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II. COMPARING PRAGMATIC AND ALETHIC REASONS¹

[Early draft of chapter 2 *The Pragmatic Foundations of Theoretical Reason*. Comments welcome.

Please check with me to see if these are still my current views before citing this text. Feel free to circulate.]

Abstract:

This book develops a view, *welfare pluralism*, which comprises two theses. One is that there are both irreducibly alethic or epistemic reasons for belief and irreducibly pragmatic (and non-alethic) reasons for belief. The other is that despite this, the source of all normativity is pragmatic in a particular way, i.e. that all reasons are reasons in virtue of their being conducive to wellbeing. The pluralist theory of reasons emerges from the irreducibly plural nature of the components of wellbeing, one of which is being in a positively-valenced epistemic state. This view also offers some insight into outstanding problems concerning the scope, chronicity, and normativity of the requirements of theoretical rationality as well. The present chapter sets out a theory of how to weigh alethic and pragmatic (non-alethic) reasons for belief, or more precisely, to say how alethic and non-alethic considerations jointly determine what one ought to believe. It replaces my earlier (2008) weighing account.

¹ This chapter has been improved in a number of ways due to comments given by those present at the Higher Seminar in Practical Philosophy at Uppsala University. I have mentioned specific contributions throughout the chapter. Simon Rosenqvist's comments on the framing and presentation of the material were also especially helpful. I also want to thank Marc-Kevin Daoust for his valuable written comments. Much of the work in this chapter has been developed in the course of a correspondence with Selim Berker. I thank him most of all.

O. INTRODUCTION

Philosophers disagree about what sorts of considerations determine what one ought to believe. Some philosophers think that truth, or related considerations, are all that bear on what one ought to believe. Others think that moral or prudential considerations are also salient. Irrespective of the particular view, more often than not the unit of consideration is a *normative reason for belief*, or for convenience, just a ‘reason for belief’.

There are two general types of views one might have about final belief oughts. One is that there is just one final belief ought. That is the view that is under consideration in this chapter. A second view, that there is more than one final belief ought, is discussed and rejected in chapter 4.

With respect to what sort of considerations can stand as reasons for belief, there are four main positions represented in the literature. I have given each a name; it is not always the name that is most commonly used, but each does, I hope, help with the clarity of the discussion. The first position is *nihilism*, which is the view that there are no reasons for belief.² The second position is *alethicism*, which is the view that all reasons for belief are or are given by truth-related epistemic considerations, or what I have called ‘alethic reasons for belief’.³⁴ The third position is pragmatism,

² Nihilism has mainly been discussed in literature on doxastic deontology and doxastic responsibility, but it also has been touched in the reasons literature. There is sometimes a fine line between nihilism and pragmatism, depending how each is understood. For some further discussion, see Glüer and Wikforss (2013 & forthcoming) and Papineau (2013).

³ The name is also used by Leary (2017). Alethicism covers a wide variety of positions. As Selim Berker has pointed out to me (correspondence), it may not be apt for all the positions that it is intended to cover, but it nonetheless remains the best option in my view. I mean for alethicism to include evidentialism, as well as relevant justification-first and knowledge-first approaches to understanding reasons for belief. In addition, it includes the position that the only normative factor for belief is whether the belief is true. If one thinks that abductive reasons or inferences to the best explanation should be understood as truth-related reasons, then they should be included under alethicism as well.

⁴ Alethicists are thick on the ground in the normativity literature. Most influential theorists are evidentialists. A small sampling of influential examples includes Adler (2002), Gibbons (2013), Mitova (2017), Shah (2006), and Skorupski (2010). Berker (ms) takes a wider view. But there are many others.

which is the view that all reasons for belief are given by the prudential or moral valence of the belief, or what I have called ‘pragmatic reasons for belief’.⁵ The fourth position is pluralism, which is the view that there are both alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief.⁶

As with many normative matters, intuitions vary both pre-theoretically and amongst the tutored about which of the four positions has the most *prima facie* plausibility. In such circumstances, one may look to the distinctive challenges faced by each candidate view and consider whether they can meet those challenges. In the previous chapter, I considered a *non-starter* challenge against pluralism. In this chapter the main focus will be what can loosely be labelled as *proof-of-concept challenges*. These are challenges that, if not met, cast serious doubt on the correctness of a particular view. They do so not by showing that a view is impossible if it fails to meet the challenges, but rather that it is unpromising. Failure to meet a proof-of-concept challenge is a reason to doubt a view’s correctness, absent significant independent theoretical support.

For nihilism, the proof-of-concept challenge is to provide some sort of error theory for the apparent existence of reasons for belief. For alethicism, it is to explain the apparent force of pragmatic reasons for belief.⁷ And for pragmatism it is to explain the strong presumption that

⁵ This is a slightly awkward way to put it, but pragmatism covers the sorts of considerations that are normally brought to bear in theories of moral or prudential reasons for action. These are diverse, ranging from consequentialist considerations to straightforwardly deontological – one might hold for example that it is wrong, irrespective of the consequences, to hold discriminatory beliefs. Stich (1990) is the *locus classicus* for modern pragmatism. Rinard (2017) has recently defended Stich-style pragmatism. Papineau (2013) and McCormick (2015) have developed novel approaches to defending pragmatism. I have discussed the view in some depth, although I have avoided taking a clear stand on the matter, in Reisner (2004, 2008, 2009b, & 2015). Important related issues are discussed in Glüer & Wilkforss (2013 & forthcoming).

⁶ This chapter defends a form of pluralism. I originally explored the issue in Reisner (2004 & 2008). Howard (ms) takes up a similar project. Harman (1999) also describes, and appears to defend, pluralism.

