18 February 2024

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Welfarist Pluralism: Pluralistic Reasons for Belief and the Value of Truth[1]

[This is the penultimate draft of this paper. However, I do not expect any significant changes in content. Please consult me if you find a typographical error or garbled sentence. Otherwise, please feel free to cite as forthcoming in *Philosophical Topics*]

0. Introduction

As individuals, we make our way through life by acting on our beliefs. Beliefs represent the temporal and spatial arrangements of the world around us. They encode our relationships with ourselves and with others. They constitute judgements about the value of things and how things – and we ourselves – ought to be. We rely on shared beliefs to cooperate and to compete.

Beliefs play a pivotal role in our mental ecology, and as believers we have a vested stake in learning how best to tend to them. Of central interest to doxastic life is the question of what one ought to believe, all-things-considered. To answer this question, philosophers seek to understand what kinds of considerations count in favour – in a strong normative sense – of believing something.[2]

[2] Note that I take a deflationary view about even the strong notion of counting-in-favour of something. It is nothing more than to make a contribution to determining what one ought to do, believe, etc. See Reisner (2019 & under contract) for a detailed discussion.

There is no clear consensus in philosophy about what determines what one ought to believe[3] or even about the correct methodology for doing so.[4] There are now a number of opinionated books, which try to show particular views are correct, embarking from various points of departure.[5]

There are two views that have dominated discussion in the literature to unequal degrees. On the one hand, there is *alethicism*,[6] which is the view that truth- or justification-related considerations are all that determine what one ought to believe.[7] Up until very recently, alethicism was the *de facto* default position about reasons for belief. This is perhaps no longer so, but it remains the most widely accepted position in philosophical discussion. On the other hand, there is *pragmatism*, which is the view that all reasons for belief are moral or prudential reasons.[8] What alethicism and pragmatism have in common is that both views promise a degree of explanatory unity that a third option, *pluralism*, appears to lack. Pluralism is the view that there both irreducibly alethic reasons and irreducibly pragmatic reasons for belief. The sense of explanatory unity of interest here is that of the grounds for reasons. One can explain why, and perhaps how, truth-related considerations aggregate to determine what one ought to believe – and likewise for prudentially or morally-based considerations. Pluralism at first blush lacks the same kind of underlying

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[3] See Chignell (2018) and Reisner (2018)a for a discussion of the literature.

[4] See Reisner (2018b) for more on the methodological question.

[5] Amongst others, see Adler (2001), Gibbons (2013), Marušić (2015), McCormick (2014), Skorupski (2010), and Stitch (1990).

[6] The use of this name is inspired by Leary (2017). A more common name for the relevant family of views is 'evidentialism', although both in meaning and frequently in application, the name is too narrow. 'Alethecisim' is not entirely unproblematic, but one must choose some name.

[7] I mean to include a wide range of epistemic properties under these headings.

[8] This is not strictly or even non-strictly accurate. It is, however, both convenient and faithful to how I see things. A pragmatist might accept that there are only moral reasons for believing and that the correct moral theory is a value-independent form of deontology.

explanatory unity as its rivals. The way in which alethic reasons for belief and the way in which pragmatic reasons for belief are grounded looks to be different. Consequently, one might wonder both why and how alethic and pragmatic considerations combine to determine what one ought to believe. One aim of this paper it provide a monistic account of the foundations of a pluralist theory of theoretical reasons, an account that closes or at least shrinks the explanatory believability gap with alethicism and pragmatism.[9]

Indeed, what follows in this paper is a proposal, the different parts of which are presented in varying levels of detail, for how to preserve first-order pluralism about normative reasons for belief while still accepting a form of foundational monism. I shall call the proposed view 'welfarist pluralism'. The paper gives a new, wellbeing-based account of the value of truth and its indicators and in doing so shows how irreducibly pluralistic first-order reasons for belief arise from pragmatic foundations.

1. A SKETCH OF WELFARIST PLURALISM

Welfarist pluralism contains three basic commitments. The first is that facts about wellbeing are ultimately what determine what one ought to believe. In the language of reasons, facts about wellbeing determine what normative reasons there are for beliefs and other doxastic states, such as suspension-of-judgement. The second commitment is that wellbeing itself has a pluralist nature and that one of the basic components of wellbeing is that of an individual's being in a positive epistemic state. Finally, welfarist pluralism is committed to the view that something's contribution to

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[9] Leary (2017) is less concerned by the disunity worry and offers a pluralist account of the foundations of theoretical reason.

individuals' wellbeing partially fixes its contribution to determining what one ought to believe. In other words, something's contribution to wellbeing partially determines how strong of a reason it is.[10]

There is a further feature of the view which I shall largely ignore in this paper.[11] Strictly speaking, what determines what one ought to believe are not facts about wellbeing, but facts about the value of wellbeing and the value of intra-personal and or perhaps inter-personal aggregates or distributions of wellbeing. For now, it will do to accept that the value of wellbeing is an increasing linear function of the 'amount' of wellbeing[12] of the individual agent in question.

