Can We Believe for Practical Reasons?

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1. Introduction

Epistemologists standardly distinguish between doxastic and propositional justification for beliefs. One rough way of capturing the distinction is as follows: To have propositional justification to believe that *p*, the subject's reasons must on balance support believing that *p*—as opposed to disbelieving or suspending judgment. To be doxastically justified in believing that *p*, the subject must have propositional justification to believe that *p* and, in addition, must believe that *p* for the good reasons that he has. We shall see that this rough characterization of the relationship between propositional and doxastic justification must be revised, but it is for the moment a useful simplification that will allow us to introduce our topic.

In addition to distinguishing between doxastic and propositional justification, it is also standard for epistemologists to distinguish between epistemic and other kinds of justification for beliefs. Epistemic justification is the kind of positive epistemic status that a belief must have if it is to count as knowledge, but beliefs may be justified in other ways without thereby being even a candidate for knowledge. The following pair of cases illustrate the distinction:

> Case 1: I am sick, but my doctor tells me that I will recover. I have no reason to doubt what my doctor tells me.
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> Case 2: I am sick and my doctor tells me that I will probably not recover, but he also tells me that the rest of my life will be much happier if I believe that I will. Again, I have no reason to doubt what my doctor tells me.

In case 1, I have propositional epistemic justification to believe that I will recover—and indeed, if I do believe it and I do recover then, other things being equal, I am doxastically justified in so believing and I know that I will recover. It is traditionally claimed that in case 2 I also have, in some sense, justification to believe that I will recover. That sense cannot be the same in which I am justified in case 1, however, because even if I manage to believe that I will recover (and even if, against all odds, I do recover), I do not know that I will recover. I have, some epistemologists say, prudential justification to believe in this case—things have a chance of turning out better for me if I do believe than if I don't. Other kinds of non-epistemic justification to believe are sometimes posited, such as moral justification and the kinds of justification that can arise from friendship or parental relations. I won't be concerned here with the extent of non-epistemic justification or with the question of

which kinds of non-epistemic justification there are, but I will assume, with the tradition, that there is such a thing as non-epistemic justification to believe. For ease of exposition, I will call all such forms of non-epistemic justification to believe, "practical justification."[1]

Now, there could of course be propositions which are both epistemically and practically justified for a subject. For instance, that my children are faring well is a proposition which is both epistemically and practically justified for me. For reasons that will become apparent momentarily, however, I am interested in this paper in propositions which are *only* practically justified for a subject. In what follows, then, talk of practical justification should be understood as talk of *merely* practical justification.

There are then two distinctions: one between propositional and doxastic justification and the other between epistemic and practical justification. How are those two distinctions related to each other? In principle, one could have all four forms of justification: epistemic and practical propositional justification and epistemic and practical doxastic justification. Epistemologists do often say (or imply) that doxastic justification is necessary and, if other conditions are propitious, sufficient for knowledge. Thus my comment that if in case 1 I do go ahead and believe for the reasons that I have I will have knowledge that I will recover. But I also said that even if I do manage to believe that I will recover in case 2 on the basis of the reasons that I have *there*, I will not come one iota closer to knowing that I will recover. This seems to give us a reason for thinking that the distinction between epistemic and practical justification applies only within propositional justification—that doxastic justification can only be epistemic.

The envisaged reason for thinking that doxastic justification can only be epistemic is not deep: if we can believe for practical reasons, there is a phenomenon worth thinking about even if we wish to retain the label "doxastic justification" for cases where we satisfy the justification condition on knowledge. But many philosophers think that the phenomenon of practical doxastic justification doesn't exist for a further reason, because they think that we *cannot* believe for practical reasons. This impossibility is sometimes advanced as a merely psychological one, but other times it is proposed as a deeper kind of impossibility, perhaps even a conceptual one. In what follows I argue for the following interrelated theses: First, we must distinguish between believing for a practical reason and believing for what we take to be a

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[1]"Practical justification" is a better name than "non-epistemic" justification because the good consequences of believing may themselves be epistemic: someone may offer to show me the truth regarding *p* on the condition that I believe *p* to be true. In that case, I may have practical justification to believe that *p* because of the good epistemic consequences of so believing. (Cf. Conee (1992), who makes the confusing terminological decision of calling that kind of practical justification "epistemic justification".)

practical reason. It is, I will argue, transparently possible to believe for a practical reason, and so the issue must be whether we can believe for what we take to be a practical reason. Second, explanations of the impossibility in terms of constitutive norms of belief, such as the truth-norm, are unsuccessful. Third, there is a striking parallel between the impossibility of believing for what we take to be practical reasons and the impossibility of intending to act for what we take to be merely reasons to intend, and so it would be preferable to have an explanation which accounts for both impossibilities at once. Fourth, such an explanation is possible: what accounts for both impossibilities is that taking something to be a merely practical reason involves not believing for that reason (and an analogous explanation holds for the practical case). Fifth, this explanation both receives confirmation from and illuminates the fact that even when we manage to believe or intend for a merely practical reason, we will not thereby believe or intend rationally. My main conclusion is that indeed we cannot believe for what we take to be merely practical reasons—but this says more about what it is to take something to be a merely practical reason than about the notion of belief.