⁷ Berker (ms) has a helpful chart explaining the different efforts to do so. The two most influential strategies are either to claim that apparent pragmatic reasons for belief are actually reasons to cause oneself to have the belief in question or to claim that the apparent pragmatic reasons for belief are reasons to desire that one has the belief in question. Skorupski (2011) was an early proponent of the former, and Parfit (2001) of the latter.

alethic reasons are the most typical ones for belief.⁸

Unlike the other four positions, pluralism does not have to explain the absence of something that might intuitively be thought to exist. Instead, it faces a positive challenge. If there are both alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief, pluralism must say something about whether, and how, they interact. In principle, two families of options are open to the pluralist. One is to say that alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief generate different oughts that are not themselves comparable.⁹ The other is to say in one way or another that alethic and pragmatic considerations are comparable and contribute to a single ought for belief.

I am not alone in finding the first option unattractive.¹⁰ The principal aim of this chapter is to discuss how alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief can be compared, or more accurately, how they each contribute to determining what one ought to believe all things considered.

1. SOME PRELIMINARIES

This chapter argues for adopting a particular comparison scheme and that the proposed scheme satisfies enough of the *desiderata* for comparing alethic and pragmatic considerations for belief that the proof-of-concept challenge is met for pluralism. However, it does not address the question of whether we should in principle expect to be able to compare alethic and pragmatic reasons or other considerations for belief, or the question of whether the theoretical arguments favour thinking that there are, or can be, pragmatic reasons for belief. These questions are taken up in more detail in chapters 1, 3, and 4.

When I initially explored the question of how to compare alethic and pragmatic reasons for

⁸ McCormick (2015) offers the most extensive discussion of why pragmatism is not inconsistent with the intuition that alethic considerations have direct reason-giving force.

⁹ See chapter 4 for reasons to be sceptical about this possibility.

¹⁰ See Berker (ms). Berker thinks that if the pluralist cannot give a plausible account of how to compare alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief, then that is a decisive consideration against pluralism. Howard (ms) offers a weighing account to defend the plausibility of pluralism.

belief,¹¹ I was writing in a context where most philosophers working on problems in normativity assumed explicitly that all normative reasons for belief were evidential reasons for belief.¹² And more tacitly they assumed that only normative reasons for belief, as opposed to other kinds of normative units,¹³ featured in determining what one ought to believe. I see no theoretical obstacle to including other alethic normative properties or concepts, including justification, warrant, and epistemic virtue amongst the determiners of what one ought to believe. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, may be said with respect to pragmatic reasons for belief. Although in general I and others working on the topic discuss value, other moral or prudential normative considerations, for example those arising directly from Ross-style duties, could contribute to determining what one ought to believe.

Nonetheless, openness about such matters can make for a cumbersome exposition. In the updated version of my original model and in the new model presented in this chapter, the most important normative notion is that of a *requirement*. Precisely what determines the relevant requirements is mostly unimportant, with an exception that I shall note in §3. Thus as an expository convenience the discussion will be limited to reasons and requirements. One should not infer from this that I am relying on reasons being the only sort of normative consideration that determines the relevant requirements.

One final preliminary note is required. In the broader context of this book, alethic considerations are claimed to gain their normative force from the fact that being in epistemically positively valanced states is a basic component of our wellbeing. All else being equal, it is better for an individual that she be in a better epistemic state. This complicates talk of ‘betterness’ and ‘pragmatically better’ in obvious ways. I have ignored this complication here in spelling out the

¹¹ Reisner (2008).

¹² Recent work continues to defend *evidentialism*. See Way (2016).

¹³ See Reisner (2018 & forthcoming-b) for more on reasons and other units of normativity.

weighing account. As I hope will be clear from the discussion in chapter 7, ignoring it should be harmless in the present context.

2. THE COMPARISON CHALLENGE

It is convenient to begin by focusing on reasons for belief. Alethic reasons for belief come in different varieties, and they may aggregate or combine in different sorts of ways. In this chapter, I mostly treat alethic reasons for belief as though they can be aggregated in some way. The assumption is argumentatively harmless where it occurs and does much to simplify the discussion.

Ordinary alethic reasons for belief do not share much in common with pragmatic reasons for belief.¹⁴ One difference is that they partake in different basing relations. Consider one type of alethic reason for belief, an evidential reason. Evidential reasons for belief obtain due to an evidencing relation holding between the considerations that are or constitute the reason and a belief's content. For (non-alethic) value-based pragmatic reasons for belief, a reason obtains when a makes-good relation holds between the considerations that are or constitute the reason and the having of the belief itself.¹⁵

Another difference between some pragmatic and some alethic reasons for belief is their unlike strength or degree properties. If we just concentrate on pragmatic reasons for belief that arise from the goodness – for oneself or for others – of having a particular belief, there is no fixed upper or lower bound for the strength of the reason. For example, there may be a being that is capable of having an arbitrarily high wellbeing, or the universe may contain an arbitrarily large number of wellbeing-having individuals. On the other hand evidential reasons for belief – and perhaps all

¹⁴ There is further discussion of the dissimilarities in Reisner (2004 & 2008).

¹⁵ Note that while evidential reasons for belief obtain in virtue of a relation between the reasons and a belief's content, they are nonetheless parallel to value-based reasons for belief insofar as they remain reasons for having the belief itself. Authors have to no avail tried to make much of the difference between each type of reason's 'in-virtue-of' *relata* in service of arguing against the existence of pragmatic reasons for belief. Although not about belief per se, difficulties with doing so are brought out elegantly in Rabinwicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2005). Some further considerations arise in Reisner (2009a).

alethic reasons for belief that can be weighed – have a fixed range of strengths from 0 to 1.¹⁶

These differences point to a difficulty with what I shall call ‘direct comparison’ approaches to weighing alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief.¹⁷ The idea behind a direct comparison approach is that, for example, a particular pragmatic reason not to believe that p can be weighed against a particular alethic reason to believe that p . So far as I can see, there is only one way of trying to construct an even slightly plausible direct comparison approach, and it is in fact pretty unappealing.¹⁸ However, it is worth looking at briefly, because it offers some insight into a more promising family of strategies.