Taken together with several further assumptions that I shall discuss in due course, welfarist pluralism entails that there are both irreducible alethic reasons for belief and irreducible non-alethic or pragmatic reasons for belief. I shall use the two terms interchangeably. Both kinds of reasons share a common grounding in facts about wellbeing. In this way, the normativity of alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief is the normativity of wellbeing. The comparability of alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief is the comparability of the epistemic and non-epistemic components of wellbeing in determining an individual's total wellbeing. Thus the picture is one of a first-order theory of reasons with non-reductive alethic and non-reductive, non-alethic components that has fully pragmatic foundations.

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[10] See Reisner (2019) for the metaphysically deflationary commitments about a strength of a reason. See also Broome (forthcoming) and Rønnow-Rasmussen (MS) for further insights into why the strength of reasons should be treated in a metaphysically lightweight way.

[11] I take this issue up in Reisner (under contract)

[12] See Rabinwicz (2002) and Broome (2004) for more on this assumption, which is tantamount to Bernouli's hypothesis.

1.1 Non-derivative pluralism

One way to think about the building blocks of a normative theory, in this case welfarist pluralism, is to consider how things look for a natural scientific theory. For example, in its present state, physics posits the existence of six *force particles*, which govern interactions amongst the 12 basic *matter particles*, each of which falls into either the quark or the lepton family.[13] In this picture we have a physical universe with several basic constituents, some of which are acted upon and some of which do the acting, at least in a very loose sense.

It is an unwarranted idealisation to say that physicists do little more than discover the constituents of the physical universe, describing their interactions through the use of mathematical models. Nonetheless, this idealisation provides a useful way of thinking about how physics might proceed, if we accept a strong form of scientific realism. On a strong realist picture, the physical universe contains whatever it contains, and a correct model would accurately represent or describe its contents in addition to its being extensionally adequate in its predictions. If the basic constituents prove to be 18 basic particles with no further underlying substances or forces, then it is not for the philosopher to say that the universe is insufficiently parsimonious or that some further facts are required to explain the brute interactions of these particles. Appropriate criticisms of present and future theories about the fundamental constituents of physical reality concern evidence, consistency, and the various precepts of scientific reasoning. The metaphysics of the natural world must follow reality.

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[13] Time may tell whether this picture of the basic constituents of the physical universe is complete and correct or whether there is, for example, some more basic in the way posited by various versions of string theory.

The study of the normative universe is given over to the constraints on theorising within which philosophers must work. There is no normative property accelerator in which theoretical and pragmatic properties collide, leaving traces of their more basic constituents. The normative world is explored through reasoning, analysis, and the use of intuitions.

Insofar as one is prepared to accept that there are non-derivative normative reasons for belief, there are three very general possibilities on offer: all non-derivative reasons for belief are alethic, all are non-alethic or pragmatic, or there are both alethic and non-alethic/pragmatic non-derivative reasons for belief. The latter two possibilities are consistent with broadly pluralist intuitions, although only the third option is pluralism in the relevant technical sense. On the second option, alethic reasons for belief exist, but they derive from non-derivative pragmatic or non-alethic reasons for belief. On the third option, there are non-derivative reasons of both kinds.

To a greater degree than physicists, philosophers are troubled by accusations that they are merely making things up, especially with respect to ontological questions. Perhaps there is yet greater sensitivity to the charge of being fantasists amongst those who investigate the normative domain, for it at least apparently lies farther from the posits of respectable science than many non-normative areas of inquiry. This sensitivity can push philosophers to prefer ontological parsimony, sometimes at a high cost, beyond the sensible methodological principle that one should not unnecessarily multiply entities. Even this principle is wont to be misapplied in a way that treats any ontologically simpler account of the normative domain as preferable to more complex accounts that have more cogent and powerful explanatory characteristics.

Welfarist pluralism is partially and essentially constituted by the thesis that there are reasons to believe that are fundamentally alethic and also ones that are fundamentally non-alethic. One may thus say that *non-derivative* pluralism is an essential feature of welfarist pluralism. Given this, it is reasonable to worry that the greater number entities has been preferred to the lesser, when the lesser has been made available to us at no significant cost. The non-alethic alternative, pragmatism about reasons belief, offers the possibility of working with a single kind of non-derivative reason for belief: the non-alethic/pragmatic considerations are such that it is often good for us to believe things that are true or on the basis of the indicators of their truth. Thus truth or evidence is, at least much of the time, a derived reason for belief.