2. Reasons

To get a better grip on what our question is, we need some stage-setting. I will assume that justification arises from reasons—epistemic justification from epistemic reasons and practical justification from practical reasons. This may well not be true—there may be propositions we are justified in believing in the absence of reasons for believing them—but the issues that I am interested in dealing with arise for that class of propositions for which we *do* have reasons. I am therefore putting aside views like those of Wright (2004). Moreover, appealing to reasons gives a more perspicuous way of understanding the distinction between epistemic and practical justification. We can distinguish at least three roles for the notion of a reason to play. First, we can think about the reasons *there are* for a subject to believe a proposition, independently of whether that subject *has* those reasons. Second, we can think about the reasons that subjects *have* to believe a proposition, whether or not those subjects do believe that proposition (and, if they do, whether or not they believe them *for* those reasons). Third, we can think about the reasons *for which* subjects believe as they do. Throughout, I assume that reasons are propositions.

I will assume also that the *reasons-for* relation is a three-place relation with propositions as its relata. That is to say, I will assume that there is no such thing as a proposition p being a reason to believe another proposition q, period—rather, p is (or is not) a reason to believe q only relative to a certain background B of other

propositions.[2] Thus, that Abe says that it's raining is a reason to believe that it is raining relative to a background which supports Abe's reliability whereas it isn't such a reason relative to a background that supports Abe's unreliability. What is it, then, for a proposition to be a reason to believe another proposition relative to a given background? I will not assume that we have available an enlightening characterization of this relation, which does not mean that we do not understand it or that we cannot use it in our theorizing.

But although I will thus take the notion of a reason as a primitive, I will not take the distinction between an epistemic and a practical reason to believe as a primitive. I adopt a broadly evidentialist conception of epistemic reasons:

> *r* is an **epistemic reason** there is to believe that *p* relative to background *B* if and only if (i) *r* is true and (ii) *r* is evidence for *p* relative to *B*.

What is it for there to be a practical reason to believe that *p*? Given my decision to use "practical" as an umbrella term that covers prudential, moral, and possibly other kinds of reasons, I cannot give a general definition of a practical reason. Roughly speaking, a practical reason to believe that *p* will be a consideration to the effect that believing that *p* will be beneficial to some group of people (perhaps myself) in some way or other. But it is irrelevant for my purposes whether even that much is true, and so I adopt the following purely negative characterization:

> *r* is a **practical reason** there is to believe that *p* relative to background *B* if and only if (i) *r* is a reason there is to believe that *p* relative to *B*, and (ii) *r* is not an epistemic reason there is to believe that *p* relative to *B*.

Notice that, as I said before, I am interpreting views like those of Wright (2004) as claiming that some propositions can be epistemically justified even in the absence of reasons. Alternatively, those views can be interpreted as saying that some epistemic reasons are not evidence. On this second interpretation, there are non-evidential reasons for believing that are nevertheless not practical in the sense I intend. If we want to go with this second interpretation, then, we would have to modify the characterization of practical reasons accordingly—but I don't see any compelling reason for preferring the second interpretation to the first.

So much for the reasons there are to believe. What about the reasons subjects have? Whether a subject *S has* a proposition *r* as a reason to believe a proposition *p* is a function of two things: whether *S* has a background relative to which *r* is a reason there is to believe *p*, and the epistemic relationship between *S* and *r*. Whether *S* has a background *B* is in turn a matter of the epistemic relationship between *S* and the propositions in *B*. So we need to characterize what it is, in general, for a subject *S* to be related to a proposition *p* in such a way that the subject *has p*. There are three initially plausible characterizations: first, *S* has *p* if and only if *S* believes *p*; second, *S*

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[2]This leaves open the possibility that some propositions may be reasons to believe relative to an empty, or tautological background. I do not commit myself one way or the other on this issue.

has *p* if and only if *S* rationally believes *p*; third, *S* has *p* if and only if *S* knows *p*.[3] I favor the second characterization, but in what follows I remain neutral among those three. As we will soon see, many philosophers also think that for a subject to *have* a reason to believe or act, it must be possible for the subject to believe or act *on the basis* of that reason—but I will not be assuming that here.

In addition to having reasons to believe that *p*, a subject may also have reasons to believe that *not-p* and reasons to think that her reasons for believing *p* are not good.[4] In that case, which attitude the subject is all-things-considered rational in taking towards *p* will depend on the overall balance of reasons. If the reasons that a subject has for believing *p* outweigh to a sufficient degree the reasons for not believing *p*, then I will say that the subject has *most reason* to believe *p*.

