Practical Reasons for Pragmatism

§0 Introduction

The existing philosophical debate about the nature of reasons for belief between pragmatists and evidentialists has been substantially biased in favor of evidentialists. The literature has been focused on gathering and evaluating evidence pertaining to evidentialism and pragmatism, in the form of philosophical arguments for and against these two theses. But this way of proceeding simply presumes the truth of evidentialism, since it assumes that what we should be doing when evaluating pragmatism and evidentialism is collecting relevant evidence in order to determine which of them we should believe. Evidentialism recommends this way of proceeding, but pragmatism does not. Holding the debate on terms more favorable to the pragmatist would require also identifying and assessing the *practical reasons* in favor of belief in pragmatism and evidentialism. Ultimately, as I will argue in this paper, conducting the debate in a fair way will shed new light on the merits of pragmatism and the flaws of evidentialism.

In the first section, I outline some terminological preliminaries and identify how the discussion is biased in favor of evidentialism. In the second section, I identify the practical reasons bearing on belief in pragmatism and evidentialism. I argue that there are structural reasons why almost everyone, almost all of the time, will have more than ample practical reason to be a pragmatist rather than an evidentialist. Then, in the third section, I examine the prospect that pragmatism and evidentialism could be self-defeating theories, and show that the self-defeat of evidentialism is both more likely and worse than the self-defeat of pragmatism. In the fourth section, I discuss how to rationally change or make up one’s mind about pragmatism and evidentialism, and how to determine what to believe under uncertainty about whether pragmatism or evidentialism is correct. Then, I conclude.

§1 Preliminaries and Literature

Pragmatism is the thesis that all reasons for belief are practical—you have reason to believe P insofar as your believing P brings about good consequences (or good expected consequences).[[1]](#footnote-1) The fact that your belief that you will win the race will improve your performance is a reason to hold that belief, for example.[[2]](#footnote-2) Evidentialism is the view that there are no practical reasons for belief; rather, all reasons to believe P are factors that render the truth of P more likely.[[3]](#footnote-3) Call these “epistemic reasons” or “evidence.” These positions are not exhaustive: there could be both practical and epistemic reasons for belief,[[4]](#footnote-4) or there could be a third kind of reason. I will set aside these views for the purpose of comparing pragmatism and evidentialism.

The literature on pragmatism and evidentialism has been methodologically biased in favor of evidentialism, since it consists of arguments for and against evidentialism and pragmatism. For example, a powerful argument which has been marshalled in favor of pragmatism is the equal treatment argument: pragmatists can determine the rationality of belief in the same way they determine the rationality of being in any other state, by its expected consequences.[[5]](#footnote-5) Evidentialists have argued that in order to be a genuine reason for belief, something must be a consideration on which a belief can be based, and one cannot base a belief on non-evidential factors.[[6]](#footnote-6) These are just two examples of arguments in the literature, and there are many more.[[7]](#footnote-7) Such arguments are evidence for and against pragmatism and evidentialism.

But gathering and analyzing evidence in this way is simply to presume the truth of evidentialism. If we assumed the truth of evidentialism, what we would want to do in order to evaluate a hypothesis is to examine the evidence for and against it, and this is exactly what philosophers have done in the case of pragmatism and evidentialism. By contrast, if we assumed the truth of pragmatism, we would want to exclusively consider the practical reasons for and against belief in a hypothesis when evaluating it. To be unbiased, we should consider both. Yet, the philosophical literature has not been concerned with the practical reasons pertaining to belief in pragmatism and evidentialism.[[8]](#footnote-8) We will now consider the relevant practical reasons.

§2 Practical Reasons for Pragmatism

One’s practical reasons will almost always favor belief in pragmatism, rather than evidentialism. If one is a pragmatist, then one is disposed to form the beliefs which one has most practical reason to form. Evidentialists, by contrast, are disposed to believe what their evidence supports. In my view, having these dispositions just is believing in pragmatism or evidentialism. However, the arguments below do not presuppose this, since other views of the metaphysics of belief also require a tight connection between belief that P and a disposition to act as if P is true. If one’s belief in pragmatism or evidentialism has no effect on one’s other beliefs, then this suggests that we have not formulated the views properly. In any case, I will assume that one who believes pragmatism is disposed to believe what she has most practical reason to believe, and one who believes evidentialism is disposed to believe what her evidence supports.