I shall describe in the coming section why the ontology, at least at the first-order normative level, is no more complex for non-derivative pluralism than it is for derivative pluralism (that is, pragmatism on which there are derived alethic reasons). While this explains why there is no parsimony-related advantage to derivative pluralism, that derivative and non-derivative pluralism are on equal terms with respect to parsimony says little about which view is correct or better supported. Before proceeding, I shall, therefore, offer a limited account what I take to be two *prima facie* considerations that favour non-derivative pluralism over derivative pluralism.[14]

The first consideration is conjectural. I believe there are some grounds for doubting that a derivative pluralism correctly tracks the strength of the contribution of alethic considerations to determining what one ought to believe. A toy example

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[14] Motivating welfarist pluralism is a central part of the project in Reisner (under contract).

may help. Consider a theory according to which the only kind of non-derivative reason for belief is the pleasure caused by having that belief. Having an individual true belief will bring most of us some additional pleasure, because having certain kinds of true beliefs is conducive to doing things that we enjoy. However, the truth of many kinds of beliefs does not have that effect, for example those about astronomical phenomena and events in the distant past, as they have little bearing on how much pleasure individuals experience through their present actions, at least for those who lack a strong interest in such matters.

More important for the enjoyment of a practically irrelevant belief than its truth or its evidential support is whether one reflects on the (seeming) truth of one's (specific) practically irrelevant beliefs in a way that produces pleasure or satisfaction. Experiencing (veridically or non-veridically) one's beliefs as true or having other positive epistemic qualities may, for example, bring a kind of intellectual satisfaction, which is itself a form of pleasure. A poorly epistemically supported belief would provide equal intellectual satisfaction to an epistemically well-supported belief, so long as one had the corresponding higher-order attitude that treated the relevant first-order belief as true and/or in one way or another epistemically justified. The accepting as true or justified is what matters psychologically, not the facts about truth or justification. This seems to me to run contrary to the pluralist intuition that a belief's having some sort of positive epistemic status *reapse* is normatively relevant, irrespective of one's reflective attitudes about those beliefs. It is important here to understand 'positive epistemic status' as meaning something along the lines of 'recommended or required by epistemic norms', as opposed to 'an epistemic state that produces positive effects on one's mood or life prospects'.

There are, naturally, a number of alternatives to simple hedonism, but examples

of this kind can be reconstructed for other views. Taking alethic reasons to bear directly on the normative status of a belief and assigning them a weight based on the importance of that epistemic status may eliminate errors about the strength of the normative contribution of alethic reasons to determining what one ought to believe.

The second motivation is this. Many philosophers and non-philosophers alike have the intuition that truth or something like justification is important for its own sake.[15] Putting things this way is vague at best. To provide some substance to the intuition, one must say something about which things' truth (or indicators of its putative truth, but I shall sometimes just talk about truth for convenience) is supposed to be important and in what way the truth of those things is supposed to be important.

I postulate that truth is supposed to be important to both the beliefs of individuals and the various public forms of expression that those beliefs take. While this is perhaps incomplete, I should imagine it suffices for getting started. With respect to how truth is important, it is tempting, albeit far from necessary, to treat its importance as being related to value. At least in loose talk, this is a common sentiment.

While truth may be important in ways that have nothing to do with value, I conjecture that if one were to introspect carefully and consider the ways in which the importance of truth is discussed in pre-theoretical contexts, one would find that it is a common, if unarticulated view that the importance of truth is something like the value of believing or knowing the truth both at an individual and a societal level. In

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[15] Clifford (1877) is of course one, but see also Horwich (2006), Lynch (2004 & 2020), and Mitova (2021). Mitova has particularly interesting new account that draws out deep connections between the value of truth and epistemic justice.

a tradition that begins at least with Aristotle,[16] this idea has been taken seriously by philosophers and given form by treating various positive epistemic qualities, including the possession of knowledge, as a non-derivative component of wellbeing or an aspect of human virtue. I assume that personal good increases as wellbeing increases; indeed, I take it that there is nothing more to personal good than wellbeing. In that important sense, having, e.g., true beliefs on this account is good.

It is this rather old idea – that truth or its indicators are part of our wellbeing – that provides a strong *prima facie* motivation for accepting non-derivative pluralism. In whatever sense truth is normative, it is so because it is non-derivatively important to us. The suggestion taken seriously here is that truth is important to us because it is in a direct sense a personal good to have our doxastic states line up with how the world is or with indicators of how the world is. Indeed, philosophers have over the last two decades put significant effort into explaining the value of truth. But at least one candidate explanation has been with us for a long time: the truth of our beliefs, or perhaps the alignment of our beliefs with evidence or other indicators of truth, are part of our wellbeing. The value of truth is its essential personal value to each of us.

1.2 Welfarist (pragmatic) foundations

Welfarist pluralism should be distinguished from two nearby neighbours. One is *foundational pluralism*. Foundational pluralism is the view that there are irreducibly alethic and irreducibly pragmatic reasons for belief and that there is a different fundamental basis for each.[17] A second nearby neighbour is *derivative pluralism.* Derivative pluralism is the view that all basic reasons for belief are pragmatic in

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[16] See Book VI and especially X of the *Nichomachean Ethics*.
[17] See Leary (2017) and Kaupinen (2023).

ways that do not treat believing in accordance with epistemic considerations as being directly good for one. Rather, one's alethic reasons derive from the fact (when it is a fact) that believing according to truth or evidence (and so on) results in non-epistemic benefits, such as pleasure, achievement, or personal growth.

