, is a state that some agents can take steps to bring about in themselves, or at least make more likely. The same is true for tears. It is possible for many people to bring themselves to tears by, say, playing the right song, or intentionally invoking a memory. Of most interest to action theorists would be the case of seizures, which such theorists take to be the paradigmatic case of human movement

that is not an action or an activity – and is thus involuntary. It is possible to induce an epileptic fit in oneself. Still, if you are teaching children or aliens about the way humans work, and you're telling them that as a rule, erections are voluntary, tears are voluntary, and seizures are voluntary, you are not using a "harmless shorthand". You are seriously misleading the children or the aliens. A human reaction that can be voluntarily *induced in oneself* is not thereby voluntary.<sup>ii</sup>

Suppose we drop the "shorthand" idea, and simply say that while beliefs may not be voluntary, they can be induced or instilled voluntarily in oneself. Does that allow us to say that there can be practical reasons to believe? No. It only allows us to say that there can be practical reasons to *induce or instill a belief state in oneself*.<sup>iii</sup> If it is true that some optimistic beliefs help with recovery from cancer, then many pessimistic cancer patients have a reason to induce or instill these optimistic beliefs in themselves, if they can find some method by which to do so. If somehow, in the kind of situation sometimes conjured up in the "wrong kind of reasons" literature in metaethics<sup>iv</sup>, the world might collapse unless I admire the work of Danielle Steele, I have a reason to induce in myself the belief that her work is excellent. Still, "optimism is good for cancer" is not a reason for any pessimistic patient to *believe* that her cancer will go into remission – thought it might be a reason for her to believe that she is likely to die if she doesn't find some way to become optimistic soon - and "the terrorist will blow up the world unless you admire Danielle Steele" is not a reason for anyone to believe that Danielle Steele's work is good, as terrorists are not known for promoting good novels. No, it is *not* a "wrong kind of reason" to believe but *not a reason at all* to believe. It is a

good reason to induce or instill a belief in oneself, if one can. The distinction stands even if we imagine the inducing or instilling as quick and easy.

It is worth noting how few of our beliefs – relatively speaking - can be said to be the result of intentional steps taken specifically to bring them into existence.

*Paradigmatic* belief-formation does not work this way. Some beliefs come to be as a result of no action at all on the subject's part. One moment my cat, Philippa, passes by – and the next moment I have the belief “the cat just passed by”. A Canadian person whom I trust to the highest degree tells me that in a certain year, the province of Alberta managed to get itself rid of rats, and instantly I believe what he tells me. In addition to beliefs that just “came” to me, I have beliefs that are the result of a particular kind of voluntary action – epistemic *deliberation*, or her elegant cousin *inquiry*. For example, my belief that Descartes's ontological argument does not work is the result of deliberation on my part, and deliberating is a voluntary action in which you intentionally focus your mind on relevant evidence. Deliberating about the validity and soundness of the ontological argument is an action that I have, long ago, decided to perform and performed. However, the action that gave birth to my belief that Descartes is wrong was not an action *meant to bring about that belief*. The purpose of my deliberation was not to induce or instill in myself the belief that Descartes was wrong but rather to *find out if he was wrong or not* – a different task altogether<sup>v</sup>. Beliefs that simply occur in us in response to data and beliefs that are the result of deliberation probably make up most of our beliefs, and they are not the result of some steps taken with a view to inducing or instilling them.

Arguably, even cases of wishful thinking – “believing what you want to believe” – are quite often *not* cases of intentional steps taken to bring about a belief one wishes to have but rather cases of “hot” irrationality<sup>vi</sup>. For example, when Freud, who was smitten with collecting antiquities, “sees” the word “antiquities” on many a store sign he passes, what happens is not that Freud wants a certain belief (“there is an Antiquities store here”) and makes sure, perhaps akratically, to create the belief in himself. Freud would probably rather not set himself up for a disappointment every time he passes a store sign. It is not a desire to *believe* that there is an antiquities store near him that motivates him to instill such a belief in himself, but rather his strong desire *that there actually be* such a store distorts his belief-formation process, a process and a distortion towards which he is passive. In more complicated cases – and here I agree with Alfred Mele<sup>vii</sup> – your desire, say, that a certain person love you just makes it too painful to *think* about the possible counterevidence, and makes it very pleasant to contemplate evidence, thus disposing you to believe he does. Again, the culprit desire is not a desire to have a certain belief – it’s a desire to be loved – and you don’t really take any action to intentionally bring about the wishful belief.. In addition to wishful thinking, we also have emotional or moody thinking – when the person you fear seems tall to you, when you believe you are ugly because you are depressed, when having just heard your favorite song makes you more optimistic about the result of the coming elections. Here too evidence is ignored and desire is relevant – whom you want to win determines the content of your “happy” belief – but there is no intentional belief-encouraging or belief-discouraging action<sup>viii</sup>.