Sometimes, one’s evidence and one’s practical reasons support different beliefs. In such a case, the pragmatist forms the belief which they have most practical reason to form, and the evidentialist forms the belief which is supported by the evidence. Let represent the utility of forming the belief supported by the practical reasons, and let represent the utility of forming the belief which the evidence supports. By the way we set up the case, > , so the pragmatist is happier than the evidentialist by - .

The greater utility the pragmatist enjoys in this case, and those like it, is a practical reason to be a pragmatist. There may be more such cases, perhaps ones where the difference between the pragmatist’s utility and the evidentialist’s utility is large. Epistemic and practical reasons often conflict, which is why the debate between pragmatists and evidentialists is so important. Thus, to arrive at the magnitude of the total practical reason to be a pragmatist, we need to sum the differences in utility between the pragmatist and the evidentialist across all situations where the evidence and practical reasons support different doxastic attitudes. Formally,

This formula shows that one’s practical reason to be a pragmatist is the sum of the difference in utility between following the recommendations of pragmatism and following the recommendations of evidentialism, across all of the cases where they issue divergent recommendations. *P* is a substantial practical reason to be a pragmatist. *P* will be larger to the extent that there are more situations in which the epistemic reasons and the practical reasons point in different directions (higher values of *n*), or to the extent that there is a bigger difference in welfare between one who believes what the practical reasons support and one who believes what the epistemic reasons support (higher values of - ). This is not to say that the theories will never issue the same recommendations; indeed, they very often issue the same recommendations, since having true beliefs is usually in one’s interest and evidence usually indicates the truth. But for anyone living in an epistemic environment in which the epistemic and practical reasons sometimes support different beliefs—and surely, this would include most if not all human beings—there is a sizeable practical reason favoring belief in pragmatism.

We have just seen that there is a big benefit to being a pragmatist, and accordingly, a big cost to being an evidentialist. Are there any comparable practical benefits that the evidentialist could claim? Perhaps believing the truth has intrinsic value, and, since evidence indicates what is true, the evidentialist realizes more of this alethic value than does the pragmatist. Even so, the pragmatist will usually have almost as many true beliefs as the evidentialist, since having true beliefs often has instrumental value,[[9]](#footnote-9) which the pragmatist will be sensitive to in the formation of her beliefs. Indeed, the pragmatist is sensitive to alethic intrinsic value, too, if there is such a thing, since pragmatists aim to form the belief which realizes the most value. Hence, the pragmatist will realize almost as much alethic value as the evidentialist, and whenever the pragmatist has a false belief, this owes to the fact that a good more valuable than alethic value was realized by the formation of the false belief.

The point here is a general one: any hidden value which an evidentialist might claim as a practical reason in favor of her view can be co-opted by the pragmatist in a similar manner. Pragmatists often form the belief supported by their evidence, since evidence indicates the truth and having true beliefs is often instrumentally valuable. Furthermore, cases where the pragmatist does not believe what is supported by the evidence are cases where so doing realizes values more important than whatever values are realized by believing what the evidence supports.

The foregoing considerations do not show that it is impossiblefor the practical reasons to favor evidentialism, only that this is extremely unlikely. Perhaps a nefarious evidentialist billionaire is giving out bribes to epistemologists if they believe in the truth of evidentialism (this would be a curious policy for an evidentialist to adopt, but no matter). One should be an evidentialist under such circumstances just in case the utility of the bribe is greater than *P*. So there are extremely unlikely circumstances in which the practical reasons support evidentialism. By contrast, we can know *a priori* that there are practical reasons to believe in pragmatism, a fact which flows from the very nature of the view, though the magnitude of this practical reason is contingent and must be ascertained empirically. There is *automatically* a large practical reason to believe in pragmatism, one which is outweighed only in cases like the evidentialist billionaire.

Importantly, evidentialism enjoys no analogous support. There is not automatically substantial evidence supporting evidentialism. The evidentialist is disposed to believe what her epistemic reasons support in cases where they conflict with her practical reasons, so she will have more beliefs which enjoy the support of the evidence than does the pragmatist. However, this does not translate into evidence for evidentialism itself, for the fact that evidentialism leads one to have beliefs which are supported by the evidence does not itself constitute evidence in favor of evidentialism. This is because evidentialism is a thesis about the nature of our reasons for belief, which is evidentially unrelated to the mundane propositions about which we form beliefs in ordinary life. By contrast, *P* constitutes a practical reason to believe in pragmatism, since one would have that much less utility if one believed in evidentialism rather than pragmatism.

