How to Argue with a Pragmatist

[Penultimate version, forthcoming in *Inquiry*]

Artūrs Logins, University of Zurich

ABSTRACT

According to recently popular pragmatist views it may be rational for one to believe p when one's evidence doesn't favour p over not-p. This may happen according to pragmatists in situations where one can gain something practically important out of believing p. In this paper I argue that given some independently plausible assumptions about the argumentative nature of philosophy and the irrelevance of bribes for good arguments, pragmatism leads to a contradiction.

KEY WORDS: reasons to believe; evidentialism; pragmatism; arguments; methodology; rationality; belief; pragmatic reasons.

1. Introduction: the puzzle

Consider the following possibility. Imagine that I was going to pay 1,000 USD to each of the reviewers who are invited to review the present manuscript if they can convince themselves that my manuscript is publishable and recommend acceptance of the manuscript to the editors, and I pay nothing if they recommend rejection. Suppose that you are one of the reviewers for this manuscript in such circumstances. Suppose that at the moment of considering my offer your evidence doesn't favour believing that the paper is publishable or believing that it's not publishable and you are not aware of any other practical consideration concerning your views on my manuscript. Would it be rational for you to recommend acceptance and believe that my manuscript is publishable on the basis of my offer of recompense alone?

The *prima facie* observation that I think we can make about the above case is that if you are a pragmatist about epistemic reasons (and think that reasons determine rationality), then it is not obvious at all that it would not be rational for you to believe that my paper is publishable and recommend acceptance. For on a pragmatist view there are pragmatic reasons to believe and some of them might concern monetary rewards for believing certain things. On the pragmatist account, your belief may be rational even if the evidence that you have about the manuscript doesn't favour the claim that the manuscript is publishable. If you are a pragmatist it is not clear why you shouldn't take the bribe and

endorse acceptance of the manuscript.[1] If 1,000 USD is not enough to convince you, let's increase my offer to 1,000,000 USD or whatever your threshold is.

However, such a situation creates a puzzle. As a reviewer for a respectable academic journal, your decision with respect to a manuscript should be ultimately based on an argument with respect to the quality of the manuscript. The editors expect that you as an expert in the field will produce a fair assessment of the manuscript that provides them with some good arguments in favour or against accepting the manuscript for publication. The fact that you will gain some financial reward by providing a positive report cannot, on the face of it, be a basis for a fair argument-providing assessment of the manuscript. Financial reward has nothing to do with the quality of the content of the manuscript. Insofar as you are participating in the practice of evaluating academic articles, it doesn't seem rational for you to base your assessment on pragmatic considerations, e.g. a bribe, that have no connection whatsoever with the content of the manuscript and good arguments for/against accepting it for publication. This seems to stand in a tension with what pragmatism implies with respect to such a situation.

More generally, the puzzle that this and similar cases create for pragmatists is that pragmatists are committed to the view that reasons to believe a proposition can be pragmatic considerations that do not entail, abductively support or raise the probability of the proposition. And yet, at least in a number of cases, we expect our reasons to believe a proposition to be premises of good arguments in favour of the relevant proposition.[2] Only things that entail, or support abductively or probabilistically a proposition can be premises of good arguments in favour of a proposition. However, pragmatism seems either to lead to a revisionary understanding of what a good argument is or to weaken drastically the supposedly essential connection between good arguments and reasons to believe. On this second horn, even in situations where we naturally expect reasons to believe to be essentially connected to good arguments, e.g. reviewing for journals, student evaluation, rational political debate and so on, they need not be so connected.

Surprisingly, this result affects the argumentative situation with respect to pragmatism itself. If we don't need evidential reasons or arguments for being rational in holding a view, then it may well be

---

[1] Of course, there are well-known and much debated issues surrounding the very possibility of believing at will. But let us circumvent the debate and assume for the sake of the argument that there are at least indirect ways for you to convince yourself about the quality of the manuscript that are at your disposal. Perhaps you can consult a hypnotist or undertake another indirect strategy to end up acquiring the relevant belief.