We are now in a position to define propositional justification in more precise terms:

> *S* has **propositional justification to believe** that *p* if and only if *S* has most reason to believe *p*.
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> *S* has **propositional justification to disbelieve** that *p* if and only if *S* has most reason to disbelieve *p*.
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> *S* has **propositional justification to suspend judgment** on *p* if and only if *S* is not propositionally justified in believing or disbelieving that *p*.[5]

We have discussed what it is for there to be reason to believe and what it is for a subject to have a reason to believe. What is it for a subject to believe *for* a reason? I do not have a theory of believing for reasons to offer, so I will be relying on pre-theoretic (but widely shared, I think) judgments about when a subject believes for a reason. I will assume, however, that it is possible to believe for a *bad* reason. The idea that there is no practical doxastic justification to believe is then based on the claim that believing for a reason is necessary for doxastic justification and that we cannot believe for practical reasons.

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[3]See Comesaña and McGrath (2014) for an argument against the knowledge account of reasons possession. In that paper we also argue that subjects can have false reasons. If we are right, then we should either revise the account of what it is for there to be a reason so as to make it non-factive, or we can follow Schroeder (2008) and say that having a reason doesn't entail that there is a reason. One can also hold that it is possible to have a proposition as a reason without believing the proposition—for instance, when the proposition is the content of an experience that one is undergoing. The issues that I discuss are not affected by whether or not we accept this enlarged notion of reasons.

[4]The latter two correspond to the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters made by Pollock (1986).

[5]For an argument that this is how we should treat suspension of judgment, see Comesaña (2013).

3. What is Impossible?

We can now begin the examination of the thesis that we cannot believe for practical reasons. As a first pass, we can formulate that thesis as follows:

> **Impossibility 1**: Necessarily, if *r* is a practical reason *S* has to believe that *p*, then *S* does not believe that *p* on the basis of *r*.

This way of formulating the impossibility thesis will not be accepted by those philosophers who wish to argue for the stronger thesis that subjects can never even *have* practical reasons for belief. According to these philosophers, a reason to believe is not just (as we assumed) a consideration that counts in favor of believing, but something on the basis of which subjects can come to believe. They will then argue as follows (see Kelly (2002) for an argument of this sort):

1. *r* is a reason *S* has for believing that *p* only if *r* could be the reason for which *S* believes that *p*.
2. Practical considerations can never be the reasons for which subjects believe.

Therefore,

3. Practical considerations cannot be reasons subjects have for believing.

The first premise of this argument is inspired by Williams (1979), who holds that nothing can be a reason for acting unless it is connected in the right way to the subject's "motivational set." The second premise is inspired by Williams (1973), and is a formulation of the impossibility thesis which I am interested in. Notice that, with a stronger first premise, a similar argument could be given for the conclusion that there can never even *be* practical reasons to believe. In this paper I want to bracket the issues that arise with respect to the first premise. I will therefore assume, for the most part, that there are practical reasons to believe, and that subjects sometimes have those reasons, and investigate the issues surrounding the second premise on the basis of this assumption. Those sympathetic to the first premise can replace my talk of practical reason by talk of practical considerations.

Let us now go back to **Impossibility 1**. That cannot be the correct formulation of the thesis, for it is clearly false. It entails the impossibility of a certain kind of doxastically unjustified belief which is manifestly possible (and actual).[6] Beliefs can be doxastically unjustified in three ways: they can be based on insufficient evidence, based on evidence which is by itself sufficient but part of a larger body of evidence had by the subject which is as a whole insufficient, and based on a consideration which is not evidence for the proposition in question.[7] **Impossibility 1** is compatible with the first two kinds of doxastically unjustified belief, but

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[6]I am talking here of *epistemically* doxastically unjustified belief.

[7]Beliefs can also be doxastically unjustified if they are not based on anything (although this doesn't mean that all such beliefs are doxastically unjustified), but I am concentrating here on beliefs that are based on something.

incompatible with the third one. But doxastically unjustified beliefs of that kind are not only possible, but actual (take your pick: homeopathy, alien visitations, etc.).

One important kind of belief based on considerations that are not evidence for the proposition believed is wishful thinking. In cases of wishful thinking, the reasons for which the subject believes are practical in nature—they are not evidence for the proposition believed. In episodes of wishful thinking, we believe on the basis of considerations that are not evidence while ignorant of doing so.[8] Indeed, it may be argued that wishful thinking is possible *only* if it operates in a manner that is not transparent to the subject. This is why, it may be further pointed out, someone who wishes to engage in a bit of wishful thinking cannot do so *directly* and must instead appeal to the kinds of maneuvers Pascal advised we should take if we want to believe against (what we take to be) the evidence: surround ourselves by others who believe, act as one who believes, etc. As Kelly (2002) has helpfully put it, although we may, in full awareness of what we are doing, *bring it about that we believe* for practical reasons (by taking a pill, say, or by engaging in the Pascalian maneuvers of self-deception just mentioned), we cannot with the same full awareness believe for practical reasons. If we are successful in bringing it about that we believe for practical reasons, the result will be that we do not have an opinion on why we believe (or perhaps we have a false opinion, as considered in the next paragraph).[9] In a similar vein, Shah (2003) advances the following "transparency thesis:" under conditions of doxastic deliberation, the question *whether to believe that p* is settled by, and only by, an answer to the question *whether p is true*. By "conditions of doxastic deliberation" Shah means that the subject's inquiry is guided by the question whether to believe that *p* (although this question need not be at the forefront of the subject's conscience to play this guiding role), and by saying that the answer to that question is "settled by, and only by" an answer to the question whether *p* is true, Shah means that the subject will take a consideration to be relevant to answering the question whether to believe that *p* only if he takes that consideration to be evidence relevant to whether *p* is true. If Kelly and Shah are right, then wishful thinking can only operate subconsciously. But even then, the possibility of such subconscious wishful thinking is still a counterexample to **Impossibility 1**, for even if the subject doesn't take *r* to be a practical reason to believe that *p*, she still believes *p* on the basis of a practical reason, and so on the basis of something which is not evidence for *p*.