So perhaps the intentional “cultivation” of belief states isn’t quite as central to our epistemic life as leafing through philosophy books would have you imagine. I do not deny, however, that there are regular contexts in which we have the ability, and the inclination, to manipulate our belief-formation process voluntarily, subtly or otherwise, and such manipulation can be effective. While wishful thinking can be enough to cause you to believe that someone is attracted to you, there is also the case of the person who wishes to believe that she is attractive and intentionally nurses that belief by paying selective attention to potential evidence. There are ways in which we can manipulate our belief-forming apparatus – making sure we pay selective attention to potential evidence is one. Other examples are some types of cognitive therapy, subscribing to a media outlet with a proven ability to bias its consumers, spending time with the “right” people to “catch” their belief (Pascal again), acting as if a working assumption were true until at last it slips our mind that we made it up, drinking to forget, reading to distract, and for that matter playing our favorite song *in order* to be more optimistic about the coming elections. For all of these things – courses of action - there might be practical reasons, as with any course of action. But practical reasons to *believe* would be something else still, and for them to exist it’s not enough that we have some ability to organize, cultivate, or regulate our beliefs voluntarily; these abilities, when they exist, enable practical reasons to organize, cultivate, or regulate – not practical reasons to believe.

### **Even More of an Exception for Belief: Against Reasons for Other States**

One way to argue against what I have said so far is to insist that beliefs themselves, apart from any acts of belief-inducement or acts of manipulating our belief-forming apparatus, are voluntary. I will not argue here against this position, which can be referred to as *genuine doxastic voluntarism*. This paper is, in a way, an exercise in tracing the implications of the claim that belief is *not* voluntary, which I feel is both widely accepted *and* not taken seriously enough.

Another way would be to argue that practical reasons to believe do not require belief to be voluntary but only for it to be metaphysically possible for some creatures to have the ability to believe at will (Rinard 2019). However, people who can wiggle their ears at will are not only metaphysically possible but exist in the actual world, and still I do not see how their existence makes it possible for me, and for most people, to have practical reasons to wiggle our ears. Furthermore, creatures who have the power to believe at will – and who somehow survived past childhood rather than fall to their deaths having decided to believe that they can fly -would have to be very different from us. While it might seem easy to imagine changing one or two major beliefs at will, I take it to be impossible to imagine reliably what it would be like to have the power to believe or disbelieve at will constantly at your disposal, with attendant temptations and responsibilities, and constantly live with such consequences as the possibility that something you are inclined to take for absolutely granted is just something believing which *seemed like a good idea* at some prior time. It would be downright astonishing if we knew what it is like to have voluntary believing come as easily to us as many mental actions do – as easily, Rinard suggests, as imagining a red tomato when we feel like doing so! While a talented science fiction writer or filmmaker can probably fantasize



nicely about such lives, such creatures, such worlds as they might live in, I doubt we can draw any *reliable* conclusions as to what ethics of belief would emerge in these worlds and for these creatures, and I doubt many norms that would apply to them would be relevant to us and our own world.

Even if Rinard's futuristic intuitions deserve more credit than I give them, it is worth repeating here that the difference between reasons to believe and reasons to induce a belief in oneself would remain intact even if we had fast and efficient belief-induction methods.

A more promising route for an objector would be to appeal instead to *reasons to be in states*.

In ordinary English, you can say that someone has a reason to go to a meeting (and stay there until it ends), but you can also say that someone has a reason to *be* at the meeting, even though going to the meeting and staying in it would be a course of action, like belief inducement, while being at the meeting is a state, like belief. This is one thought in the background of work by Rinard<sup>ix</sup>, who takes epistemic reasons to be no more than a kind of practical reasons. Rinard cites the appeal of the symmetry inherent in a theory that acknowledges only one kind of reason, and I will shortly explain why such a symmetry is not unqualifiedly good as a feature of a theory of reasons. First, though, I would like to take a look at Rinard's particular kind of symmetry, which is attendant on the plausibility of saying that reasons to make yourself believe just are reasons to believe. This plausibility in turn rests on the presence in natural language use of utterances like "you have a reason to be at the meeting", or "in this economy, there are good reasons to own a house" or "it's irrational to be in debt if you don't have to".