Welfarist pluralism by way of contrast is monistic about its normative foundations. All reasons for belief arise from wellbeing, or the goodness of wellbeing. There is no separate normative basis for alethic reasons. However, unlike derivative pragmatism, welfarist pluralism holds that one's alethic reasons are grounded essentially in the epistemic component of one's wellbeing and need not derive from their instrumental value in promoting e.g. pleasure, achievement, or personal growth. It may help to illustrate with an example.

Suppose the fact that a certain chemical trail in the sand is evidence that a snake has passed by recently. Perhaps with the added assumption that this fact about a chemical trail in the sand is epistemically accessible to me, that fact is an alethic reason for me to believe that a snake has slithered across the patch of sand in question.[18]

On what I take to be the correct view of reasons, the fact that there are certain chemicals in the sand is the reason itself, *i.e.* it stands in the reason relation to an agent (me), a belief (that a snake has passed by), and degree of strength, and so on. The metaphysical explanation of why it is a reason is that it is evidence for the proposition that is the content of the belief for which the fact is a reason.

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[18] Snakes gain epistemic access to this information through their ability to track directional features of chemical trails with their forked tongues in combination with Jacobson's organ. Presumably a person would manage with some sort of artificial sensor.

We are entitled to ask several further explanatory questions.[19] The one of interest here is this: why does this fact's standing as evidence for the contents of a particular belief make it a reason to have that belief? A foundational pluralist would, or at least might, answer that there is no informative answer to this question. It is simply the nature of normativity that something's being evidence makes it be a reason for belief.[20]

Now consider the fact that having a particular belief would make me happy, irrespective of the (evidential, for example) support for the truth of its contents (or their truth, for that matter). The fact that having the belief would or does make me happy is a reason to have that belief. If we ask a further question about why this is so, foundational pluralism offers the explanation that it is a reason because it makes us happy.

Foundational pluralism is a view worth exploring in its own right, but I introduce it here as a foil to *foundational monism*. The particular kind of foundational monism that I have in mind leaves the answer to the question 'What is the reason itself?' intact in both of the preceding examples. However, it offers a different answer to the second question from that given by foundational pluralism.

According to welfarist pluralism's foundational monism, the fact something is evidence for *p* is a non-derivative reason to believe *p*, just as it would be on foundational pluralist theories. However, the explanation of why it is a reason is that *being in a positive epistemic state* is a basic, non-derivative component of wellbeing. Just in the same way that something's being pleasurable to believe is a reason to believe it, because pleasure is a basic, non-derivative component of wellbeing, the

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[19] I thank Jens Johansson for his advice on how to improve this discussion.
[20] See Leary (2017) for further discussion of foundational pluralist strategies.

realisation of relevant epistemic goods is also a basic component of wellbeing.

Welfarist pluralism is thus committed to a particular kind of account of wellbeing, although not to any particular account of wellbeing *per se*. It is committed to an account of wellbeing that has two or more basic components, at least one of which is being in a positive epistemic state and at least one of which is something else. Welfarist pluralism must also hold that these components combine to produce a total wellbeing state. This is because the explanation of how alethic and non-alethic reasons for belief combine to determine what one ought to believe is the same explanation as to why the different components of wellbeing combine to produce a total level of wellbeing.[21]

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider what makes something be a basic or non-derivative component of wellbeing (I use the terms interchangeably in this context). Here is a sketch of the idea. A component of wellbeing is basic if it is a) an essential component of wellbeing and b) it is not essential to wellbeing only in virtue of it contribution to one or more other components of wellbeing.

The kind of foundational monism that is part of welfarist pluralism holds that all reasons for belief are so, because having that belief contributes to wellbeing.[22] The account's foundational monism is pragmatic in just this sense: all reasons for belief are grounded in wellbeing.

Of course, put this way it is easy to see that the minimal difference between

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[21] I assume here that alethic and pragmatic reasons for belief combine to determine what one ought to believe. Berker (2018) is sceptical about the possibility of giving an extensionally plausible combinatorics. Kaupinen (2023) argues that there is no unified ought of belief, but rather an alethic ought and a pragmatic ought. I have tried to answer both worries in Reisner (under contract) and in a more general way in Reisner (2004 & 2015).

[22] For the sake of simplicity, I shall assume for now that the contribution is to the agent's own wellbeing.

welfarist pluralism and pragmatist derivativism is that they value truth (and/or associated epistemic properties) in different ways. In one sense, the views are rather close to each other. In another, they are far apart. They are close together insofar as they are both compatible with welfarism about reasons for belief. They are far apart, because welfarist pluralism treats alethic reasons for belief as being equally basic to non-alethic, pragmatic, reasons for belief. It thereby inherits the combinatoric challenges endemic to views like foundational pluralism. The contribution of alethic reasons to what one ought to believe is not parasitic on how they promote the realisation of non-alethic goods. The derivative pluralist escapes the combinatorics snare by being able to appeal to the degree to which having epistemically supported beliefs realises non-alethic goods, meaning that at root one is comparing like with like. On the other hand, one may note that in situations where there are no non-alethic goods to believing what is epistemically supported, there are only error-theoretic explanations available as to why there at least still seem to be alethic reasons for belief.