§3 Self-defeat

We have just examined the practical reasons pertaining to pragmatism and evidentialism. As I mentioned at the outset, the literature is full of evidence for and against pragmatism and evidentialism, so I will direct the reader to the many excellent papers devoted to evaluating that evidence, rather than review it here. To me, it is clear that the evidence supports pragmatism—there are important philosophical arguments for pragmatism and against evidentialism which have not yet been, and probably cannot be, answered. If the evidence in fact points away from evidentialism, then evidentialism is a self-defeating theory: evidentialism tells you to believe what the evidence supports, and the evidence supports pragmatism, so evidentialism tells you not to believe evidentialism. Of course, this self-defeat is merely contingent: new arguments in favor of evidentialism might be discovered, or the old ones against it may be decisively answered, forgotten or suppressed. Nevertheless, the actual self-defeat of evidentialism gives us occasion to examine the conceptual issues surrounding the self-defeat of pragmatism and evidentialism.

There are of course many forms of self-defeat which a theory might face. The strongest is that if a theory is true, then it is false. But there are also milder forms of self-defeat. The mildest, often raised against consequentialism and ethical egoism, is that trying to follow the recommendations of the view will lead you to do worse by the lights of the view.[[10]](#footnote-10) I will focus on an intermediate form of self-defeat which is the most epistemologically interesting, according to which a theory is self-defeating when the theory recommends against belief in itself. This kind of self-defeat, if it occurs, is usually contingent. Pragmatism and evidentialism could be self-defeating in this way only relative to a person’s evidence or practical interests. So these views can be self-defeating, in this sense, relative to a person and a time, not self-defeating *simpliciter*.

Evidentialism is self-defeating for one when one’s evidence supports pragmatism, and pragmatism is self-defeating for one when one’s practical reasons support evidentialism. Because of the arguments in the last section, we can see that the circumstances in which evidentialism is self-defeating are much more likely than the circumstances in which pragmatism is self-defeating. Epistemologists argue about the relative merits of evidentialism and pragmatism, and are divided. There are good arguments for and against both evidentialism and pragmatism, so the evidence is mixed. Whether your evidence supports evidentialism or not depends on highly contingent factors about which papers you have read and how you evaluate and compare the force of the arguments in them. By contrast, I have just argued that the practical reasons will almost certainly firmly support pragmatism because of structural facts about the nature of pragmatism—there are automatically practical reasons in favor of pragmatism. The practical reasons support evidentialism only when a nefarious evidentialist billionaire is handing out bribes to believe in evidentialism, or in some other extremely unlikely event. Thus, evidentialism is much more likely to be self-defeating than is pragmatism. This is a mark in favor of pragmatism—self-defeat is a bad-making, though perhaps not damning, feature of an epistemological theory.[[11]](#footnote-11) Though the self-defeat of both views is possible, the self-defeat of evidentialism is much more likely than the self-defeat of pragmatism.

In addition, the self-defeat of pragmatism would not be as bad as the self-defeat of evidentialism. If the evidence supports pragmatism, then pragmatism is probably true, since the function of evidence is to indicate truth. The self-defeat of evidentialism is evidence against evidentialism, it indicates the falsity of evidentialism, and the truth of pragmatism.

If the practical reasons support evidentialism, this is not evidence against pragmatism, so the self-defeat of pragmatism does not indicate the falsity of pragmatism. If pragmatism is self-defeating, then this is because of a contingent accident about what practical reasons one happens to have. Practical reasons do not indicate the truth of what they support like evidence does.

Pragmatic self-defeat does not indicate the truth of evidentialism like evidential self-defeat indicates the truth of pragmatism. Thus, self-defeat is bad news for evidentialism, since it indicates its falsity, but it is not clear that it is bad for pragmatism, since it is evidentially irrelevant to the truth of pragmatism.