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[8]Nothing much hangs on whether we want to call such episodes "wishful thinking"—all that matters is the possibility of our believing in ignorance of the nature of our reasons for believing.

[9]If the Pascalian maneuvering is subtle and successful, there may be a third option: that we have put ourselves in a position where we do indeed have epistemic reasons to believe—that is to say, we have put ourselves in a position where, from the point of view of our former self, we have misleading evidence.

Is there anything that is salvageable in **Impossibility 1**? There may well be. Even though we have allowed for a subject to believe on the basis of a practical reason, none of the cases canvassed so far are cases where the subject *takes* herself to believe for a practical reason. This suggests a different impossibility thesis:

> **Impossibility 2**: Necessarily, if *S* takes *r* to be a practical reason *S* has to believe that *p*, then *S* does not believe that *p* on the basis of *r*.

Impossibility 2 is significantly weaker than the bare "we cannot believe for practical reasons." In order to have a good candidate for an impossibility it is crucial to include the doxastic qualifier about what the subject takes to be the case. In taking *r* to be a practical reason he has to believe *p*, the subject takes *r* to not be evidence for *p*. Notice, however, that it doesn't really matter whether *r* really is evidence for *p* or not—all that matters for whether *S* can believe on the basis that *p* is whether *S takes r* to be evidence for *p* or not. But that **Impossibility 2** is not refuted by the counterexamples to **Impossibility 1** does not mean that it is true, of course. Is **Impossibility 2** true? It depends on how we interpret the doxastic qualifier. In the next section I evaluate an initially plausible proposal for interpreting **Impossibility 2** and explaining why it obtains. That proposal, I will argue, is not successful precisely because it gives an improper interpretation of the doxastic qualifier. Under that interpretation, **Impossibility 2** is false. I will then argue that although there is in fact an interpretation that makes **Impossibility 2** true, that interpretation also makes it trivial. I will conclude, however, by arguing that something interesting follows from **Impossibility 2** even under this trivial interpretation.

4. The Truth Norm

The explanation of the impossibility that I want to examine is Shah's own. Shah argues (in effect) that **Impossibility 2** obtains because of the combination of two factors. First, belief is subject to a truth norm, meaning that a belief counts as incorrect if false. Being subject to this truth norm is what distinguishes belief from related propositional attitudes such as assuming and pretending. Second, under conditions of doxastic deliberation we must deploy the concept of belief itself, and (as competent users of that concept) we recognize that it is subject to the truth norm. We must deploy the concept of belief under conditions of doxastic deliberation because being under conditions of doxastic deliberation means that the question *whether to believe that p* is guiding one's inquiry. As we said above, Shah grants that the fact that the question is guiding one's inquiry doesn't entail that the question must be at the forefront of one's consciousness, but it must nevertheless play a psychologically real role if the activity one is engaged in is to count as deliberating about what to believe. The same kind of psychological reality that the question must have, then, is claimed for one's deployment of the concept of belief. If these conditions obtain, Shah argues, then considerations that one takes to be

practical reasons to believe that *p* will not be counted as relevant to the question whether one should believe that *p*.

One may, of course, raise doubts about the alleged fact that belief is subject to the truth norm. And even if Shah is right about the truth norm, it is not plausible to suppose that everyone engaged in doxastic deliberation believes that Shah is right. How is the explanation supposed to go for those subjects perfectly capable of engaging in doxastic deliberation but ignorant of (or skeptic about) Shah's theory? But bracket those doubts. Shah's explanation is not satisfactory even for those who do believe his theory. After all, no matter how much in the background the question what to believe (and the constituting concept of belief) may be, Shah's explanation of **Impossibility 2** is still quasi-inferential: the subject must recognize that believing for a practical reason will make for improper believing, and must *on that basis* decline to believe for what he takes to be a practical reason. There are two important objections to this way of accounting for **Impossibility 2**. First, it simply goes against the phenomenology of the cases in question: when I don't believe that I will recover in case 2, it just doesn't *feel* like I am declining to believe out of deference for my correct apprehension of the concept of belief. Second, and perhaps more importantly, suppose that Shah is right about belief being subject to the truth norm and that I, as the subject in case 2, recognize this. What is to stop me now from overriding my recognition that taking a practical consideration as a reason for believing will make for improper believing? Why can't I say, "I don't care whether my believing will count as *proper* believing, as long as the effects of doing so are as predicted"?[10] But, of course, I wouldn't be able to do this. Shah himself objects to teleological accounts of belief, according to which an episode just doesn't count as believing unless it is regulated by an intention to accept the truth, on the grounds that one may believe without such an intention, because one may believe through the operation of unconscious processes. This is why Shah takes truth to be *normatively*, rather than *metaphysically*, connected to belief—it's not that nothing counts as believing unless guided by an intention to accept the truth, but rather that a subject will not take himself as *properly* believing unless he takes himself as believing for epistemic reasons. But this move from metaphysical to normative necessity opens up the possibility for a subject to *willfully* believe *im*properly. But, again, this is a possibility that is not in fact open, and so Shah's explanation is not satisfactory.