2. The value of truth

At the end of §1.1, I presented the intuition that truth is in some way good or valuable as being a motivation for welfarist pluralism. Welfarist pluralism is of course not unique in treating truth as valuable. It differs from the main alternatives insofar as it treats truth directly as a personal good. This section looks more closely at welfarist pluralism's treatment of truth as valuable.

The idea that truth is valuable or good has been explored in different ways in recent decades. What the different discussions have in common is the notion that certain things that have the property of being true – mainly true beliefs but perhaps

also true assertions – are non-personal goods. It is also a special kind of goodness or value that is limited to the epistemic domain; the goodness or value involved is non-moral and non-prudential.

This picture immediately raises two concerns. The first of these is familiar in various guises. Not all true beliefs seem to be equally valuable. Trivial or irrelevant true beliefs seem to be less valuable than interesting, relevant beliefs. Perhaps the former sort are not valuable at all. Authors[23] try to get around this worry by stipulating that only sufficiently relevant, interesting, or important true beliefs are good.

An interesting question about this strategy is why the importance of a belief affects its value.[24] After all, the question is not which beliefs are good for a particular individual or individuals, but rather merely which beliefs are good or valuable. This good, as Michael Lynch notes,[25] is typically construed as some kind of alethic good. Yet relevance, interestingness, and importance are not themselves alethic qualities. They are qualities that relate to an individual's concerns in both thought and action.

Welfarist pluralism holds that the correct account of wellbeing is one according to which being in a positive epistemic state, one which is epistemically required, for example, is part of wellbeing. There is an obvious affinity with views about wellbeing that treat knowledge as part of wellbeing.[26] Those views assume, mainly tacitly, that knowledge is the final epistemic good. I believe the emphasis on

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[23] See Lynch (2009).

[24] Mitova (2021) offers a different, innovative approach to answering this question.

[25] Lynch (2009)

[26] There are various examples of such views, but many fall into the Aristotelian tradition. See for example Griffin (1986) for relevant discussion. Moore (1984), Rashdall (1907), and probably Ross (1930) all fall into the Aristotelian tradition. See Aristotle (2000).

knowledge was and is mistaken, although it is not a point that I am prepared to argue for here. Rather, I should like to point out that what is particularly interesting about knowledge is that it connects the mental lives of agents to the actual state of the world via factivity. It is a particularly robust form of true belief.[27]

There are several strands of thought about wellbeing that take veridicality as an important feature of genuine human happiness.[28] Famous examples, such as Robert Nozick's Experience Machine,[29] rely on eliciting the intuition that things which are both done and experienced have a higher importance to wellbeing than the corresponding simulacra and experiences of those simulacra. Ersatz achievement is not as personally valuable as real achievement. Genuine relationships contribute more to wellbeing than qualitatively identical supposed or illusory relationships.

While it is not Nozick's main concern, I believe these intuitions about truth are also intuitions about something like appropriate connections to reality. Consider two variations on the Experience Machine style of examples. In the first variation, bad conditions on the mountain lead a climber to have a number of false, but reality-grounded experiences and beliefs. The climber might have become lost, because snow made one route look like another. Responding to the evidence, he begins to head up the wrong face of the mountain. Unusual weather skews the significance of various indicators about the condition of the snow and ice, and the climber experiences himself as manoeuvring up one kind of surface, while he is in fact going up another. His experiences are not veridical in a number of ways, but they are tied

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[27] *Pace* Ayer (1956), Sutton (2007), Williamson (2002), and others who treat knowledge as a separate type of mental state.

[28] Griffin (1986) remains an essential point of departure for contemporary discussions about this aspect of wellbeing.

[29] Nozick (1974).

in evidenced-based and other epistemically reasonable ways to his environment.

In the second example, consider a climber who experiences himself as climbing on the route he is actually on and doing so in the way that he actually is. However, the experiences are not due to his connection to the environment or derived from interpretations of his environment's normal indicators. Rather, his brain is hooked up to a device that by an amazing, causally arbitrary coincidence feeds him back perfect simulations of the experiences he would be having of his actual activities.

My intuition is that the first climber's experiences contribute more *ceteris paribus* to his wellbeing than do the second's, even though the second climber's experiences are veridical and the first climber's experiences are not, although both may be valuable (and perhaps more valuable than just having the experiences). What I take the broadly Nozickian intuitions to point at is that it is not only (mere) veridicality that matters, or at least that matters most, but rather *aspirational veridicality*, which is a kind of appropriated and situated, even is sometimes non-veridical, relation between one's mental states and what they (purport to) represent.