I have argued that the self-defeat of evidentialism is both more likely and worse than the self-defeat of pragmatism. There are automatically strong practical reasons in favor of pragmatism, so it is very unlikely that the practical reasons favoring belief in evidentialism are strong enough to outweigh the practical reasons favoring belief in pragmatism, as I argued in section 2. Even more damning for the evidentialist, and independent of my arguments earlier in the paper, the self-defeat of evidentialism is evidence for pragmatism, but the self-defeat of pragmatism is not evidence for evidentialism. Both of these facts, I submit, cast pragmatism in a better light than evidentialism.

§4 Change of Mind and Uncertainty

So far, I have argued that the literature has neglected an important consideration in the debate between pragmatists and evidentialists: whether the practical reasons support pragmatism or evidentialism. Furthermore, I have argued that the practical reasons are very likely to support pragmatism since there are automatically substantial practical reasons in favor of pragmatism. I noted that I regard the balance of the evidence as supporting pragmatism as well, which led us into a discussion of the self-defeat of pragmatism and evidentialism, where I argued that the self-defeat of evidentialism is both more likely and worse than the self-defeat of pragmatism.

Suppose that you, dear evidentialist reader, have been convinced by my arguments so far—should you change your mind and believe in pragmatism? More generally, how should someone decide what to believe about pragmatism and evidentialism? The aim of this final section is to answer that question. There are three cases to consider:[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. You change your mind from evidentialism to pragmatism.
2. You change your mind from pragmatism to evidentialism.
3. You begin in a state of neutrality, and then make up your mind.

We will now consider each option in turn.

First, suppose that you are an evidentialist. If your evidence supports evidentialism, then you can rest content. However, suppose that you fall under the influence of pragmatist writers, making it the case that your evidence supports pragmatism. Then, it seems as if evidentialism recommends that you should change your mind, and start believing in pragmatism. Being a good evidentialist, you follow your evidence where it leads, becoming a pragmatist.

Unfortunately, upon becoming a pragmatist, you will regard your conversion as irrational. You changed your mind about evidentialism on the basis of the evidence in favor of pragmatism. But once you are a pragmatist, you do not regard this as a good reason to have converted to pragmatism. Instead, you believe that the practical reasons to believe in pragmatism are the only considerations which should lead someone to believe in pragmatism.

Now, suppose that you are a pragmatist. If your practical reasons support pragmatism, then you can rest content. However, suppose that a nefarious evidentialist billionaire gives you a big bribe to become an evidentialist, making it the case that your practical reasons support evidentialism. Then, it seems as if pragmatism recommends that you should change your mind, and start believing in evidentialism. Being a good pragmatist, you follow your practical reasons where they lead, becoming an evidentialist.

Unfortunately, upon becoming an evidentialist, you will regard your conversion as irrational. You changed your mind about pragmatism on the basis of the practical reasons in favor of evidentialism. But once you are an evidentialist, you do not regard this as a good reason to have converted to evidentialism. Instead, you believe that the evidence supporting evidentialism is the only consideration which should lead someone to believe in evidentialism.

The situation is perfectly symmetric between pragmatism and evidentialism. One might object to this symmetry, on behalf of the evidentialist, along the following lines. It is easy enough to foresee the fact that you will regard your conversion as irrational once it is complete. Hence, one might think that an evidentialist who accepts both an enkratic requirement and some version of the reflection principle should remain an evidentialist even if her evidence supports pragmatism. The thought goes like this: an evidentialist can foresee that she will regard her conversion as irrational before she converts to pragmatism, so she now regards forming the belief in pragmatism as irrational. Since she now accepts an enkratic requirement, she will not form a belief in pragmatism, since she now believes that the conversion would be irrational. Coming to believe in pragmatism would violate that enkratic requirement.