[2] See also Way (2016) and Boult (*forthcoming*) for somewhat similar arguments against pragmatism that rely on versions of the thought that reasons have to be connected to good arguments. See below for a comparison of the present proposal and these arguments.

the case that we don't need arguments to reject pragmatism. Having a pragmatic reason, say, a promise of some financial benefit, might suffice for being rational in rejecting pragmatism. But rejecting pragmatism entails believing that only evidential reasons or arguments can render a view rational. So, if pragmatism is true, we can have good reason to reject pragmatism. But if we have good reason to reject pragmatism, we might not be rational in believing that pragmatism is true. So, if pragmatism is true, we may not be rational in believing that it is true.

In what follows, I explore an aspect of the conflict between what pragmatism seems to entail and the argumentative nature of reasons to believe a philosophical theory in a bit more detail. In particular I situate the argument within a wider perspective of some general observations about philosophical methodology and argument.

2. The new pragmatists

Recently, there has been a new wave of interest in pragmatism in epistemology. A crucial claim of the new pragmatists (cf. Reisner 2009, 2018; Marušić 2013; McCormick 2014; Rinard 2017, 2018; Leary 2017; Maguire and Woods 2020, among others) is that in situations where one's evidence doesn't favour p over not-p, it may nevertheless be rational for one to believe p.[34] Namely, according to the new pragmatists, it can happen in circumstances where one stands to gain something practically important out of believing p, like getting some monetary reward, improving one's health, keeping one's promise, respecting one's friendship, enjoying some warm feelings or acquiring a meaning for life. New pragmatists have long argued, on many occasions, that arguments in favour of the theory according to which no non-evidential – that is, non-truth-conducive – considerations can ever play a role in determining what is rational for one to believe (a.k.a. evidentialism) are all inconclusive and that there are no good undefeated arguments against pragmatism (see Reisner 2018, for a recent overview of the arguments). On the contrary, according to the new pragmatists, pragmatism has a serious theoretical advantage over evidentialism. According to them, it can account both for pre-theoretical judgements

---

[3] Following Rinard (2017), the principal focus here is on rational belief. But the argument below might be adapted to versions of pragmatism about what one ought to believe.

[4] To be more precise, some pragmatists endorse something even weaker: that pragmatic considerations can merely add up to evidential considerations that one already possesses in favour of believing a proposition and help to reach the relevant threshold for rationality. Alternatively, more moderate pragmatists suggest that pragmatic considerations can render a belief obligatory, where it was already permissible given evidential considerations. Thanks to a reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

according to which evidence matters for rational belief and also for pre-theoretical judgements about cases where practical considerations seem to play a role in determining the rationality of beliefs. Evidentialists, according to the new pragmatists, can plausibly explain only the former and need to appeal to complicated and apparently arbitrary error theories about the initial plausibility of the latter judgements (a.k.a. 'wrong kind of reasons skepticism', cf. Maguire and Woods 2020). In sum, according to the new pragmatists, pragmatism has an explanatory advantage over its evidentialist rivals when it comes to special cases and the existing arguments against it are all unsuccessful.

3. The argument

The argument that I am going to present relies crucially on a possible case. Consider a situation where all expert philosophers – more specifically, our reliable peers in epistemology who are agnostic about the pragmatism–evidentialism debate, but are all equally reliable experts – have been offered a good sum of money by an eccentric billionaire to believe the following proposition (p): pragmatism is correct.

Now with this case in mind, consider the following argument:

1. In situations where one's evidence doesn't favour p over not-p, it can be rational to believe that p on the basis of practical considerations (e.g. an offer of a monetary gain). [Pragmatism, Assumed for *reductio*]
2. In a case of peers who are agnostic with respect to the evidentialism–pragmatism debate where their evidence doesn't favour evidentialism over pragmatism, it is rational for such peers to believe that one of these is correct on the basis of practical considerations. [An application of pragmatism to the debate about pragmatism, a case]
3. For any philosophical theory T, one is rational to believe that T is true only if one has a good argument(s) in favour of T. [An Assumption]
4. One (e.g. an agnostic peer) has been offered a monetary gain for believing that pragmatism is true. [A Case]
5. One (e.g. an agnostic peer) is rational to believe that pragmatism is true. [2, 4]
6. That one has received an offer of a monetary gain for believing that pragmatism is correct provides one with a good argument in favour of pragmatism. [3, 5]
7. For any philosophical theory T, having an offer of a monetary gain for believing that T is correct never provides one with an argument in favour of T. [An assumption]

(1)–(7) leads to a contradiction. A premise should be given up. Which premise should we give up? Several points have to be made here. First, it seems that (5) and (6) should be the last candidates here, for these are merely consequences of what has been assumed in the argument. Giving up these would mean giving up on valid logic rules. This should be accepted as an extremely revisionary move and should be considered the least plausible option.