2.1 Direct comparisons and the aggregated threshold approach

The *aggregated threshold approach* is an attempt to get around the most obvious problem with direct comparison approaches in general, namely that it is unclear how to compare the respective weights of epistemic and pragmatic reasons for belief. The underlying idea behind the aggregated threshold approach is quite simple. One starts with the strength of reasons of both types – pragmatic and alethic reasons respectively – given as a numerical representation. Then one assigns a qualitative interpretation to the numerical representation that describes in graded terms how strong the reason is. Whichever type of reason is strongest determines what one ought to believe.

For simplicity’s sake, we can start with a model that contains only one reason of each type. The model requires some assumptions. Let us assume that all reasons for belief can be assigned numerical strengths. Let us assume that alethic reasons have a strength from 0 to 1 inclusive and represent some sort of probability that belief for which they are reasons is true. And let us assume that pragmatic reasons have numerical strength corresponding to the quantity of goodness or

¹⁶ Not everyone holds this view. See for example Fantl (2003).

¹⁷ Berker (MS) calls this approach ‘aggregate and compare’.

¹⁸ Berker (ms) offers a valuable discussion of why such approaches are likely to be hopelessly problematic.

badness of having the particular belief.¹⁹

Suppose that there is an alethic reason (a-reason) with a strength of .7 for me to believe p and that there is a pragmatic reason (p-reason) with a strength of 23 for me not to believe p . Directly comparing the strengths of the p-reason and a-reason is intuitively uninformative; the strengths are given for two different scales that represent two different kinds of properties (probability and degree of goodness). The mere fact that 23 is a larger number than .7 provides no insight into which type of reason has more strength or how each type of reason contributes to determining what one ought to believe.

The aggregated threshold approach attempts to tackle this problem by giving some further meaning to the strength numbers by interpreting them qualitatively with respect to sufficiency and power.²⁰ For example we could say that an a-reason with a strength of .7 or greater to believe p is just barely sufficient – has just enough power – to make it the case that one ought to believe p in the absence of other considerations. And we could say that a p-reason with a strength of 23 is a low power p-reason.²¹ Consider a scenario in which there is a p-reason of strength 23 not to believe p and an a-reason with strength .7 to believe p . There is a sufficiently powerful a-reason to believe p and a low power p-reason not to believe p , so one ought to believe p .²²

¹⁹ I have left a lot out of these assumptions, for example what exactly the numerical strength of each type of reason represents. In the case of pragmatic reasons, I have not said whether the scale corresponds to actual amounts of value, or whether the numbers just represent a cardinal ordering of the strength of the reasons. I have not addressed whether either or both type of reason is monotonic, etc. I shall just ignore all these matters for the moment, as they do not bear on the argument. It is easiest, however, to think of the alethic reasons' strength as being an epistemic probability that the belief is true and the pragmatic reasons' strength as representing a cardinal ordering on an unbounded, fixed and arbitrary scale.

²⁰ 'Power' strikes me as awkward, but it is to avoid having to use 'strength' ambiguously in this context. It means 'strength'.

²¹ I am assuming that pragmatic reasons for belief are like pragmatic reasons for action in that there is no minimum sufficiency threshold. Even a very weak pragmatic reason to φ is sufficient to make it the case that one ought to φ in the absence of countervailing reasons.

²² Jens Johansson provided several valuable suggestions for improving this part of the paper.

So long as there is just one reason of each kind, this looks like at least a possible start. What makes it seem like a possible start is that there is a strong alethic reason for believing p and a not particularly strong pragmatic reason for not believing p . Intuitively in such cases it seems we ought to believe p . The aggregated threshold approach is extensionally adequate for this case.

Difficulties arise immediately when one starts to add additional reasons to the mix. Suppose that three additional low power p-reasons not to believe p are added to the mix and one additional low power a-reason to believe p is also added. If there is a clear way to evaluate all the reasons together, I cannot imagine what it would be. What is imaginable is adding up the strengths of all the p-reasons and separately all the strengths of the a-reasons, and then comparing (with respect to power or otherwise) the total strength of p-reasons not to believe p to the total strength of a-reasons to believe p . Whatever the merits of this way of handling multiple reasons, it is not an instance of direct comparison. Rather, it is a form of *siloing*. Siloing is a two step method. First the strength (or other appropriate assignment) is determined for the totality of each type of reason. Then one compares in some way the strength or other appropriate assignment made to the aggregate strength of each type of reason.

3. SILOING I: SIMPLE AND TWO STEP DEFEASING

Siloing approaches improve in important ways on direct comparison approaches.²³ For reasons that will become apparent, I now believe that siloing approaches of the kind discussed here are at least flawed. Nonetheless it still seems possible to me that *simple defeasing* is a live candidate as a pluralist response to the proof-of-concept challenge, mainly due to considerations raised in §4.2. Nonetheless, the *rankings satisfaction account*, developed in §5, is superior on grounds of extensional adequacy and at least possibly on grounds of conceptual simplicity.

²³ They were originally developed in Reisner(2004 & 2008).

3.1 Simple defeasing

A straightforward approach to siloing is *simple defeasing*. Informally, simple defeasing is a comparison procedure that lets the a-reasons determine what one ought to believe about some proposition x , unless it is either very good or very bad that one believes x . In that case, the p-reasons determine what one ought to believe.