In other words, under Shah's interpretation the doxastic qualifier in **Impossibility 2** is given a substantive, second-order interpretation:

> **Impossibility 2-S**: Necessarily, if *r* is a reason *S* has to believe that *p* but *S* **believes** *r* to not be evidence for *p*, then *S* does not believe that *p* on the basis of *r*.

[10]Enoch (2006) raises a similar objection to constitutivist accounts of the normativity of action.

But, as I have argued, **Impossibility 2-S** is false: why cannot I believe that *r* is not sufficient evidence for *p* while knowingly saying: "To hell with evidence, I will believe *p* because of *r*"?

At this point, Shah might appeal to *doxastic involuntarism*: the fact that we cannot decide to believe in the same way in which we can decide to act.[11] Notice that doxastic involuntarism closes up the possibility left open by Shah's appeal to the truth norm: we cannot willfully believe improperly because we cannot willfully believe. But however appealing doxastic involuntarism may be as (part of) an explanation of **Impossibility 2**, it cannot be the correct explanation, as I go on to argue in the next section.[12]

5. Kavka's Toxin Puzzle and the Irrelevance of Doxastic Voluntarism

Kavka (1983) has presented the following example. There is an eccentric billionaire who offers you this deal: if you form the intention, by midnight tonight, to drink a certain toxin tomorrow, he will deposit a million dollars in your bank account and you will never again hear from him. The toxin has the effect of making you violently ill for a day, but is otherwise benign. The puzzle is that, try as you might, you find yourself unable to form the intention. You know that, when tomorrow comes, there will be no incentive for you to ingest the toxin—either the million dollars will already be in your bank account, in which case there is no need to drink it, or it won't, in which case drinking the toxin will only add insult to injury.[13]

Kavka's diagnosis of the puzzle is the following: you cannot form the intention to perform a certain action on the basis of considerations that are merely reasons for intending to perform the action (and not also reasons to perform the action). In general, reasons to intend to perform a certain action are also reasons to perform that action, but this is not always the case. The millionaire's offer is a reason for you to intend to drink the toxin, but it is not a reason to drink the toxin.[14] Reasons to intend to ϕ can therefore be of two kinds: they can be considerations that favor ϕ-

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[11]For the classic defense of doxastic involuntarism, see Williams (1973).

[12]The explanation of the impossibility in Kelly (2002) takes a similar form: we cannot believe for practical reasons because beliefs are not actions, and only actions can be based on practical considerations. Even if true, this explanation would not be deep (and Kelly himself would agree, I think).

[13]You think, of course, about creating incentives for you to take the toxin—you think of hiring your cousin Vinny to beat you up severely if you don't drink it, for instance—but the billionaire's contract explicitly forbids this.

[14]Your thought of hiring your cousin was an attempt to give yourself a reason to drink the toxin.

ing, or they can be considerations that favor intending to ϕ without also favoring ϕ-ing. Following Pillar (2001) we'll call reasons of the first kind "content-related" reasons for ϕ-ing, and those of the second kind "attitude-related" reasons for ϕ-ing.[15] It is important to notice that this distinction between content-related and attitude-related reasons helps locate the difficulty that Kavka's puzzle presents, but doesn't explain it. For positing the distinction does nothing to explain *why* we cannot intend to ϕ on the basis of attitude-related reasons for ϕ-ing.

The interest of the toxin puzzle for our purposes resides in the fact that the impossibility that it poses is exactly parallel to the impossibility that we are interested in for the case of belief. The distinction between epistemic and practical reasons for beliefs parallels the distinction between content-related and attitude-related reasons for action. Just as the fact that the billionaire will give me a million dollars if I form the intention to drink the toxin is a reason to form that intention but not a reason to drink the toxin, so too the fact that it will make my friend happy is a reason for me to believe that she is loyal without being evidence of her loyalty. An attitude-related reason to ϕ is a reason to intend to ϕ that is not a reason to ϕ; and an attitude-related reason to believe that *p* is a reason to believe that *p* that is not evidence for *p*. Once that connection is made, we can see that there is a general impossibility thesis:

> **General Impossibility**: Necessarily, if *S* takes *r* to not be a content-related reason to take an attitude *D* towards a proposition *P*, then *S* does not take *D* towards *P* on the basis of *r*.