Second, we can observe that the argument makes a number of assumptions. And someone sympathetic to pragmatism might be tempted to think that at least one of these has to be wrong. However, it is not clear that pragmatists have an obvious escape route here. Consider, for instance, premise (2) of the above argument. It is merely an application of the general pragmatist principle to *a* case where some peers are agnostic about evidentialism–pragmatism; their evidence doesn't favour one over the other. This premise merely states that assuming that pragmatism holds there is a possible case where pragmatism will predict that agnostic peers with equipotent evidence with respect to evidentialism–pragmatism are still rational in believing that one of the theories is correct merely given pragmatic considerations. It doesn't state that it is the case for all agnostic peers. It only states that the general pragmatist principle also applies to the philosophical debate over pragmatism and hence there are situations where pragmatic considerations determine whether one is rational in believing that pragmatism is correct. If pragmatists were to deny this, they would owe us an extra explanation of why it can never be the case that pragmatic considerations determine the rationality of believing or not that pragmatism is correct. They would owe us an explanation of what's so special about this case and why practical matters never interfere with rationality of belief in pragmatism. It is not easy to see how such an extra explanation could be provided, and hence I suggest that denying the truth of premise (2) is not a promising option for pragmatists: that assuming that pragmatism is true, there is a possible case where pragmatic considerations matter for rational belief in pragmatism.

The assumption in premise (3) also looks rather warranted. It only states that when it is rational for us to believe that a philosophical theory is correct, we have an argument in favour of the theory. It doesn't state that if we have good arguments for a theory, or a sufficient amount of good arguments in favour of a theory, it is rational for us to believe it. (Having a general theory of when it is rational to believe something is not something we can provide within the limits of the present manuscript.) It's just the minimal claim that one cannot be rational in endorsing some philosophical theory without having any (good) argument in its favour whatsoever. This premise is rooted in some very general considerations about aspects of philosophical methodology. Rejecting it may well lead us to some

5

revisionary views of how to understand philosophical activity in general. Think for instance of the very general and standard assumption about the argumentative nature of philosophical methodology. The following three passages from recent general introductions to philosophy and a research article illustrate the point:

> (1) Philosophy is for nit-pickers. That's not to say it is a trivial pursuit. Far from it. Philosophy addresses some of the most important questions human beings ask themselves. The reason philosophers are nit-pickers is that they are concerned with the ways in which beliefs we have about the world either are or are not supported by rational argument. Because their concern is serious, it is important for philosophers to demand attention to detail. People reason in a variety of ways using a number of techniques, some legitimate and some not. Often one can discern the difference between good and bad arguments only if one scrutinizes their content and structure with supreme diligence. (Baggini and Fosl 2010: 1–2)

> (2) The methods philosophy needs for choosing between rival theories need not be so different from the more theoretical methods of natural science. We want the theory that best explains whatever evidence we can get. The method of choosing between theories on that basis is called *inference to the best explanation*. It is widely used in both natural science and philosophy. (Williamson 2018: 78)

> (3) There is no question that the ideal of 'following the argument where it leads' is one that has exerted a powerful attraction in the history of Western philosophy. As one might expect given Russell's invocation of 'Plato's Socrates', the theme is a recurrent one in the Platonic corpus. Thus, in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates declares that 'the lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead him' (14c). In the *Republic*, he instructs his interlocutors that '…wherever the argument, like a wind, tends, there we must go' (394d; Cf. *Phaedo* 107b). And in the *Crito*, he offers the following self-description: 'I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me' (46b). The ideal is also invoked by many later thinkers. For example, John Stuart Mill, in the midst of his defense of the freedom of conscience in *On Liberty*, declares that 'No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead' (1859/1978, p. 32). To this day, great philosophers who embraced strange conclusions are praised in eulogies for their willingness to follow the argument where it leads, […] and the ideal is mentioned in faculty handbooks in the context of discussions of academic freedom […]. (Kelly 2011: 106)

Giving up on premise (3) appears unattractive if we want to maintain the *prima facie* plausible idea that arguments are essential to philosophy and having a rational belief in philosophical theory entails having good arguments for the theory in question.