I am moved, at least within limits, by the intuitive force of thought experiments and examples that treat one's actual doings and one's experiences that *aspire* to be of them as more personally valuable than their ersatz or disconnected counterparts. I have no additional arguments in favour of these intuitions. If 'aspirational veridicalism', as I shall call the view, is false, then it is less clear why one should expect wellbeing to have the required kind of epistemic component.

Let us then suppose that aspirational veridicalism is true for the sake of advancing the discussion. The epistemic component of wellbeing is tied to aspirational veridicalist intuitions. The reality, or at least connection with reality, of our interior life is a good. One's having the phenomenal experience of ascending K2

is valuable in no small part, because it is a representation of one's actual achievements in climbing K2. The doing, as opposed to the mere phenomenological experiencing, contributes to wellbeing, as do veridical/aspiringly veridical experiences of the actual doing. The latter do so beyond what having identical internal states would contribute, were one to undergo them whilst sitting inside an experience machine.

This is the underlying thought: if we accept aspirational veridicalism about wellbeing, having appropriate doxastic connections to the outside world is part of our wellbeing, because it instantiates actual or aspirational veridical relations between our mental lives and what our mental lives (purport to) represent. However, things are in some ways more complicated with our doxastic states. Doxastic achievement and its correlation with the outside world have two distinct components. One is correctness in the sense of a belief's simply being true. Another is responsiveness to reality, at least partially in the form of responsiveness to evidence, rational argument, and reflectively adopted precepts of good reasoning. Doxastic correctness – having a true belief – is not the sole way in which beliefs reflect a real connection to the world. A belief's connecting in the right way by conforming to appropriate epistemic norms does not entail that the belief will be true.

It is a job for epistemologists to discover how to balance these considerations.[30] The aim of belief may be truth. Having beliefs that strive to connect to and represent

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[30] This point needs clarifying. I am not suggesting that one ought to defer to the epistemological literature in some current or past historical state. Rather I take it that there is some correct account to be worked out, and that it is part of the proper study of epistemology. I am making a number of assumptions that are not compatible with various contemporary strands of epistemology, for example they are not compatible with orthodox Bayseanism.

the world as it is, however, does not secure their truth. My own opinion, and it is not very much more than that, is that a belief's response to its environment is of greater epistemic importance than its truth, although both may well matter. I have the analogous intuition about the two variations of the Experience Machine example. The prioritisation of the indicators of truth over truth itself seems to be the most common view in the literature on alethic reasons for belief.[31] It is no coincidence that for a long time, the rival view to pragmatism was called 'evidentialism'. Welfarist pluralism leaves open the question of what being in a positive epistemic state is, at least up to a point, but it treats being in a positive epistemic state as part of wellbeing. This is in the main because wellbeing, according to aspirational verdicialism, is partially determined by our connections to the world as it is by the aetiology of our internal mental states.

An attractive feature of this explanation of why true or at least positively epistemically valanced beliefs are valuable is that they are valuable to us as individuals. Any epistemically positive belief is equally good for us *qua* epistemically positive belief. However, at the same time certain beliefs can be good for us in additional ways. Beliefs which are of practical value, because they are both true and relevant, will make further contributions to our wellbeing. For example, being a certain kind of person, perhaps a learned person or an expert on a particular subject, may be a type of achievement; having true beliefs relevant to being learned or to being an expert would thus confer additional gains on an individual's wellbeing, as having them would contribute towards producing worthwhile achievements. Beliefs that allow us to navigate our environment without injury

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[31] See Gibbons (2013) for a thorough and opinionated survey.

allow us to avoid physical pain. The welfarist pluralism explanation for the greater value of interesting or relevant beliefs is that they contribute to wellbeing in additional, complex ways over and above the fact that they are epistemically positive.

Of course, this does not exclude the possibility that relevance and interestingness are essential features of epistemically positive beliefs. If they are, then welfarist pluralism accommodates that, too. Nonetheless, if they are not, welfarist pluralism at least can help to explain the intuition that relevance and interestingness matter to the value of beliefs that (otherwise) share the same epistemic status.[32]

While it has only been lightly defended here, I believe that this account of the value of truth or indicators of truth is promising. The truth is in important to us collectively, in part because it is contributes to the wellbeing of each of us individually.

3. The epistemic component

In §§1.1-1.2, I presented a rough picture of how each of the two main components of welfarist pluralism work to combine a) monist foundations with b) non-derivative pluralism about reasons for belief. The source of reasons for belief is wellbeing, and their combinatoric properties are those of the individual components of wellbeing.