In the practical case, content-related reasons are reasons to act in a certain way (or, equivalently, to make the proposition that you act in a certain way true) and the attitudes are intentions. In the theoretical case, content-related reasons are epistemic reasons (that is, evidence) and the attitudes are beliefs. We have, then, the following instances of General Impossibility (I rename **Impossibility 2**):

> **Theoretical Impossibility**: Necessarily, if *S* takes *r* to not be evidence for *p*, then *S* doesn't believe that *p* on the basis of *r*.
>
> **Practical Impossibility**: Necessarily, If *S* takes *r* to not be a reason for ϕ-ing, then *S* doesn't intend to ϕ on the basis of *r*.[16]

I am not saying that all instances of General Impossibility are true. It is not even clear that General Impossibility makes sense for all attitudes. What is it, for instance, for there to be content-related reasons to imagine something? Some may say that it is for there to be considerations that make the content of the imagination worthy of being imagined. Maybe that is so, but I do not want to commit myself to that.

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[15]Parfit (2001) marks the same distinction but with a different terminology: he talks of object-given vs. state-given reasons.

[16]Notice that we have included the doxastic qualifiers in the statement of Practical Impossibility as well. This is as it should be, for otherwise Practical Impossibility will be open to the same kind of counterexamples that we used against **Impossibility 1**.

Instead, by claiming that both Practical and Theoretical Impossibility are both instances of General Impossibility, I am showing what it is that they have in common.[17]

My claim, therefore, is that Theoretical and Practical Impossibility are at root the same phenomenon, and must as such be explained in analogous ways. This is why doxastic involuntarism, even if true, is a red herring. For everyone should agree that intending is voluntary (at least as voluntary as the corresponding action), and so practical involuntarism, being false, cannot possibly be the explanation of Practical Impossibility.[18] If I am right that both impossibilities should receive analogous explanations, then doxastic involuntarism cannot be the explanation of Theoretical Impossibility. To clarify, I do not mean that doxastic involuntarism, if true, is completely irrelevant to Theoretical Impossibility. I remain neutral about that. What I am saying is that it cannot be the deep reason why Theoretical Impossibility obtains, for (given the existence of Practical Impossibility) we have ample reasons to think that Theoretical Impossibility would still obtain even if doxastic involuntarism were false.[19]

6. What Explains the Impossibilities?

I have so far argued that a promising attempt at explaining Theoretical Impossibility fails, for the interpretation involved in the explanation makes the alleged impossibility not impossible at all. Moreover, I have also argued that the correct explanation of Theoretical Impossibility must give us an explanation of Practical Impossibility as well. This rules out doxastic involuntarism as an explanation of the

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[17] *If* we end up thinking that both Practical and Theoretical Impossibility are true, then we might wish to consider the project of arguing for General Impossibility that captures a more general truth. I will argue that both Practical and Theoretical Impossibility are true only in a trivial sense, and so I do not see much interest in that project.

[18] Hieronymi (2006) claims that intendings are not voluntary. However, she reaches this position by defining the formation of an attitude as voluntary if and only if (in effect) it is formed on the basis of attitude-related reasons. It thus turns out that not only belief isn't voluntary, but neither is intention. This merely terminological move, however, does not seem to me to be very deep. Notice, for instance, that it does nothing to explain why either impossibility obtains—that is, in her terminology, it does nothing to explain *why* belief and intention are not voluntary.

[19] For the same reason, even if Kelly (2002) is right that there is a difference between actions and beliefs such that we cannot believe for practical reasons, this leaves Practical Impossibility unexplained, and so suggests that it cannot be the most perspicuous explanation.

impossibilities. In this section I argue that the key in offering a correct explanation of both Practical and Theoretical Impossibility lies in giving a non-substantive, first-order interpretation of the doxastic qualifiers in the theses.

Let us first tackle Theoretical Impossibility. Its antecedent involves a subject taking a consideration *r* to *not* be evidence for *p*. I start by considering what it might be for a subject to take *r to be* evidence for *p*, and then I return to the negative case.

What is it, then, to take *r* as being evidence for *p*? Under Shah's interpretation, it is to believe that *r* is evidence for *p*. That is a substantive, second-order interpretation of the doxastic qualifier which, I have argued, results in a false impossibility thesis. Is there any other interpretation available?

There is. Start by considering a related question: What is it to take a person *S* to be a scoundrel? Following Shah's model of the interpretation of the doxastic qualifier, it is to hold a belief to the effect that *S* is a scoundrel. But in a very clear way, believing that *S* is a scoundrel is neither necessary nor sufficient for taking *S* to be a scoundrel. You may lack the belief, and yet behave in ways that betray the fact that you take *S* to be a scoundrel: you avoid *S*'s company, you counsel others to do the same, etc. Indeed, you may come to *discover*, to your surprise, that you take *S* to be a scoundrel, and you may then either come to believe that *S* is a scoundrel or may try to modify your behavior in accordance with what you take to be the case. Conversely, you may well believe that *S* is a scoundrel without taking *S* to be a scoundrel. Indeed, you may come to discover that you don't take *S* to be a scoundrel, and you may then either modify your behavior to match your beliefs or, like Princess Leia did with respect to Han Solo, you may abandon your belief.[20]