Premise (4) merely states that there is a possible case where one has pragmatic considerations in favour of believing that pragmatism is correct, namely, an offer of a monetary gain. Again, denying that such a case is even possible requires an extra argument that doesn't seem to be forthcoming.

Finally, a proponent of pragmatism might want to reject premise (7). Recall that it states that a monetary gain cannot provide a good argument for a philosophical theory. One might think that pragmatists have to bite the bullet and endorse the consequence of their view that actually sometimes a monetary gain can provide one with a good argument in favour of a philosophical theory. The worry with this move, however, is that it does not merely question the argumentative nature of philosophy – rejecting premise (3) would do that – but it leads to a radical revisionism about what makes arguments good in general. For rejection of (7) would generalise. If one thinks that a bribe can provide a good argument for a philosophical theory, it is not clear how one could then reject the idea that a bribe can provide a good argument for a scientific theory, for a political view, for endorsing a public policy and so on. Such a consequence, however, would be quite radical and would oblige us to rethink the very nature of rational debate. Thus, of course a proponent of pragmatism might bite the bullet and reject premise (7), but such a move doesn't appear very promising for it would lead to quite a radical revisionism with respect to what can constitute a good argument in general.

At this point, one might question the validity of the argument. One line of thought would be to claim that there is a sort of a gap within the argument.[5] The suggestion would be that premise (6) doesn't really follow from premises (3) and (5), since these two premises alone don't rule out the possibility that the agnostic peer has received other, non-practical considerations as good arguments in favour of the philosophical theory of pragmatism in between. But if (6) doesn't follow, then no contradiction is derived.

To this worry I would like to reply by recognising that there are indeed some implicit assumptions in play within the argument. And an important assumption at play here is that the only difference with respect to an agnostic peer who has no practical interest in pragmatism being true, S, and a peer who

---

has such an interest is the monetary incentive, S' (we can think of the same peer at different times, for instance). The assumption is that we hold fixed the idea that apart from being different with respect to the monetary incentive, the two subjects, S and S', are exactly the same in some relevant sense of the sameness. But then given that the only aspect in which S and S' differ is the monetary incentive, one can plausibly infer that the difference argument-wise between S and S' (that is, with respect to what arguments they have) reduces to their difference monetary-incentive-wise. Of course, there is a logical space here for opposing this inference. However, I don't see any good grounds for rejecting that inference. It seems that there are no theoretically independent good grounds, that is, non-*ad-hoc* grounds, for rejecting such an inference. At any rate, I haven't yet seen pragmatists offer one, which is not of course to say that it cannot be done. But if a pragmatist wants to oppose the argument at this stage, she owes us an explanation of why this inference doesn't go through. As far as I can tell no such independently well-motivated argument is forthcoming. I thus conclude that the argument is sound. However, it may be useful to see how exactly the implicit assumptions work within the argument. Thus, here is a more explicit version of the argument (with additional implicit premises made explicit):

1'. In situations where one's evidence doesn't favour p over not-p, it can be rational to believe that p on the basis of practical considerations (e.g. an offer of a monetary gain). [Pragmatism, Assumed for *reductio*]

2'. In a case of peers who are agnostic with respect to the evidentialism–pragmatism debate where their evidence doesn't favour evidentialism over pragmatism, it is rational for such peers to believe that one of these is correct on the basis of practical considerations. [An application of pragmatism to the debate about pragmatism, a case]

3'. For any philosophical theory T, one is rational to believe that T is true only if one has a good argument(s) in favour of T. [An Assumption]

4'. One (e.g. an agnostic peer with no initial good/sufficient argument for pragmatism) has been offered a monetary gain for believing that pragmatism is true. [A Case]

5'. One (e.g. an agnostic peer) is rational to believe that pragmatism is true. [2', 4']

6'   One (i.e. the agnostic peer) has a good argument(s) in favour of pragmatism. [3', 5', MP]

7'   The only difference between the agnostic peer with a monetary incentive to believe that pragmatism is true and his (internal) doppelganger with no monetary incentive to believe that

pragmatism is true is that the former has a practical interest in believing that pragmatism is true. [4', The case]

8'. The doppelganger of the agnostic peer with no monetary incentive doesn't have a good argument for pragmatism. [4', 7', IBE]

9'. That the agnostic peer has received an offer of a monetary gain for believing that pragmatism is true provides the agnostic peer with a good argument in favour of pragmatism. [6', 8', IBE]

10'. For any philosophical theory T, having an offer of a monetary gain for believing that T is correct never provides one with an argument in favour of T. [An assumption]

Premises (1') –(10') lead to a contradiction. Given the above discussion, I submit that the premise that has to be given up is premise (1').