One issue that arises immediately on this picture is that of how to understand the epistemic component of wellbeing. A perhaps tempting, but unacceptable view is that being in doxastic states or engaging in doxastic processes for which there are

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[32] Welfarist pluralism offers a more flexible way to account for the role of interest or practical importance in generating reasons for belief than interest-relative approaches to epistemic properties, such as being justified or being an instance of knowledge. See for example Stanley (2007).

alethic reasons is *ceteris paribus* good for an individual, with the order of explanation going from reasons to wellbeing (or perhaps personal good, where 'good' refers to the value of wellbeing rather than wellbeing itself). This picture places reasons prior to wellbeing and would require an explanation about the source of alethic reasons which does have wellbeing in its *explanans*. A picture of this kind is inconsistent with welfarist pluralism in both logic and spirit. There are accounts of personal good, and even wellbeing under that name, that treat being in line with various normative reasons as an inherently positive contribution to one's wellbeing.[33] Whatever account of wellbeing is ultimately the right one for use in welfarist pluralism, it is not one of those.[34]

There is a certain idea of a *normative source* and also the idea of a *source of normativity* that have appeared with different glosses in earlier work of mine and the work of John Broome's.[35] Broome's idea, very roughly, is that different sorts of domains or systems are capable of producing requirements. For example, the source of the requirement that one eats peas using the reverse side of one's fork is etiquette. And the source of the requirement not to harm innocents is morality. One of the possible sources is *epistemology*. The requirement that one not believe a transparently false proposition has epistemology as its source. Of course, this is not an entirely conventional use of 'epistemology', but the underlying idea is intuitively graspable.

According to Broome, some sources are normative. For example, morality may be normative, whereas etiquette is non-normative. According to Broome, when a source

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[33] Fitting-attitude analyses can have this character. For an in-depth discussion, see Sylvan (2021).

[34] Insofar as wellbeing is the basis for personal goodness, I also doubt that this sort of reasons-first approach can be correct. See Reisner (2023) for an argument against reasons-first views.

[35] See Reisner (2004 & 2015) and Broome (2007 & 2013).

is normative, it confers the force of being a normative reason on its requirements. This is why there is a reason not to harm innocents, while there is no non-derivative reason to eat peas by balancing them on the reverse side of one's fork; morality is a normative source, whereas etiquette is not. Broome does not elaborate on what makes a normative source be normative. I believe it is correct to read him as being open to existence of either one or of many basic normative sources.

On the other hand, in earlier work of mine, I used 'source' in a different way to describe properties or categories of properties that gave rise to reasons or oughts. For example, the source of the requirement that one not to believe necessary falsehoods is truth, or perhaps logic, rather than epistemology. Likewise, the source of the requirement not to harm innocents is goodness (assuming a broadly teleological ethics for the sake of argument).[36] I shall soon make use of both Broome's notion of a source and my own.

The question of in virtue of what something is valuable invites several answers, as there are several potentially relevant senses of 'in virtue of'. Here, two particular kinds of question are of interest. It is helpful to introduce a toy theory once again. Suppose that subjectivism about goodness is true, i.e. what it is for something to be good is for me to believe that it is good.[37]

Let us assume that penguins, as individuals, are good. In virtue of what are they

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[36] In contrast particularly to Broome's view, Bruno Guindon (2016) makes a strong case for treating reasons as conceptually and metaphysically prior to normative sources. The welfarist pluralism account may not be compatible with the the view that Guindon sets out. Readers persuaded by his work may thus have (additional) reasons to be sceptical about welfarist pluralism.

[37] This idea is inspired by various works of Ralf Bader's. The original, unpublished paper from which I got the idea has evolved instead into several different papers, including work in progress. Consequently, it seems best to me to acknowledge my intellectual debt to Bader without providing a specific citation.

good? The first answer to this question is the fact that I believe that they are good. This grounds the fact that they are good. The relation itself is grounded by a second fact, namely that what makes something good is that I believe it is good. This in turn explains why what is good changes along with my beliefs about what is good. It also explains why what is good is always determined by what I believe is good and not something else. A parallel thought about grounding is present in welfarist pluralism.

According to welfarist pluralism, the fact that believing x is required by epistemology is the first kind of grounding fact. That satisfying the requirements[38] of epistemology is a basic (positive) component of my wellbeing is the grounding fact of the second kind, namely it is what makes it the case that the first fact itself grounds the fact that there is an alethic reason for me to believe x.[39]

This structure supports two integral parts of the welfarist pluralist picture. The first is that it distinguishes welfarist pluralism from foundational pluralism. Welfarist pluralism and foundational pluralism both cite the fact that something is required by epistemology as the grounding fact (of the first kind) for there being an alethic reason to believe x. According to welfarist pluralism's foundational monism, the explanation of why *the fact that believing x satisfies a requirement of epistemology* grounds *the fact that there is a reason for believing x* is because satisfying a requirement of epistemology contributes to increasing the level of a component of one's wellbeing. According to foundational pluralism, the explanation instead would be

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[38] I am assuming for the present discussion that what there is to being in a positive (as far as it goes) epistemic state just is being in the state of satisfying one or more requirements of epistemology. The sense of 'positive' here is meant attributively rather than predicatively.