The proposal can be stated as a function that takes the total strength of the a-reasons and the total strength of the p-reasons as arguments and maps them to the values: ought to believe x , not ought to believe x , ought to believe not x , ought to suspend judgement about x :

The Defeasing Function: Let a be the total strength of the a-reasons for believing x and let p be the total strength of the p-reasons for believing x . Let $\{p_{min}, \dots, p_{max}\}$ be the range of normal values for p . If $(p < p_{min})$ or $(p > p_{max})$, then believe according to the p-reasons. If $p_{min} < p < p_{max}$, then believe according to the a-reasons.

The formalisation is not-in-and-of-itself particularly significant, but it does highlight three important features of this approach.

The first is that simple defeasing does not require individual reasons to have any special comparative features of their own and does not assume, for example, that a-reasons or p-reasons respectively have monotonic strengths²⁴ or indeed strengths at all. All that matters is that some total strength can be assigned to an agent's a-reasons and to her p-reasons.

The second is that the view requires that there is some sort of normal range for the goodness or badness of believing something. How that range is set remains in principle open; the range could be fixed or it could be contextual. The formulation of the view does not strictly entail that the

²⁴ As Berker (ms) observes, I implicitly assumed monotonic weighing originally. That assumption can be safely jettisoned, as it was inessential to the proposal.

boundaries, fixed or contextual, are sharp, but I assume that they are.²⁵

Finally, this approach is consistent with pragmatism in addition to pluralism.²⁶ If one thought, for example, that the upper and lower bounds for the normal range of goodness were contextual, perhaps one could appeal to the increased or diminished pragmatic importance of believing true (or more likely to be true) things in different contexts. This includes the possibility that in some circumstances, the boundaries could have a zero interval making only the p-reasons *ex ante* relevant.

A further revision is required to square a simple-defeating approach with a pragmatic reading. By hypothesis, alethic considerations have no inherent reason-giving force according to the strong form of pragmatism being considered at present.²⁷ Instead, the upper and lower thresholds for *p* are set contextually. The feature of the context that sets the thresholds is the strength of pragmatic reason for believing in accordance with what the total alethic considerations count in favour of. If the p-reasons for believing otherwise are weaker than the p-reasons for believing what the alethic considerations favour, then one ought to believe according to the alethic considerations. If not, then one ought to believe according to the pragmatic considerations. As a technical note, *a* no longer takes a-reasons as arguments. Instead, it takes the measure of the degree to which the totality of alethic considerations probabalises the relevant doxastic content.

3.2 *Two-step defeating*

When I originally presented the defeating function approach to siloing, I proposed a second way of interpreting what I then viewed as its inner workings. I unhelpfully described the second

²⁵ I have no special argument for this, but I also see no special reason to think that they are vague.

²⁶ I make this point in the original presentation. Strangely, Maguire and Woods (ms) claim otherwise.

²⁷ Of course, I try to have it both ways in this book – the source of normativity is pragmatic but epistemic considerations have basic reason-giving force. Ordinary pragmatists reject this claim. See Stich (1990) and McCormick (2015) in particular.

approach as a second interpretation. Instead, as Selim Berker²⁸ has noted, it was a second proposal, which can be understood as a form of *two-step defeasing*, with interestingly different results.

Two-step defeasing works like this. Assume that there are second-order reasons for believing according to what the a-reasons count in favour of or what the p-reasons count in favour of. We can denote these second order reasons by p^s and a^s . There is a^s much reason to believe according to the totality of the a-reasons, and there is p^s much reason to believe according to the p-reasons. We can stipulate that one ought to believe according to the p-reasons when the p-reasons and a-reasons disagree just in case $p^s > a^s$ and according to the a-reasons when $p^s \leq a^s$.²⁹

The difference between two-step defeasing and simple defeasing may not be apparent at first blush. However, there is a peculiarity of simple defeasing that two-step defeasing addresses. Consider the case in which in simple defeasing the consequences of not believing x are very good. In that case, the p-reasons do all the work, and one ought not to believe x . There is more than one way that one can not believe x : one can believe not x (while also not believing x), one can fail to have any doxastic attitude towards x , and one can suspend judgement about x , if one takes suspension to be an independent doxastic attitude. Let us suppose that the a-reasons support believing not x .³⁰ According to simple defeasing, while it is permissible to believe not x , it is also permissible to have no doxastic attitude at all towards x or to suspend judgement towards x .³¹

Without assessing the seriousness of this peculiarity, it does at least seem like an undesirable consequence for simple defeasing. Intuitively, pragmatic reasons for belief are important when they conflict with the alethic reasons for belief. According to simple defeasing, when the moral or

²⁸ Berker (ms). Indeed, confusingly I say in the original that the second approach is extensionally equivalent to the first. I had meant with respect to the defeasing results, not with respect to rankings amongst pragmatically acceptable options. In any case, I did not anticipate the forceful arguments recently developed by Berker and was merely articulating a second possible approach.

²⁹ This discussion was improved due to comments from Jens Johnsson.

³⁰ Each of these attitudes should be read as being the exclusive doxastic attitude one has towards x .

³¹ If one wishes to treat having no doxastic attitude towards x and suspension of judgement towards x as different.

prudential stakes are high, evidential reasons become irrelevant, even when one can conform both to them and to one's pragmatic reasons for belief.

Two-step defeasing avoids this problem by adding a step. First one assesses whether the p-reasons and a-reasons conflict. If they do not, then what one ought to believe is solely determined by the a-reasons. If they do, one must follow the second order weighing procedure. If $p^s > a^s$, then what one ought to believe is determined by the p-reasons alone. Otherwise, what one ought to do is determined by the a-reasons alone.