Thus, it would appear that the above argument presents a genuine challenge for pragmatist views. Given a couple of independently plausible assumptions about the argumentative nature of philosophy and the irrelevance of bribes for good arguments, an application of pragmatism to a case where one has practical considerations in favour of believing that pragmatism is correct but doesn't have conclusive evidence in favour of or against pragmatism leads to a contradiction. Given the plausibility of the assumptions, giving up pragmatism then appears like a viable option.

Before concluding let me compare briefly the present argument to somewhat similar proposals within the recent literature on the evidentialist–pragmatist debate.[6] In a recent and insightful article, Jonathan Way (2016) provides an argument against pragmatism that relies essentially on the connection between reasons and good reasoning and the idea that incentives to believe that p cannot figure as premises of good reasoning towards believing that p. More precisely Way puts forward the following argument:

(1') Reasons to believe p must be premises of good reasoning to believing p.

(2') It is not good reasoning to reason from an incentive for believing p to believing p.

(3') So, incentives for believing p are not reasons to believe p. (Way 2016: 813)

---

[6] Thanks to a reviewer for this journal for drawing my attention to the need to explore the parallels and differences between my proposal and the views in what follows.

The argument is about 'incentives to believe', but assuming that by 'incentives' Way means roughly the same thing as what we mean by 'pragmatic considerations' we can assume that the argument is an argument against pragmatism about normative reasons to believe. The argument is valid. Way proposes the following considerations in favour of the two premises of the argument, in order to defend its soundness. In favour of premise (1') Way suggests that it is a mere application of a highly plausible principle, the 'Good Reasoning Constraint' principle (GRC):

GRC Reasons to ϕ must be premises of good reasoning to ϕ-ing. (Way 2016: 813)

According to Way (2016: 814), GRC is extremely plausible given that 'reasons are what *should* guide us'. The suggestion is that GRC is a natural way to capture this normative aspect of reasons; namely, that reasons fulfil the function of normative guidance by being premises of good reasoning. Note also that GRC corresponds roughly to the so-called Reasoning view of normative reasons that Way and others have defended elsewhere (e.g. Way 2017, McHugh and Way 2016) by defining/reducing normative reasons to good/fitting premise-responses in good/fitting patterns of reasoning.

In favour of premise (2') Way proposes that it is supported by another plausible principle that is stated as follows:

(Link) It is good reasoning to move from believing *p*, *q*, *r*. . . to believing *c* only if '*p, q, r*. . . , so, *c*' is a good argument. (Way 2016: 815)

Way puts forward four lines of thought in favour of (Link) (see Way 2016: 816). First, following Broome (2013), he suggests that reasoning from one belief (belief that p) to another (belief that c) can be expressed schematically as '*p, so c*' (cf. Way 2016: 816) and hence when it is so expressed it is stated in the form of an argument. Thus, the connection between reasoning and argument seems to be rather tight. Second, Way follows Hieronymi (2005) in accepting the general idea that reasoning is directed at a question. Assuming that good grounds for answering a question are good arguments, it is only natural to think, according to this line of thought, that good reasoning corresponds to good arguments. Third, Link provides a good explanation of why there is a close connection between correct beliefs and good reasoning (assuming that correct beliefs are true beliefs). And fourth, it seems that reasoning in general, theoretical or practical, can be assessed by assessing its expression. In Way's words, 'Link is an instance of this general point' (Way 2016: 816).

While I agree with Way that incentives cannot be normative reasons, at least not in a central sense of 'reasons', my argument against pragmatism about reasons, presented above, differs on at least

10

two important points from Way's argument. For one thing I would like to suggest that the present argument is in a sense more surprising, given that it points to a sense in which philosophical pragmatism (i.e. philosophical theory of pragmatism) is self-undermining. This is not to say that one cannot make this implication on the basis of Way's argument. However, my argument makes it explicit how that self-undermining can be understood.