Owning a house, being in a meeting and being in debt are not actions: they are states, just like the states of believing that things will turn out well. If there are practical reasons to be in states, such as reasons to be at a meeting or to own a home or to be solvent, why can there not be practical reasons for being in the state of believing that things will turn out well? If the reasons we have to be at a meeting are practical, why can't our reasons to believe that Michigan is cold be practical as well? It would simplify things to avoid an asymmetry between owning a home and reasons for owning a home on one hand and having a belief and reasons for having the belief on the other.

Sebastian Schmidt, in a recent paper<sup>x</sup> argues that pragmatists such as Rinard need, to support their view, the claim that such practical reasons to be in states exist and are not reducible to practical reasons to act. I agree, and will now argue (on grounds different from his, which have to do with the structure of motivation) that reasons to be in states - other than reasons to be in states of credence - do not exist (but reasons to be in states of credence do. Derivatively, there are reasons to be in states that consist partially in states of credence<sup>xi</sup>).

I have mentioned that in English, "you have a reason to go to the meeting" (going to the meeting being an action) and "you have a reason to be at the meeting" (being at the meeting being a state) are both natural things to say. This phenomenon makes Rinard's view seem plausible at first, but it actually hints at the existence of a deeper asymmetry than the one she attempts to eliminate. The asymmetry is this: there is no such thing as a reason to be at the meeting (or own a home, etc.). States of credence such as belief are the *only states* for which there are reasons at all. With all other states in which one could be, to speak about reasons to be in them is just a shorthand way to

speaking about reasons to take courses of action (and/or inaction) the intended consequence of which is being in them.

To wit, there is no such thing as you having reasons to *be without consumer debt* besides having reasons to *act in such a way as to avoid consumer debt*. On the other hand, it is possible that Kepa has a good reason to *believe* that most Israelis do not speak any Yiddish – namely that an expert just told him so – but no reason to *act so as to make sure he has the belief*. If he has an exam on the subject, an upcoming trip to the middle east, or just intrinsic curiosity about languages, then he might have a reason to take certain actions - write down what the expert said, for example. Otherwise, though, there might be no reason for him to do any such thing. It is fine for him to just let himself forget about it as he gives his attention to other things.

A better way to see the asymmetry is this. If Meena has good reasons to believe that Michigan is cold, and she believes that Michigan is cold for these good reasons, we say that Meena is reasonable or rational in believing that Michigan is cold or that her belief that Michigan is cold is a reasonable or rational belief. Similarly, if Meena has good reasons to be in a meeting and she is in the meeting for these good reasons we say that it is reasonable or rational of her to be in that meeting. But things are asymmetrical in the following respect: one is reasonable or rational in being in a meeting if and only if one's being in the meeting is the intended result of a reasonable and rational course of action, but one can be reasonable or rational in believing that Michigan is cold even if one's belief is *not*, in any way, an intended result of reasonably and rationally taking a course of action.

In more detail: that Meena was in a meeting for good reasons or that it was rational or reasonable of her to be in the meeting<sup>xii</sup> is true if and only if Meena took the relevant course of action (went to the meeting and refrained from leaving it until the end) for good reasons. Imagine that Meena has overwhelming reasons to be at the meeting – perhaps her company is about to make a decision that would greatly affect things she cares about – but Meena does not know it, mistakenly thinking that the meeting is in fact about something that does not matter to her. She came to the meeting anyway, irrationally, out of a worrier nature, and that worrier nature prevented her from leaving before the discussion reached matters of interest to her. As her co-workers came into the room, one of them, Josh, knowing the agenda and realizing that Meena’s interests will be at stake, thought to himself that “it’s very reasonable of Meena to be here for the meeting”. Josh, in this case, is wrong. Were he to discover that Meena was at the meeting a result of an *irrational* action he would have taken back the mental compliment he gave Meena and thought instead that it was *fortunate* for Meena that she was at the meeting. Something similar would have been the case if Meena were at the meeting as a result of no action at all – a paternalistic benefactor beamed her to the meeting room through magic. If, on the other hand, we learn that Meena went to the meeting rationally and stayed there rationally – was there as the intended result of a rational course of action - it is hard to see what sense it would ever make to say that it was not rational of her to *be* there.