Under that assumption, just as believing that *S* is a scoundrel is neither necessary nor sufficient for taking *S* to be a scoundrel, so too believing that *r* is evidence for *p* is neither necessary nor sufficient for taking *r* to be evidence for *p*. You may have the belief while your behavior betrays that you don't take it to be so, and you may lack the belief while your behavior shows that you do take it to be so. But what is the behavior in this case? What is the analogous of avoiding *S*'s company, etc? In this case it will, of course, not be physical behavior, but rather doxastic behavior. One clear way in which one can take *r* to be evidence for *p* is by consciously believing *p*

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[20]The case is tricky. Solo himself thinks that Leia likes him *because* he is a scoundrel: "There aren't enough scoundrels in your life." However, it is likely that Solo is using 'scoundrel' here in an "inverted commas" sense. Of course, some philosophers will say that there isn't a sharp line between believing that someone is a scoundrel and behaving as if he is. Leia only *thinks* that she believes that Han Solo is a scoundrel, whereas her attitudes reveal that she doesn't really hold that belief, or perhaps she is in a state that is in between believing and not believing, those philosophers will say. That is fine by me: it is enough that Leia's state doesn't count as a *paradigmatic*, full-blown belief.

on the basis of *r*.[21] Now, of course one may take *r* to be evidence for *p* and not believe *p* at all—for example, one may take *r* to be *some*, but not *sufficient*, evidence for *p*, and even if one takes *r* to be sufficient evidence for *p* when considered in isolation, one may take it that there is further evidence which, together with *r*, does not provide sufficient evidence for *p*. Believing that *p* on the basis of *r* is thus not necessary for taking *r* to be evidence for *p*, but it does seem to be sufficient. It follows, then, that not taking *r* to be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*.

Now, suppose that one does not believe that *p* on the basis of *r*. Why could that be? It could be, of course, simply because one is not aware of *r*. But it could also be because one is aware of *r* and takes it to not be evidence for *p*. Given that not taking *r* to be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*, it follows that, *in normal cases*, taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* will also be sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*. This is so because, in normal cases, taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not taking *r* to be evidence for *p*. The *abnormal* cases will be ones where one takes *r* both to be and to not be evidence for *p*. If this happens, then it may well be that even though one takes *r* to not be evidence for *p*, one nevertheless does believe that *p* on the basis of *r*—on account of the fact that one also takes *r* to be evidence for *p*. I take it (no pun intended), however, that the cases that we are interested in (those in the scope of the impossibility theses here analyzed) are not these pathological ones. The question: Why cannot we believe for what we both take and take not to be practical reasons? is not a particularly pressing one—not because it has an obvious answer, but because the cases to which it applies are abnormal. I therefore assume that, at least for the cases that interest us, taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not taking *r* to be evidence for *p*.

Therefore, under this interpretation, taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*. This interpretation then explains **Impossibility 2**.[22] But notice that the explanation thus provided makes **Impossibility 2** trivial. The explanation can be presented as the following argument:

1. Believing that *p* on the basis of *r* is sufficient for taking *r* to be evidence for *p*.

Therefore,

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[21]The "consciously" qualifier is important if we want to allow for the possibility of unconsciously believing for what we take to be an attitude-related reason—see the end of section 2. That said, I drop the qualifier in what follows.

[22]Hieronymi (2006) argues that (in the terminology used here) to take *r* to not be evidence for *p* doesn't involve believing that *p*. Of course, anyone who thinks that we cannot believe for what we take to not be evidence will agree that taking *r* to not be evidence doesn't involve believing that *p* (otherwise it would of course be possible to believe for what we take to not be evidence!). But just pointing that out doesn't explain the impossibility. In addition to *not involving* believing that *p*, taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* involves *not believing* that *p* on the basis of *r*.

2. Not taking *r* to be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*.

3. Taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not taking *r* to be evidence for *p* (in the cases that we are interested in).

Therefore,

4. Taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* is sufficient for not believing that *p* on the basis of *r* (in the cases that we are interested in).

The crucial assumption 1 follows from our proposal to interpret takings not as full-fledged doxastic attitudes, but rather as motivational states that would be rationalized by the corresponding doxastic attitudes. If this assumption about what it is to take something not to be evidence is accepted, then it follows trivially that someone who takes *r* to not be evidence for *p* will not believe that *p* on the basis of *r*—modulo the irrelevant complications noted, that just is *part of what it is* to take *r* to not be evidence for *p*.

Analogous considerations apply to Practical Impossibility. Subject to the same complications noted in the theoretical case, the proposal is that to take *r* to not be a reason for ϕ-ing *just is* (in part) to not intend to ϕ on the basis of *r*. If the proposal is accepted, no deep explanation is needed for why it is not possible to intend to ϕ on the basis of a consideration that one takes to not be a reason for ϕ-ing.