Second, Way's argument relies essentially on a certain view of normative reasons. As we noted above, a central assumption in Way's argument (1'–3' above) is the GRC principle. And on a charitable interpretation of GRC, it just corresponds to the Reasoning view of reasons, which can be stated as follows: 'for that *p* to be a reason for a response is for that *p* to be a premise of a good pattern of reasoning from fitting responses to that response' (McHugh and Way 2016: 586). In contrast to Way's argument, my argument doesn't rely on the view that *all* normative reasons are premises in good reasoning. Indeed, my view is compatible with the idea that there might be normative reasons that are not tied to premises in good reasoning. In opening up such a possibility, I can avoid some worries that the Reasoning view has to face. Among these are the worries of how to explain that it is possible for there to be reasons for one to F in situations where, roughly, by (reasoning towards) F-ing on the basis of a reason to F one would destroy one's reason to F (e.g. surprise party cases; see Schroeder 2007: 165–166) or in cases where one cannot (reason towards) F for a reason to F (e.g. one just cannot (reason to an intention to) move to another place just because the ice-cream there tastes better; cf. Schroeder 2007: 166), or in cases where one cannot reason from a consideration without endorsing a self-undermining premise-response (e.g. Moore-paradoxical beliefs; cf. Logins 2020). My argument avoids these worries, since I am not committed to the view that in all contexts, all reasons have to be contents of premise-responses in good patterns of reasoning. Moreover, in leaving the possibility that not all reasons are essentially premises in good patterns of reasoning, my view also avoids begging the question against those pragmatists who explicitly endorse a radically different understanding of the nature of normative reasons in general. For instance, my argument is compatible with the view that in a sense reasons can also be, roughly, parts of explanations of why it would be good for one to F (cf. Maguire and Woods 2020).

In another recent and insightful article on pragmatism, Cameron Boult (*forthcoming*) provides a new argument against pragmatism about knowledge, i.e. the view that whether one knows or not sometimes depends on one's practical interests (or, in other terms, on what's at stake in a given situation). More precisely, he replies to a recent argument in favour of the claim that an important

purist (i.e. anti-pragmatist) objection to pragmatism fails, namely, the objection that only truth-relevant factors can make a difference to whether one knows. In making his argument for the claim that there is another, better argument in the vicinity of the standard argument from the mere truth-relevant considerations against pragmatism, Boult makes points that are relevant, and indeed very close, to our present proposal. According to Boult, only factors that are relevant to the truth of p or are relevant to the exercise of cognitive agency can make a difference to whether one knows. And since practical interests are beyond these two factors, pragmatism is mistaken (cf. Boult *forthcoming*: 14). Practical interests are not relevant for cognitive agency. Cognitive agency is exercised in good (theoretical) reasoning – reasoning about whether p. And the Link principle from Way (2016) helps to show why this is so. Boult endorses Link and in addition to Way's considerations in its favour provides another line of thought in support of Link:

> Consider William, who sincerely asserts that 'p, q, r. . . , so, c' is a very bad argument for c. He also sincerely endorses his chain of reasoning from p, q, r. . . to believing c. William's combined stance on the argument and his own chain of reasoning is puzzling. Link explains why it is puzzling. (Boult *forthcoming*: 13)

Considerations about cognitive agency are central to Boult's case against pragmatists, since, as he observes insightfully, purists need not be committed to the claim that *only* factors that are relevant to the truth of p (e.g. factors that raise the probability of p) can make a difference between knowledge and belief falling short of knowledge. On Boult's view, the exercise of one's cognitive agency can also make a difference and purists need not deny this. Indeed, the fact that practical interests are irrelevant for cognitive agency speaks against pragmatism. Cognitive agency here is understood as 'the capacity to respond to epistemic reasons, and to express one's epistemic-evaluative commitments in one's judgments and attitudes' (Boult *forthcoming*: 9), while 'practical agency is the capacity to respond to practical reasons, and express one's practical (instrumental, moral) evaluative commitments in one's actions and attitudes' (Boult *forthcoming*: 9). Crucially then, according to Boult, the relevance with respect to cognitive agency is understood in the following way: 'a factor is relevant to cognitive agency with respect to p just in case it can be the input or output of good reasoning concerning whether p' (Boult *forthcoming*: 10). Finally, practical interests cannot be factors that are relevant to cognitive agency with respect to p, since '[i]ntuitively, they can be neither input nor output of an

agent's good reasoning concerning whether p' (Boult *forthcoming*: 10).[7] This is where the appeal to Link is important within Boult's dialectic, since he motivates the idea that practical interests cannot be inputs or outputs of good reasoning whether p, by tightening the connection between good reasoning and good arguments.