Contrast this with the case of belief. It is simply *false* that “Meena believes that Michigan is cold for good reasons” or “it is rational of Meena to believe that Michigan is cold” is true if and only if Meena’s belief that Michigan is cold is an intended result of a rational course of action. Perhaps, like many beliefs, Meena’s belief that Michigan is

cold is not the intended result of any action whatsoever: it just appeared there in a response to something that her teachers said in geography class, or, alternately, in response to having spent a lot of time in Michigan. Perhaps Meena's belief that Michigan is cold is there as the result of deliberation, that did not involve the intention to make herself believe Michigan is cold but rather the intention of arriving at a true belief on the subject, whatever it might be. Furthermore, Meena's belief that Michigan is cold could be the result of an *irrational* action –reading a reliable encyclopedia while driving. None of that is relevant to the rationality of the belief. Of all the states that you seem to have a reason to be in, belief-like states are special in that you actually, literally have a reason to be in them. You can say here that, contra Rinard's frequent statements, belief is special, but you can equally think of my last point as confirming the action theorist's initial intuition that *action* is special, in that there can be practical reasons for it.

### **The Sinking Heart**

Philosophers love symmetry, and some might be disappointed by this result. I would like to argue that they should not be, as there are good reasons, independent of my specific reply to Rinard, to be suspicious of any overly symmetrical conception of epistemic and practical reasons. Love of symmetry makes it attractive for a theory to imply that the fact that a belief would be good for you and the fact that the evidence suggests that the belief is true are both reasons for that belief, reasons that can be weighed against each other<sup>xiii</sup> and are thus reasons in a similar way, whatever exactly that means. Alternately, it also makes it attractive to argue, like Rinard, that all reasons

are practical. However, the appeal of symmetry here is at least matched by the appeal of a strong intuition that with the possible exception of some special contexts – perhaps religious faith - if you seek reasons to believe, being handed putative *practical* reasons to believe is like being offered food when you are critically thirsty. I will call it “The Sinking Heart Intuition”, and here is an illustration thereof.

Imagine that you have cancer and you do not yet know if the course of chemotherapy you have undergone will save you or not. You sit down at your doctor’s desk, trying to brace yourself for news, aware that at this point there might be only interim news – indications that a good or a bad outcome is likely. The doctor says there are reasons to be optimistic – to believe that everything will come out OK. Though you are still very tense, you perk up and you feel warm and light all over. You ask what the reasons are. You’re all ears. In response, the doctor tells you about ironclad scientific results showing that optimism is good for the health of cancer patients.

Your heart sinks. You experience a very bitter disappointment and will probably be angry at the doctor for the misleading way he put his point. A good theory of epistemic and practical reasons to believe should account for the Sinking Heart intuition in some way. If, as per Rinard, a reason is a reason is a reason, no exceptions, no special treatments, why does a putative conversational switch from one practical reason to believe to another practical reason to believe feel so brutal<sup>xiv</sup>? If evidential and practical considerations add up together, why does the doctor’s declaration seem so painfully *beside the point*? I offer the following explanation – not the only one possible, but hopefully a good one: the doctor, when he says “there are reasons to be optimistic”, is telling you a falsehood, as there are no reasons to be optimistic in your case, only

reasons to *induce or instill optimism in yourself* if you can – which reasons you might have already suspected you have. You are simply disappointed to discover that the doctor does not, in fact, have the happy news he claimed to have – for, if optimism is a belief state, saying that there are reasons for it is by default implying that there is evidence for its truth. You are also angry at him for *saying one thing and meaning another*. While the Sinking Heart Intuition does not by itself make a decisive argument against any theory, I take it to exert a pressure at least equal to that of the philosopher’s love of symmetry.

### **No Epistemic Reasons to Act**

It might seem that we who are interested in possessing knowledge or avoiding unjustified beliefs – have plenty of epistemic reasons to act. In various circumstances, we have reasons to acquire books, use Google, deliberate carefully, avoid some media channels and double-check our mathematical calculations. These are clearly courses of action.

But do we really have *epistemic* reasons to act in those ways?