4. SILOING II: OBJECTIONS FROM EXTENSIONAL INADEQUACY

Both simple and two-step defeasing are subject to challenge. I shall revisit the objection raised to simple defeasing in §2.1 presently, but I want to begin by considering an objection raised to two-step defeasing by Berker.³² A general aim of the discussion of both these objections is to get a better fix on what counts as a compelling objection from extensional inadequacy to a proposal for comparing pragmatic and alethic reasons for belief.

4.1 *The objection to two-step defeasing*

Berker's objection to two-step defeasing is quite straightforward. While two-step defeasing gets things right when one's p-reasons and a-reasons are consistent with each other, it has a rather strange consequence in some cases in which they conflict.

Berker asks us to imagine the following scenario. Suppose that one has very strong p-reason not to believe x , strong enough that according to two-step defeasing one ought not to believe x . In this case, one can comply with the ought in three ways: by having no doxastic attitude towards x , suspending judgement about x , and (only) believing not x . For expository reasons, it is best just to focus on suspending judgement about x and (only) believing not x .

³² Berker (ms).

Holding the p-reasons fixed, we can check to see what two-step defeasing says to believe when we change the strength and valence of the a-reasons. Suppose that the a-reasons very strongly support believing not x . According to two-step defeasing, one ought to believe not x . This is because two step defeasing only treats the p-reasons as relevant when they conflict with the a-reasons.

Next, imagine that one's evidential situation changes so that the a-reasons favours neither x nor not x . In that case, we ought to suspend judgement about x . The explanation is of the same form as in the previous case, namely that the p-reasons and the a-reasons do not conflict, only this time the a-reasons favour suspension of judgement.

Finally, imagine that one's evidential situation changes yet again so that the a-reasons very strongly support believing x . This moves us into a conflict case, as the p-reasons favour not believing x . In the conflict case, only the p-reasons count. They require us not to believe x , but are silent about how we do not believe x . This entails that we are permitted either to suspend judgement or to believe not x .

Berker thinks that the transition from the second case to the third is odd. One goes from being forbidden from believing not x to being permitted to believe not x because our evidence for x has in fact improved. A better result, according to Berker, would be that one is required to suspend judgement, which does less violence to one's e-reasons than does being permitted to believe not x .

4.2 The objection to simple defeasing revisited

One way to see the objection to simple defeasing is as a more serious version of the objection to two-step defeasing. Simple defeasing treats all cases where the p-reasons are very strong in the way that two-step defeasing treats conflict cases. This allows for the intuitively strange result that the a-reasons can favour believing not x and the very strong p-reasons can favour not believing x , yet it is still permissible to suspend judgement with respect to x . Seen this way, the objection to simple defeasing is more serious than the objection to two-step defeasing. It is bad to get things wrong in

one case, as two-step defeasing does; it is *a fortiori* worse to get things wrong in two cases as simple defeasing does.

However, it is not wholly clear that this is the right way to understand the objection to simple defeasing. There is an important difference between the two kinds of defeasing.

Two-step defeasing's appeal lies in its sensitivity to the evidence in non-conflict cases. One might charge the simple defeasing procedure as being too extreme; once the threshold has been crossed for p-reasons to be salient, then a-reasons are silenced. Two-step defeasing only silences the a-reasons in conflict cases. This is obvious enough, but it is helpful to explain the difference in the procedures this way. It is precisely because two-step defeasing is sometimes sensitive to a-reasons when the p-reasons are strong enough and sometimes not that Berker's objection gets its purchase. As he notes, the counterexample is most striking when one considers what happens as the strength of the a-reasons for believing *x* increases while the p-reasons stay fixed and above the threshold. A-reasons become irrelevant because they become more strongly contrary to the p-reasons.

This does not happen with the simple defeasing view. One might say in a sense that simple defeasing takes seriously the idea that pragmatic reasons are all that matter when they are strong enough and lives with the consequences.

One might try to convert the flat-footedness of simple defeasing into a further virtue of the view by observing that it is unlikely that one will very often be required by the p-reasons merely not to believe something. For that to be the case, the p-reasons in favour of suspending judgement and disbelieving would have to be precisely balanced. Although I cannot see any way to argue for it, it seems likely to me that there will be some sort of difference in benefit to suspending judgement versus disbelieving in most actual world cases. The scenario in which one's p-reasons strongly tell against believing *x* and one's a-reasons tell strong in favour for example believing not *x*, and yet one is permitted to suspend judgement with respect to *x*, is likely, we may suppose, a rare one.

Although this line of argument appeals to me in some ways, it is possible to press against it.

One could imagine a world in which the p-reasons were often finely balanced, perhaps by a powerful demon with too much time on his hands. In that case, a defender of the simple view could not plead that rarity mitigates the counter-intuitiveness of the view's implications. I take this modally enhanced version of the objection to render the rarity defence of simple defeasing unconvincing, or at least less convincing.

Berker's objection against simple defeasing nonetheless strikes me as less serious than his objection against two-step defeasing. The former view has an problematic, but consistent, account of what happens when the pragmatic threshold is crossed. Someone committed to simple defeasing might be able to come up with a good explanation of why crossing the threshold fully silences the a-reasons.³³ But I do not see any appeal to two-step defeasing in light of Berker's objection. By opening the door to sensitivity to a-reasons, the view becomes accountable to being sensitive in the correct way. To put how I see things concisely, while both views now seem extensionally inadequate to me, simple defeasing's extensional inadequacy may still turn out to be only apparent, given sufficient theoretical support of other kinds. I do not believe the same can be said in the case of two-step defeasing.