The reason this objection is not right can be seen by drawing a distinction between regarding the formation of a belief as irrational and regarding the belief itself as irrational—a belief can exhibit one kind of irrationality without the other. Consider the literature on cases of “irrelevant influences” on belief. The fact that you were raised in a religious household is hardly evidence for the existence of God, yet, it caused you to form a belief in the existence of God. However, and this seems to be the consensus view in that literature, one can regard the way one formed an irrelevantly influenced belief as irrational, but also regard the belief itself as rational.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Whenever you change your mind about a rational requirement, such a conflict will emerge, as well. If you go from believing evidentialism to believing pragmatism because the evidence supports pragmatism, once a pragmatist you will regard your *conversion* as irrational, but you will regard your *belief* as rational iff the practical reasons support pragmatism (more on this immediately below). More generally, when you change your mind about a rational requirement which applies to itself—like pragmatism and evidentialism, or conciliationism, for that matter—you will regard your conversion as irrational but your belief as rational iff the new rational requirement which you adopt recommends belief in itself (whether it does so may depend on contingent facts about your epistemic state, as it does for pragmatism and evidentialism). Enkratic requirements, in their best form, apply to beliefs about a belief’s rationality, not to beliefs about the rationality of the process which led to the formation of a belief. The pair of attitudes “P, but my belief that P was formed irrationally” is fine, and certainly better than “P, but my belief that P is irrational.” This concludes my response to the objection that evidentialists should retain their belief when the evidence supports pragmatism.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The situation regarding changing your mind about pragmatism and evidentialism is perfectly symmetric. But there are two other cases to consider (set out in the following table):

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Table 1. | Epistemic reasons support pragmatism | Epistemic reasons support evidentialism |
| Practical reasons support pragmatism | You should be a pragmatist. | Believe whatever you started out believing—rational change of belief is impossible. |
| Practical reasons support evidentialism | Unstable. | You should be an evidentialist. |

In the upper left quadrant, you stay a pragmatist if you start out as one because the practical reasons support pragmatism, and you convert to pragmatism if you start out as an evidentialist, because the epistemic reasons support pragmatism. Though you will regard your conversion as irrational, you will regard your belief in pragmatism as rational since the practical reasons support that belief. In the lower right quadrant, you stay an evidentialist if you start out as one because the epistemic reasons support evidentialism, and you convert to evidentialism if you start out as a pragmatist, because the practical reasons support evidentialism. Though you will regard your conversion as irrational, you will regard your belief in evidentialism as rational since the evidence supports that belief. In the upper right quadrant, you are stuck believing what you start out believing. The epistemic reasons support evidentialism, which you regard as reason to be an evidentialist only if you are already an evidentialist. The practical reasons support pragmatism, which you regard as a reason to be a pragmatist only if you are already a pragmatist.

The lower left quadrant is puzzling. If you start out as an evidentialist, you convert to pragmatism because the evidence supports pragmatism. However, once a pragmatist, you see that the practical reasons support belief in evidentialism, and as such, you become an evidentialist, and the cycle continues. The only way to reach an equilibrium is to collect more practical and epistemic reasons, in the hope that the additional reasons that you collect will reverse the direction of support for either practical or evidential reasons (moving you to the upper left or lower right quadrants, respectively). Given my arguments above, it is extremely unlikely that you will land in this quadrant, as the practical reasons will rarely if ever support evidentialism. Nevertheless, nothing further can be said concerning the rational response to such a situation, other than that one should collect more evidence and practical reasons in the hopes of breaking the logjam, and should perhaps suspend judgment in the meantime.

Finally, suppose that you have yet to decide on pragmatism and evidentialism. How should you go about making up your mind? If you accept neither pragmatism nor evidentialism, then you do not have a theory which tells you what you ought to believe. And it is unclear what principles you should employ in deciding what to believe if you do not accept any theory which tells you what you ought to believe.

If the situation is that of the lower right quadrant, then you can reason as follows: “if I was an evidentialist, then I would be content with my belief since the evidence supports evidentialism, and if I were a pragmatist, then I would convert to evidentialism since the practical reasons support evidentialism. So, I should be an evidentialist.” Analogous reasoning holds for the upper left quadrant. As before, I have nothing productive to say about the lower left quadrant, except that one who has not made up one’s mind is best advised to remain agnostic about pragmatism and evidentialism if they find themselves in the lower left quadrant.

The upper right quadrant is the interesting case. The only positive analysis I can provide of such a situation presupposes that you have initial credences in both evidentialism and pragmatism. We will assume for the purposes of this analysis that the views are exclusive and exhaustive, so that Pr(Evidentialism & Pragmatism) = 0 and Pr(Evidentialism) + Pr(Pragmatism) = 1. The informal thought behind this analysis is that if you are uncertain of whether to believe in pragmatism or evidentialism, you should weigh the extent to which the evidence supports evidentialism by your credence in evidentialism, and compare that to the extent to which the practical reasons support pragmatism, weighed by your credence in pragmatism. For example, if you are initially a bit more confident in evidentialism than pragmatism and the evidence only slightly supports evidentialism, but the practical reasons decisively and significantly support pragmatism, then you should be a pragmatist. By contrast, if your prior credence in evidentialism was very high, then the slightest advantage in evidential support for evidentialism is sufficient to make it the case that you should believe evidentialism. And vice versa for pragmatism. This approach also secures the intuitive result that when one kind of reason is tied, the other kind can break the tie to determine what you should believe about pragmatism and evidentialism.