Consider the most banal type of practical reasons discussed in philosophy – instrumental reasoning. Typical instrumental reason statements are often phrased in ways that resemble advice:

“If you want to be rich, you need to invest for growth”

“If you want to be healthy, get regular exercise”

“The best way to get from New York to DC is by train, not by plane”

Now, suppose that, instead of a person who wants to be rich, we meet a person who wants to know things. Such a person might hear such advice as:

“If you want to see how awful average humans can be, read a few books about the Nazi period”

“If you want to gain some understanding of Leibniz, use the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (and not Wikipedia)”

“You must continue to exercise your math skills if you want to be able to acquire mathematical knowledge”

These last three pieces of advice are of a kind with the previous three pieces of advice. Just like the person who wants to be healthy has a reason to get regular exercise, the person who wants to know mathematics has a reason to exercise her mathematical skills. Just like the best way to get from New York to DC might be by train, and not by plane, the best way to acquire basic understanding of Leibniz might be through reading SEP, and not through reading Wikipedia. Knowledge in general, justified belief in general, knowledge of particular subjects, avoidance of particular errors – these, just like wealth, health, and reaching DC, are goals that give rise to *practical reasons* to do



or not do a variety of things. It is misleading to say “epistemic reasons” when what you are referring to are practical reasons that those who pursue *episteme* have<sup>xv</sup>.

Why is it so misleading? Perhaps anything that has to do with knowledge and belief can be called “epistemic”. It might seem that there is no need to refrain from calling practical reasons having to do with knowledge or justified belief “epistemic reasons” – in the same way that practical reasons having to do with money are called “economic reasons” and practical reasons having to do with health are called “medical reasons”. This is not, however, what we traditionally mean by “epistemic reason”. Epistemic reasons are not, traditionally, a type of practical reasons, and that’s what makes the claim that we have epistemic reasons for things more philosophically exciting, at the outset, than the claim that we have economic or medical reasons for things. Epistemic reasons come from epistemic norms, and “epistemic norms” are not simply norms that apply to beliefs. Epistemic norms are a separate *kind* of norms - norms that exemplify a *kind* of normativity which is different from practical normativity<sup>xvi</sup>.

Consider by analogy the phrase “an aesthetic reason”. Just like one could, if one insisted, define “epistemic” as simply “pertaining to belief”, one could, if one insisted, define “aesthetic” as “pertaining to art and beauty”. If one takes this seriously, it might turn out that we have *aesthetic* reasons not to buy paintings when the market for them is volatile, or aesthetic reasons not to steal from art museums. To say this, however, would be confusing. The typical reasons we have not to buy art in volatile art markets are *prudential* reasons and the typical reasons we have to avoid stealing from museums are *moral* reasons. The fact that a reason or a norm pertains to art does not in itself

make it an aesthetic reason or aesthetic norm in the sense philosophers of aesthetics talk about.

A norm such as “to obtain knowledge, go the library”, then, is clearly a practical norm that applies to people who want knowledge. The subject of the sentence is knowledge, but the *normativity* in the proposition is simply means-end normativity, which applies to searches for knowledge exactly as it applies to searches for cat food. Thus the norm is no more an epistemic norm than “*if you want a lovely house, save money so you can afford one*” is an aesthetic norm. Whether certain topic or question – say, the value of knowledge - belongs under “epistemology” might sometimes be a semi-arbitrary matter of convenience<sup>xvii</sup>, but whether epistemic *normativity*, as opposed to some other kind of normativity, occurs in some case is a substantive question, and a philosopher who wants to argue that “don’t believe contradictions” and “go to the library!” involve the *same kind* of normativity – epistemic normativity - needs to do more than say “well, going to the library is about knowledge. Why *not* call it an epistemic norm, then?”.

Some epistemologists, however, do more than that and argue for the substantive view that all epistemic norms, including evidential norms for believing, are instrumental – which, if true, would seem to make epistemic norms a subset of practical norms. Instrumentalists about epistemic norms might hold that “follow your evidence!” itself is really an instrumental norm – fully stated as something in the neighborhood of “if you want to have accurate beliefs, follow your evidence”. If it is an instrumental norm, and if it applies only to agents with some ends, isn’t it practical? If it is a practical norm, says

the instrumentalist, it is a practical norm in a way that does not preclude it also being an epistemic norm. Perhaps epistemic norms just are practical, after all<sup>xviii</sup>.

But instrumental norms are most clearly practical in the following way: they are *norms for voluntary things*. It is no accident that in more old-fashioned terms, they are said to tell you to *will* certain means if you *will* a certain end. “If you want to succeed in politics, be born in the right place” and “if you want to have a long life, have the right genes” are not instrumental norms but parodies thereof – simply because being lucky with geography or genes is not a voluntary thing. Beliefs – this gets us back to the beginning – are not voluntary either, and so instrumental norms are *never* norms that tell us *what to believe* (though, as you might recall, they can tell us when to induce or instill a belief in ourselves, or when to deliberate about what might be true).