5. THE RANKING SATISFACTION ACCOUNT

Whatever the potential merits of simple defeasing, there is a better approach to comparing p-reasons and e-reasons. Or if one wishes to do without reasons, it is a better approach to comparing pragmatic and epistemic considerations. The better approach is the *ranking satisfaction account* (RSA). It is both extensionally adequate and, as I shall argue in chapter 7, explanatorily preferable for the pluralist.

³³ This would be the route I would explore if I were defending pure pragmatism.

5.1 Setting up the account

Although RSA represents a significant change from the defeasing accounts, it maintains what might be usefully thought of as *the core intuition*:

The core intuition: 1) When the pragmatic stakes are low enough, what one all things-considered ought to believe is what epistemology requires or one of the things that epistemology permits. 2) When the pragmatic stakes are high enough, what one all things-considered ought to believe is what practicality requires or one of the things that practicality permits.

Some explanation is needed. I have introduced the notion of *practicality*. It is an umbrella notion applying as needed to the set of concepts or properties that occupy the domain of practical normativity, i.e. morality and prudence.³⁴ I also talk about what ‘epistemology requires’. ‘Epistemology’ here stands indicates the relevant alethically sourced norms. Lastly I talk about ‘pragmatic stakes’. They are discussed in §5.3.

The most philosophically important change in this formulation is the replacement of *reasons* with *requirements*. It is sometimes helpful to consider verdictive normative concepts and properties, such as *requirement* and *ought* instead of contributory normative units, like *reasons*.³⁵ This is such an instance, as will become apparent in the foregoing discussion.

In addition to the core intuition, RSA also incorporates what I shall call ‘Berker’s addendum’:

Berker’s addendum: 1) When the pragmatic stakes are high enough, if what epistemology

³⁴ I take morality and prudence to be exhaustive. Bruno Guidon (2016) has argued that there are further reasons of rationality that stand apart from both morality and prudence.

³⁵ I learnt this lesson from John Broome. See also Reisner (forthcoming-b)

requires or some of those things that epistemology permits are consistent with what practicality requires, then one ought all-things-considered to believe what epistemology requires or one of the practically permissible things that epistemology also permits. 2) When the pragmatic stakes are high enough, if what practicality requires or permits conflicts with what epistemology requires or permits, then one ought all-things-considered to be in the epistemologically highest ranked doxastic state – or one of the epistemologically highest ranked doxastic states if there is a tie – that is consistent with what practicality requires or permits.

I call this ‘Berker’s addendum’ because it is intended to capture the conditions implicit in the two important objections discussed in §4 to the defeasing views.³⁶ Berker may not want to include conditions concerning what epistemology permits rather than requires. I defended the inclusion of epistemic permissions in chapter 1.³⁷

And finally, RSA also includes *Reisner’s addendum*:

Reisner’s addendum: 1) When the pragmatic stakes are low enough, if some of the doxastic options permitted by epistemology are permitted or required by practicality, one all-things-considered ought to be in (one of the) doxastic states permitted or required by both epistemology and practicality.

Reisner’s addendum is important, because at least if the arguments in chapter 1 are correct, one is sometimes permitted to be in more than one doxastic state. In such cases, if one allows that there

³⁶ Berker (ms), §4.3.

³⁷ See also Reisner (2013, 2014 & forthcoming-a). More detailed work on epistemic permissivism, based on similar considerations, can be found in Dahlback (forthcoming), Drake (2017) & Raleigh (2017)

are pragmatic reasons for belief at all, it is intuitive that tie-breaking is one of their functions.

5.2 *The account*

With the core intuition, Berker's addendum, and Reisner's addendum now in place, we have a good description of what conditions an account of comparing pragmatic and alethic considerations for belief, or doxastic states more widely, would ideally meet. In this section, I set out the account in what I take to be its most natural form.

The natural way to understand RSA is as an account that shifts priority either to the requirements of practicality or to the requirements of epistemology depending on what the pragmatic stakes⁵⁸ are in a given case, while respecting to the extent possible the force of the non-prioritised type of requirement. The account can be described in a simple form:

The ranking satisfaction account: When the pragmatic stakes are high enough, you ought to be in the unique practically⁵⁹ top ranked doxastic state, if there is one. If there is more than one practically co-top ranked doxastic state, you ought to be in the one with the highest epistemic ranking, or one of the ones sharing the highest epistemic ranking.

And

When the pragmatic stakes are low enough, you ought to be in the unique epistemically top ranked doxastic state, if there is one. If there is more than one epistemically co-top ranked doxastic state, you ought to be in the one with the highest practical ranking, or one of the ones sharing the highest practical ranking.

I intend for the notion of *ranking* to be understood in terms of that of *requirement*, although I want to remain neutral on the question of whether the notion *ranking* is reducible to the notion of *requirement*:

⁵⁸ See §5.3 for a more detailed discussion of how pragmatic stakes are evaluated.

⁵⁹ 'Practically' in these formulations denotes that the ranking is according to practicality.

Top ranking & unconditional requirement extensional equivalence: x is top ranked in a domain iff x is unconditionally required in that domain

Second ranked & conditional requirement extensional equivalence: y is ranked second in a domain iff x is ranked first in a domain and it is required in that domain that (if not x then y).

The account of second ranked can be converted into an account of n -ranked:

N-ranked & conditional requirement extensional equivalence: ω is n -ranked in a domain iff α is top ranked and ψ is $n-1$ ranked and it is required in that domain that (if not $\{\alpha \vee \beta \vee \dots \psi\}$ then ω).

This description of RSA captures the desired extensional features for comparing alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief, or more generally alethic and pragmatic considerations for belief. It is unsurprising that it is possible to create such an account. Models are generally cheap. This leaves the question of whether the account is well enough motivated to answer the relevant proof-of-concept challenge.