While I think of my proposal as congenial to Boult's argument – indeed, I think his defence of Link can be taken to provide additional support for the present proposal, given the interconnections between rational belief (in a philosophical claim), good reasoning, and good argument – I would also like to suggest that one can endorse our present argument without being entirely committed to all of Boult's assumptions. That is, I think that our present proposal goes in a sense beyond Boult's argument. The main substantial difference, as far as I can see, is that the present proposal is not committed to there being a clear-cut distinction between cognitive and practical agency. One may remain agnostic with respect to there being cognitive or practical agency at all or there being a clear-cut distinction between them (as some pragmatists might want to suggest), but still accept the premises of our argument and thus concede that it leads to a *reductio* of pragmatism. The only crucial assumptions for our argument are that no good argument for a (philosophical) hypothesis can be constituted by mere practical interests and that if one is rational in believing a philosophical claim, then one has a good argument in its favour. It need not rely on further assumptions about cognitive agency. But, of course, as noted above, my proposal is in no way incompatible with Boult's argument. Indeed, as I see it, taking both of them on board might constitute a coherent, overreaching approach with respect to reasons to believe as well as knowledge.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, if the above line of thought is on the right track then pragmatism cannot be an improvement upon evidentialist epistemology. It leads to paradoxical conclusions about the concrete application of pragmatism to the belief that pragmatism is correct or to radically revisionary views about aspects of philosophical methodology or good arguments in general. Certainly, everyone can recognise

---

[7] Note, as Boult observes, that this is not to say that practical interests cannot be relevant for *practical* reasoning and hence to practical agency (*ibid.*).

that various cases of practical benefits of not respecting one's equivocal evidence present a challenge for evidentialism. But to abandon evidentialism in favour of pragmatism may well lead us to a place where we are no longer sure why philosophers should aim to fit their theories to evidence from pre-theoretical judgements or, indeed, ground their theories on arguments, rather than, say, bribes, at all. If this is the choice we are facing, then I suggest we rather put our money on traditional evidentialism.

References

Baggini, Julian, and Peter S. Fosl (2010). *The Philosopher's Toolkit: A Compendium of Philosophical Concepts and Methods*. John Wiley & Sons.

Boult, Cameron (forthcoming). Pragmatism, Truth, and Cognitive Agency. *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*.

Hieronymi, Pamela (2005). The Wrong Kind of Reason. *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (9): 437 - 457.

Kelly, Thomas (2011). Following the Argument Where It Leads. *Philosophical Studies* 154 (1): 105–124.

Leary, Stephanie (2017). In Defense of Practical Reasons for Belief. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (3): 529–542.

Logins, Artūrs (2020). Normative Reasons without (Good) Reasoning. *Ethics* 130 (2): 208-210.

Maguire, Barry, and Jack Woods (2020). The Game of Belief. *Philosophical Review* 129 (2): 211–249.

Marušić, Berislav (2013). Promising against the Evidence. *Ethics* 123 (2): 292–317.

McCormick, Miriam Schleifer (2014). *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*. Abingdon: Routledge.

McHugh, Conor, and Jonathan Way (2016). Fittingness First. *Ethics* 126 (3): 575–606.

Reisner, Andrew (2009). The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons for Belief and the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem. *Philosophical Studies* 145 (2): 257–272.

Reisner, Andrew (2018). Pragmatic Reasons for Belief. In Daniel Star (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Reasons and Normativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rinard, Susanna (2017). No Exception for Belief. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94 (1): 121–143.

Rinard, Susanna (2018). Believing for Practical Reasons. *Noûs* 4: 763–784.

Schroeder, Mark (2007). *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford University Press.

Way, Jonathan (2016). Two Arguments for Evidentialism. *Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (265): 805–818.

Way, Jonathan (2017). Reasons as Premises of Good Reasoning. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98 (2).

Williamson, Timothy (2018). *Doing Philosophy: From Common Curiosity to Logical Reasoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.