Formally, we need a measure of the extent to which the evidence supports one view over another, and a measure of the extent to which the practical reasons support one view over the other. The measure of how much evidence supports one hypothesis over another is the likelihood ratio. In this case, it is the ratio:

*L* = Pr(E | Evidentialism) / Pr(E | Pragmatism)

Here, E represents all of your evidence which bears on pragmatism and evidentialism. The larger *L* gets, the more the evidence supports evidentialism, and if *L* = 1, then the evidence supports neither view over the other.

The force of practical reasons should be measured in a similar way. The parameter of interest is the ratio of the utility of believing pragmatism to the utility of believing evidentialism:

*U* = U(Believe in Pragmatism) / U(Believe in Evidentialism)

The greater this ratio, the more practical reason you have to believe in pragmatism. At *U* = 1, the practical reasons are indifferent between evidentialism and pragmatism. At *U* > 1 the practical reasons support pragmatism and at *U* < 1 they support evidentialism.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Finally, we can present the formula determining whether someone with credences in evidentialism and pragmatism, but who has not made up their mind about what to believe, should believe about evidentialism and pragmatism. Such a person should believe in evidentialism only if the following inequality holds:

Pr(Evidentialism) \* *L* > Pr(Pragmatism) \* *U*

What this inequality does is weigh the force of the evidence favoring evidentialism by one’s credence in evidentialism, and weigh the force of the practical reasons in favor of pragmatism by one’s credence in pragmatism. Intuitively, the lower one’s credence in evidentialism, the less important it is that the evidence supports evidentialism, and the lower one’s credence in pragmatism, the less important it is that the practical reasons favor pragmatism.

More generally, this criterion can be used to determine what to believe about any proposition (not just about evidentialism and pragmatism) when one is uncertain whether pragmatism or evidentialism is correct. In fact, criteria broadly similar to this have been advanced in the literature on normative uncertainty.[[16]](#footnote-16) When you have credences in pragmatism and evidentialism and are deciding what to believe about P, you should weigh the force of the evidence for P (a likelihood ratio) by your credence in evidentialism, and compare that to the practical reasons for P (a utility ratio), weighed by your credence in pragmatism, in the manner prescribed above.

Given this framework and the current state of our understanding of the practical and epistemic reasons bearing on belief in pragmatism and evidentialism, an undecided party should probably become a pragmatist. I demonstrated in section 2 that there are automatically strong practical reasons to be a pragmatist. These reasons are outweighed by practical reasons to be an evidentialist only if there is something like a nefarious evidentialist billionaire handing out bribes to believe in evidentialism. To my knowledge, there are no perverse interests seeking to influence the beliefs of epistemologists on this matter.[[17]](#footnote-17) Epistemologists have developed numerous arguments for and against evidentialism and pragmatism, and weighing them in order to determine which position the evidence most supports is a delicate matter. I believe that this evidence supports pragmatism, but at best, it provides only modest support to one position or the other, compared to the size of the practical reasons in favor of pragmatism revealed by the arguments of section 2. Unless the neutral party has a very high initial credence in evidentialism (and hence would not be very neutral) or were exposed to an unrepresentative body of evidence which very strongly favors evidentialism, it seems that, given the criterion above, a neutral party should become a pragmatist, since they have strong practical reasons to do so.

So, to readers who were initially undecided about pragmatism and evidentialism (and who are not being paid off by a nefarious evidentialist billionaire), welcome to the pragmatist club! And to my evidentialist readers who give some credence to pragmatism—I invite you to reconsider your position in light of the criterion for forming beliefs under uncertainty outlined above, and to consider the strength of your practical reasons to believe in pragmatism.