Is “following the evidence” something voluntary? One has to be careful here. “Follow the evidence” is natural English, and in such English people do “follow the evidence” in an agential-sounding way sometimes – usually in contexts in which evidence need to be discovered through action and every new piece of evidence occasions a need for more action – in other words, detectives and journalists “follow the evidence”, as well as other inquiring minds. Inquiring is an action, agents perform it and practical norms can apply to it, and sometimes “following the evidence” is another phrase for “inquiring” or “inquiring well”. However, at other times, that a person “follows the evidence” means simply that, as she becomes aware of the evidence, *her beliefs change* in the right way - change, say, so that she comes to believe the relevant propositions that are supported by the evidence. This is not something the person does as an agent but a non-voluntary process – “*coming to believe*” might be a better name for

it than the philosopher-invented “forming a belief” - that she undergoes. No instrumental norm can apply to it. Note that the thesis that *all* epistemic norms are instrumental or practical requires that *all* changes in credence that can be judged through epistemic norms –that is, arguably, all changes in credence - be voluntary. It is not enough to suspect that *some* such changes – say, changes in response to very confusing pieces of evidence – somehow are.

The philosophical field of action theory takes it as its main purpose to explain the difference, perhaps the gulf, between “a person’s arm rising” and “a person raising his arm”. I do not claim to have the desired explanation, but epistemologists and moral psychologists should not ignore the difference itself. Ignoring it or papering over it with “harmless shorthand” strategies is inviting category mistakes into our understanding of both action and belief.

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<sup>i</sup> Heil (1983). This attitude - finding it relatively unimportant whether belief is strictly speaking voluntary or not - seems to have been adopted by countless epistemologists after him.

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<sup>ii</sup> The distinction between something like a belief being voluntary and its induction being voluntary is emphasized throughout Peels (2017). That beliefs are states of the subject and not actions or activities has been pointed out by many – See for example Chrisman (2018).

<sup>iii</sup> A point made by Hieronymi (2006) (2009). For a recent and thorough treatment of the idea of practical reasons for belief *production* see Schmidt (2022).

<sup>iv</sup> Started by Crisp (2001) and Rabinowicz, Wlodek, and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004).

<sup>v</sup> See Flowerree (2020) for a distinction between truth-oriented “belief management” and other forms thereof.

<sup>vi</sup> “Hot Irrationality” as a term applying to irrationality related to emotions and desires is due to David Pears (1984), who provides us with an interesting discussion of motivated but unchosen irrational beliefs..

<sup>vii</sup> 2001. Mele discusses many complicated cases of a strong desire that P causing a belief that P.

<sup>viii</sup> The phenomena discussed in this paragraph are discussed by Arpaly (2003).

<sup>ix</sup> See Rinard (2017).

<sup>x</sup> 2022

<sup>xi</sup> By which I mean emotions like admiration, if it requires believing that something is somehow good, or fear, on those occasions, if such there be, where it requires the belief, at some level, that something is dangerous.

<sup>xii</sup> I am going to take “it’s rational of her to be in the meeting”, “it’s reasonable of her to be at the meeting” and “she is in the meeting for good reasons” as interchangeable for the purpose of this example.

<sup>xiii</sup> As per Reisner (2008), for example.

<sup>xiv</sup> People’s responses vary, but giving this example in talks yields an array of tortured faces and sounds as soon as the end of the story is reached. This is particularly true if I add that what the ironclad results show is that such optimism is particularly good for patients in a bad shape.

<sup>xv</sup> See Goldberg (2020) for insisting on the phrase “practical reasons” for such reasons, though he thinks these practical reasons do have a complicated relationship with epistemic reasons.

<sup>xvi</sup> Simion (2018) makes the distinction between epistemic norms and norms with epistemic content. She concludes that epistemic norms cannot control actions except actions that have characteristic epistemic goals, like research, inquiry etc. I think she does not go far enough, and even the latter kind of actions are not thereby subject to epistemic norms.

<sup>xvii</sup> Or it might be a complex matter of principle. For an interesting meta-epistemological discussion of how “big” the domain of the epistemic is and how big the domain of epistemology should be, and especially how norms for

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action fit in, see Friedman (2020). I disagree with her ultimate position - which relies on an intuition that it is within epistemology's role to tell us how to obtain knowledge, "from start to finish" - for many reasons, including not sharing the intuition in question.

<sup>xviii</sup> For a critical explanation of epistemic instrumentalism see Lockard (2013). For a subsequent defense see, for example, Sharadin (2019).