The proposed interpretations of what it is to take a consideration to not be evidence or to not be a reason for acting make the impossibilities in question trivial. But (I have argued) it is precisely only in these trivial senses that we cannot believe or act for attitude-related reasons. As soon as we open a gap between taking something to not be evidence for *p* or a reason to ϕ, on the one hand, and believing and intending on the other, we allow for serious objections to the impossibility theses analogous to the objection that we raised for Shah's interpretation. For, to illustrate with the theoretical case, suppose that it is possible to take *r* to not be evidence for *p* while at the same time believing that *p* on the basis of *r*. In that case, of course, the impossibility can at best be *normative*: we *shouldn't* believe that *p* for what we ourselves take to not be evidence for *p*.[23] But this leaves it open that we can do it: that we can say "To hell with evidence, I will believe that *p* on the basis of *r*." But we cannot do so, and so any merely normative interpretation of the impossibilities will leave something unexplained. The reason why we can't do so is precisely that there is no gap between taking *r* to not be evidence for *p* and not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*. We cannot say "To hell with evidence, I will believe that *p* on the basis of *r*" because, under my interpretation, that will involve both believing and not believing that *p* on the basis of *r*.

[23] I say "at best," and I mean it. If we believe that *p* on the basis of *r* when *r* is sufficient evidence for *p*, then we may well be justified in believing that *p*, even if we also take *r* to not be evidence for *p*.

7. Practical Justification for Belief?

There are two related questions regarding **Impossibility 2** that I have been examining. First, how should we interpret the doxastic qualifier in that thesis? Second, assuming that the thesis is true, what explains its truth? The two questions are related because, I have argued, whether the thesis is true at all—and, therefore, whether we should look for an explanation of it—depends on how we interpret the doxastic qualifier. I examined one higher-order interpretation of the doxastic qualifier and argued that it results in a false thesis. I then proposed, in the previous section, a first-order interpretation of the doxastic qualifier, according to which part of what it is to take something to be a reason for believing (or acting) is to believe (or act) on the basis of that reason. This results in a true, but trivial, interpretation of **Impossibility 2**. I also argued that any stronger interpretation of this thesis will result in a false claim.

Is there nothing of substance, then, to the claim that there is no practical doxastic justification for belief? On the contrary, I think that the notion of taking a consideration to be a reason of a certain kind can help illuminate why it is true and interesting that there cannot be practical doxastic justification for belief.

Assume that, to be (practially or epistemically) doxastically justified in believing that *p*, it is not enough to believe that *p* for good reasons that one has, even when one lacks any other reasons for not believing. Assume that one must, in addition, take those reasons to be good reasons of the kind in question. When the kind in question is epistemic, this additional condition is automatically satisfied, for believing on the basis of a reason is sufficient, I argued, for taking that reason to be evidence for believing. But when the reason in question is practical, I argued, then one can believe on its basis only if one does not take it to be a practical reason. If our assumptions are correct, then it follows that one cannot be practically doxastically justified, even when one manages to be believe on the basis of a practical reason.

The same goes for the practical case. Just as we distinguish between propositional and doxastic justification for the case of belief, we should similarly distinguish between propositional and what we can call "conatic" justification for the case of intention. Thus, just because I intend to do the rational thing it doesn't follow that I am rational in so intending—I am not, for instance, if I intend to do it for the wrong reasons. Suppose now that we make an assumption analogous to the one made for the belief case: that intending on the basis of an undefeated good reason is not sufficient for conatic justification, that taking the reason in question to be a good reason of the kind that it is is also a necessary condition. In that case, given my argument that taking something to not be a content-related reason to ϕ entails not intending to ϕ on the basis of that reason, one can never be conatically justified in intending on the basis of an attitude-related reason.

The results of this section depend on the assumptions that to be doxastically (conatically) justified in believing (intending) on the basis of reason r, one must take

r to be the kind of reason that it is. I believe that there is a lot to be said for that assumption, but defending it here would take us too far afield.[24]

8. Conclusion

We can believe for practical reasons. We do so when we engage in wishful thinking. We may also do so even when consciously deliberating about what to do, if we confuse an attitude-related reason for a content-related reason. What we cannot do is believe for *what we take to be* attitude-related reasons. What explains this impossibility? I argued against two different lines of explanation: the appeal to belief as subject to a truth-norm and the appeal to doxastic involuntarism. I then pointed out that a related impossibility obtains in the realm of practical reasons: we cannot intend to ϕ for what we take to be merely attitude-related reasons to intend to ϕ. Given that these are at root the same phenomenon, we should look for a unified explanation. I gave that unified explanation in terms of what it means to take a consideration *r* to be a merely attitude-related reason to believe that *p* or to intend to ϕ: it involves not believing that *p* or not intending to ϕ on the basis of *r*. This interpretation makes the impossibilities in question trivial. But that is as it should be. We cannot believe a proposition for what we take to not be evidence for that proposition only because taking a consideration to not be evidence for a proposition already involves not believing that proposition for that reason. However, this does not mean that there is nothing of substance to the impossibilities. Even though we can believe and intend for good attitude-related reasons, so believing will never be doxastically justified, and so intending will never be conatically justified.[25]

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[24]For related issues, see Comesaña (2006) and Turri (2010).

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