§5 Conclusion

I have presented three new lines of thought concerning the debate between pragmatists and evidentialists in this paper. First, I pointed out that an important consideration bearing on the debate between pragmatists and evidentialists has been neglected in the philosophical literature on the topic: the practical reasons pertaining to evidentialism and pragmatism. Then, I examined these reasons, and argued that, unless an evidentialist billionaire is handing out bribes to believe in evidentialism (or some other similar oddity has occurred), our practical reasons decisively support pragmatism. This is because of an automatic, structural advantage that pragmatism enjoys and evidentialism does not: there are always substantial practical reasons in favor of pragmatism because pragmatists are disposed to believe what their practical reasons support when they conflict with the evidence, but there is neither a comparable practical benefit to being an evidentialist, nor is there automatically evidence supporting evidentialism.

Second, I examined issues surrounding the prospect of self-defeat for pragmatism and evidentialism, concluding that the self-defeat of evidentialism is both more likely—because of the structural advantage pragmatism enjoys—and worse—because the self-defeat of evidentialism indicates the truth of pragmatism, though the self-defeat of pragmatism does not indicate the truth of evidentialism—than the self-defeat of pragmatism.

Finally, I looked at the issue of how to rationally change one’s mind about pragmatism and evidentialism. I also presented a criterion for how to decide what to believe under epistemological uncertainty (uncertainty about whether pragmatism or evidentialism is true), and applied this criterion to the decision about whether to believe in pragmatism or evidentialism, arguing that one should probably be a pragmatist, according to the criterion I identified.

If the arguments in this paper have been successful, they have begun the project of filling a very important gap in the philosophical literature on evidentialism and pragmatism, one concerning the practical reasons bearing on pragmatism and evidentialism. Considering the practical reasons as we have has shown that the merits of pragmatism are much greater than has previously been appreciated.[[18]](#footnote-18)

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1. Rinard (2017), (2019) and Maguire and Woods (2020) defend this form of pragmatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An example from Rinard (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Some authors do not like to use “evidentialism” to refer to this position. Berker (2018) uses “anti-pragmatism” and Howard (2020) and Leary (ms) use “alethism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Reisner (2008), (2009), Howard (2016), (2020), Leary (ms). This position was popular among the Classical Pragmatists, and is exemplified by James (1896), who argues that practical reasons come into play only when an option has enough credibility to be “live” for an individual. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rinard (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kelly (2002) and Shah (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a recent survey, see Reisner (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The sole exception to this generalization is Logins (forthcoming). Logins argues that pragmatism predicts that a philosopher who is bribed to believe in pragmatism rationally ought to believe in pragmatism. Yet, *qua* philosopher, someone should never believe in a philosophical theory unless they have a good argument for that theory, and a bribe is not a good argument. I will depart with Logins, since I am not concerned with philosophical methodology, or what one ought to believe *qua* philosopher, but what one ought to believe full stop. In so departing, I will draw a conclusion opposite Logins’s: the practical reasons to believe in pragmatism vindicate rather than condemn it. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rinard (2019) emphasizes this point because true beliefs often facilitate our action aimed at realizing our desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Redacted] raised to me the interesting suggestion that Pragmatism might be self-defeating in this way. Unfortunately, we cannot examine this possibility here. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Though see Christensen (2021) for an argument that self-defeat is not as bad as is commonly believed. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I will not consider the cases of going from evidentialism or pragmatism to a state of neutrality. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See White (2010), Schoenfield (2014), (ms) and Vavova (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [Redacted] has suggested to me an additional line of reply: the circumstances where an evidentialist’s evidence supports pragmatism are the makings of a (putative) epistemic dilemma. On the one hand, the evidentialist could follow their evidence where it leads and become a pragmatist, but on the other hand, the evidentialist could respect the enkratic requirement and reflection principle, auxiliary commitments which fit well with evidentialism. So it is not simply the case that one ought to remain an evidentialist in such a situation, but rather, one both ought to remain an evidentialist and one ought to become a pragmatist (an epistemic dilemma). If you think, as I do, that there are no epistemic dilemmas, then you will regard the fact that evidentialism entails that there could be an epistemic dilemma (when an evidentialist’s evidence supports pragmatism) as a refutation of evidentialism, or at least a mark against it. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The agent’s utility function will have to be normalized to render it proportional to her probability function Pr(\*). We can suppress this complication for convenience. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Bykvist (2017) and Barry and Tomlin (2016) for relevant discussions. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. If there are, I would like to be introduced to them! [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to [redacted] for helpful discussions of the ideas in this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)