5.3 Pragmatic stakes⁴⁰

One might wonder about what would make the pragmatic stakes high enough for RSA to trigger the dominance of practicality. A satisfactory answer to this question is difficult to provide. It is part of the aim of the book as a whole to say more about how and why pragmatic and alethic considerations compare in the ways that they do. There is a smaller, but nonetheless important, question that requires addressing here. That is in a more formal sense, what makes the stakes be

⁴⁰ Thank you to Per Algarder and Erik Carlson for pointing to the need to add this section.

high enough?

Erik Carlson⁴¹ pointed out to me that the following situation can in principle arise. With respect to x , one could believe x , believe not x , or suspend judgement with respect to x . In a particular set of circumstances, believing x is the epistemically top ranked option, suspending judgement is the epistemically second ranked option, and believing not x is the epistemically bottom ranked option.

In the same circumstances, suspending judgement about x is the top ranked practical option, believing x is the second ranked practical option, and believing not x is the bottom ranked practical option. Furthermore, there is little difference in pragmatic import to suspending judgement about x or to believing x , but believing not x has catastrophic consequences. The ordering in tabular form is this:

1. <u>Practical: Sx (good)</u>	<u>Epistemic: Bx</u>
2. <u>Practical: Bx (slightly less good)</u>	<u>Epistemic: Sx</u>
3. <u>Practical: $B\neg x$ (very bad)</u>	<u>Epistemic: $B\neg x$</u>

Considering all three doxastic options, the stakes are very high. It would be very bad to believe not x rather than be in one of the other two doxastic states. But there is only a minor pragmatic difference between the top ranked and the second ranked epistemic option. This has the consequence⁴² that very small pragmatic differences can silence the epistemic considerations, even when no particular threshold of importance has been crossed.

I shall return to the question of thresholds in §5.5. For the present, let us assume that no interesting thresholds are crossed in moving from the second to the top ranked pragmatic options.

⁴¹ During a presentation at the Uppsala Philosophy Department Higher Seminar in Practical Philosophy.

⁴² Perhaps alluded to in figures 3 and 5 of Berker (ms).

Because those options are the same, just reversed in order, as the top two epistemic options, no pragmatically significant threshold is crossed by moving between them.

When faced with a pair of orderings like these, my intuition is that the epistemic considerations dominate. This is best explained by understanding the pragmatic stakes as being relative to the top ranked epistemic option. Because in the example above the top ranked pragmatic option is only slightly better than the second ranked pragmatic option, and because the second ranked pragmatic option is the top ranked epistemic option, the stakes are low enough to allow the epistemic considerations to dominate.

5.4 Underpinnings

It is important to recognise from the outset that to answer the proof-of-concept challenge, the account need meet only two main criteria. One is that it is extensionally adequate to the relevant intuitions about comparison. The other is that it is not objectionably *ad hoc*.

With respect to the first criteria, there is bound to be some degree of disagreement even amongst pluralists about individual marginal cases. I have relied on my own intuitions, which are at least sometimes shared, in formulating the core intuition. As the literature on this topic is still developing, it is difficult to be sure how widespread agreement is amongst, or on behalf of, pluralists. The one detailed sceptical treatment of pluralism takes the core intuition as central to the pluralist picture.⁴³ This sample is too small to constitute a canvassing of even tutored intuitions, but at least it is part of the mainstream, or perhaps one should say ‘main rivulet’, amongst those working on the topic.

Berker’s addendum and Reisner’s addendum are meant to pick up intuitive extensional *desiderata* for the treatment of certain specific classes of counterexamples. There is in principle room for someone to accept the core intuition but to reject all or part of the two addenda.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Nonetheless they seem to me to be the most plausible extension of the general idea behind the core intuition.

Whether RSA is extensionally adequate then depends on the degree to which one thinks the core intuition, or some other extensionally equivalent set of intuitions, determine what the right answers are for pluralists to give. ‘Right’ has to be understood in a certain way. Pragmatists and alethicists may well be pragmatist and alethicists because they have the intuition that either alethic considerations or pragmatic considerations do not count directly towards determining what one ought to believe. In that way, of course, no pluralist view that takes both kind of considerations into account will be right. So one has to understand ‘right’ as meaning something like ‘right by the pluralists’ own lights’, or ‘right by the lights of someone thinking sympathetically about pluralism’.

My own view is that extensionally speaking, RSA is right, or right enough, for the pluralist to meet the extensionality criterion of the proof-of-concept challenge. But there is one more type of extensional adequacy challenge to consider before the matter is settled.

With respect to the second *desideratum* of non-*ad hoc*ness, the most important question is whether the account given is entailed, or at least suggested, by a well supported theory. I argue in chapter 7 that welfare pluralism at least renders RSA plausible. The book itself partially aims to support welfare pluralism. The best that can be said here is that the view cannot be judged *ad hoc* yet.

5.5 A second type of counterexample

Berker offers another type of putative counterexample to simple and two step defeasing.⁴⁴ I have set them out here in a way slightly different to Berker, but the structure remains the same. RSA treats cases of this kind in the same way as the earlier defeasing accounts. Unlike Berker’s earlier counterexamples, these do not constitute a serious extensional adequacy challenge.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* See (again) figures 3 and 5.

Understanding why provides some further insight into why RSA is sufficient to meet the proof-of-concept challenge for pluralism.

Consider a case in which epistemology requires that you believe not x and that practicality requires only that you not believe x . Suppose that the pragmatic stakes are high-enough – keeping in mind the option-relative account of high-enough in §5.3 – that pragmatic requirements dominate. According to RSA, one ought all things considered to believe not x , as opposed to suspending judgment with respect to x . Now suppose some small additional pragmatic inducement is added that makes it the case that practicality requires one to suspend judgement with respect to x . According to RSA, now one ought all-things-considered to suspend judgement with respect to x .

An example much like this one can be generated for an initial disagreement case, where practicality requires that one not believe x and epistemology requires that one believe x . In that case, RSA says that one ought to take the second ranked epistemological option, namely to suspend judgement with respect to x . Now suppose that a small pragmatic inducement to believe not x is added. RSA now says that one ought to believe not x , because the balance of pragmatic requirements is no longer equal but rather favours believing not x .

In both of these examples, it appears that one is trading off a possibly significant epistemic loss for what is *ex hypothesi* the minimal normatively salient pragmatic gain. That a tiny change in the overall pragmatic considerations can have such a drastic effect on the significance of the total epistemic considerations to what one ought to believe sits poorly with Berker. He takes them to be serious counter examples to siloing, and therefore they would be serious counterexamples to RSA.

Although at first blush RSA's sensitivity to small pragmatic changes may seem problematic, once the option-relative account of pragmatic stakes is in place it is difficult to use cases of this kind in a direct way, at least, as an argument against RSA. At least it is difficult to do so in the broader context of a proof-of-concept challenge.

Pluralism as it has been spelled out here is the view that both pragmatic and epistemic considerations contribute to determining what one all-things-considered ought to believe and that they do so in a way such that the pragmatic considerations can sometimes dominate the epistemic ones.⁴⁵ Setting aside views that have vague thresholds, on all present versions of pluralism, there will come a tipping point when the pragmatic considerations both become salient and conflict with the epistemic ones. By focusing on the moment of transition, the tipping phenomenon seems stranger than it really is.

The reason for this is that focusing on the tipping point suggests that the amount of pragmatic gain in a particular instance must be compared to the amount of epistemic loss. But pluralism trades on the intuition there are thresholds of pragmatic value (or reason) that shift the normative dominance from epistemic considerations to pragmatic considerations. The tipping point has to be located somewhere. To put the point another way, this category of objection is a rejection of the view that there are tipping points. To reject that there are tipping points when some crucial threshold is crossed is essentially a rejection of pluralism, or so I have just claimed. Since it is part of the proof-of-concept challenge framework that all views are not considered implausible on their face, Berker's tipping point counterexamples do not suffice for claiming that pluralism under the guise of RSA fails to meet the proof-of-concept challenge. Instead, it may suggest that Berker finds pluralism unintuitive. Of course, others find alethicism or pragmatism unintuitive.

Less rhetorically, one might consider an analogy with respect evidentially justified beliefs. There is some threshold of evidential strength above which one is justified in believing x and not justified in suspending judgement or believing not x . For justified a belief that x , the strength of evidential support for which is only minimally above the threshold, a very small change in the amount of evidence will require that one suspend judgement about x instead, at least on many

⁴⁵ Without the second clause, versions of standard pragmatic encroachment will be classified incorrectly for present purposes as pluralist views.

standard views.⁴⁶ It seems strange when focusing of the degree of change in the strength of the evidence to suppose that the smallest change in the amount of available evidence could change what attitude is epistemically required. It seems rather less strange to think that at some point the evidence for a particular belief crosses a threshold becomes insufficient.⁴⁷ That some small change makes a difference at some point is the price of deontic tipping in general.

I take this to be a sufficient response to this second class of counterexamples for present purposes. If the fact that there are tipping points at is sufficient to reject pluralism, then parallel problems will arise for both pragmatism and alethicism. Each view will be faced with the problem that it cannot precisely track all intuitions.⁴⁸

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered a new and (I have argued) improved account of how to compare alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief – or without reasons talk, a new account of how pragmatic and epistemic requirements jointly determine what one ought to believe – in both high and low pragmatic stakes situations. The account should be of interest in its own right, as such accounts are quite thin on the ground.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, the chapter's more important role in the overall project is to show that pluralism is not yet ruled out as an account of the normative factors that determine what one ought to believe. That pluralism is worth considering has not infrequently been doubted. There is an

⁴⁶ One might want to claim that the threshold is vague, but doing so introduces problems of its own.

⁴⁷ 'At some point' is not meant to rule out a vague threshold. As is my practice throughout, I am ignoring problems arising from vagueness.

⁴⁸ I have argued in earlier work that alethicism fails to meet what I now call 'proof-of-concept' challenges. See Reisner (2009a and 2018a). I raise related worries with particular attention to proof-of-concept challenges in chapter 3 of this book. Berker (ms) raises proof-of-concept challenges to pragmatism. I argue that pragmatism fails the proof-of-concept challenge in chapter 6 of this book.

⁴⁹ Howard (ms) provides an alternative account.

influential *non-starter* style objection to pluralism: pluralism (and for that matter pragmatism) is impossible because there are normatively relevant fundamental differences between beliefs and actions to prevent them from being subject to shared or overlapping norms. In the previous chapter I argued that beliefs and actions are sufficiently continuous with respect to their relevant non-normative features that what differences they exhibit are insufficient to support a non-starter objection.

The proof-of-concept challenge raised in this chapter is the second important worry to overcome before a pluralist view can be developed freely. If pluralism is clearly extensionally inadequate, then it is also clearly false. I have argued that pluralism is not clearly extensionally inadequate, and therefore it is not clearly false at least on grounds of extensional adequacy.

The remainder of part I of this book is taken up with showing that pluralism is superior to alethicism. Of the three main alternative views about normative reasons for belief, alethicism is the most popular and, I argue, the least plausible. Thus far, however, if the arguments in this chapter and the previous one are correct, all that has been established is that pluralism cannot be ruled out from or near the start of the discussion.

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