[39] One may reasonably ask whether there are further grounding questions to ask, namely in virtue of what it is the case that being a part of wellbeing grounds something's being grounds for a reason for belief. This further grounding question is not one that I pursue in this paper. For some methodological considerations in trying to answer it, see Reisner (2018b).

that the fact that *x* satisfies a requirement of epistemology is itself the complete explanation.

This way of describing the structure also puts us in a position to distinguish more clearly between welfarist pluralism and derivativist pragmalism. On the latter view, the fact that *e* is evidence for *p* grounds the fact that *e* is a reason to believe *p*. However, what grounds the relation between these facts is that believing in accordance with the evidence (either in this case or generally) increases the level of some non-epistemic component of wellbeing, for example the amount of pleasure one feels. What makes the reason non-derivative according to the foundational monism of welfarist pluralism, as opposed to a (for example) hedonic derivativist pragmatism, is the nature of wellbeing itself. Epistemic goods are basic wellbeing goods, so to speak, on the former view, whereas they are not on the latter.

To further characterise the structure of welfarist pluralism, it is helpful to extend the grounding model with an additional step. The fact that *e* is evidence for *p* grounds the fact that *e* is a reason to believe *p*. In turn, this grounding relation obtains because (suppose) epistemology requires one to believe according to the evidence. What *confers* normativity on the requirements of epistemology is in turn the fact that being in a positive epistemic state is a basic component of an individual's wellbeing.

To return now to talk of 'sources', in the sense in which I have used the term, the source of all normativity is wellbeing. In Broome's sense, the source of the normativity of this particular reason is epistemology, and the rest of the story the explanation of why epistemology is a normative (reason providing) source rather than a non-normative source.

The picture on offer relies on the dual grounds model presented in this section. I

shall call the first ground for a reason 'the reason itself'. I shall use 'source' in the way that Broome does, namely the sort of system or structure that produces requirements and reasons. A source which can issue reasons non-derivatively is a *normative source* and one that cannot is a *non-normative source*. Following my earlier practice, something like wellbeing, which confers normativity to a source, is a *source of normativity*.[40] One may rightly complain that it is too easy to confuse a *normative source* with a *source of normativity*. However, other candidate terminology is more awkward and adds difficulty when comparing what is said here to the literature. I apologise for not having a neater terminological solution.

Coming full circle, it is now possible to offer a summary description of the epistemic component. The epistemic component is a component of wellbeing. Epistemic facts are thus reasons for beliefs themselves. They are so because epistemology is a normative source. The source of normativity for epistemology is wellbeing.

3.1 Epistemology as a component of wellbeing

'Epistemology' is a word used to name a field of philosophical inquiry. This field was originally constituted by the study of the theory of knowledge, but in time it has come to concern concepts and properties like *justification*, *warrant*, *ought*s, and *reason*s as they apply to a variety of doxastic states, sometimes in connection to knowledge and sometimes not.

I am interested in much narrower notion of epistemology, one that may overlap only to a limited degree with the present research discipline in philosophy with

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[40] See Reisner (2004 & 2011).

which it shares a name. It is a notion of epistemology in which epistemology issues requirements of the relevant kind. With respect to this narrower notion, epistemology is a kind of function from states of the world to requirements. These requirements may be evidential in character: that there is overwhelming evidence for p requires one to believe p.[41] They may be logical: that x and *not x* are contradictories requires one not to believe both x and not x. I do not mean to limit the requirements of epistemology to evidence and logic. In fact, I take it that it is the job of the epistemologists – in the sense of those who study might study this narrower notion of epistemology – to discover its requirements. Satisfying those requirements is a basic, non-derivative component of wellbeing, whatever the requirements turn out to be, within some important limits.

For reasons outlined in §2, I take it that epistemology, or the part of it that appears in welfarist pluralism, is concerned with mind-world relations. This means that strictly internalistic features of epistemology are ruled out. This has three important upshots.

The first is that theoretical rationality, understood as a system of wide-scope requirements governing relations amongst mental states, is not part of epistemology in the relevant sense. Theoretical rational requirements, construed thusly, do not depend on non-mental features of the world. The requirements do not arise from considerations that concern how one's mental states relate to worldly states. This is not to say that there are no overlapping requirements of theoretical rationality and epistemology. Insofar as the former are consistency requirements, they forbid having pairs of logically inconsistent beliefs. Two logically inconsistent beliefs cannot both

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[41] There are those who are sceptical about this claim. See Reisner (2013) for more discussion. Kevin Mulligan has also pressed objections to this principle to me in conversation.

be true. Epistemology requires us not to have beliefs or combinations of beliefs that are necessarily false. Therefore, there are at least some requirements of epistemology that are identical in content to at least some requirements of theoretical rationality. But they are numerically different requirements in virtue of having different sources.[42]

The second upshot is that some aspects of epistemology, concerning which there is debate about whether they are internal or external, must be external. The sense of 'internal' and 'external' is like that used in traditional reasons literature, not the justification literature, which is to say the issue is whether extra-mental facts play a particular kind of role or whether they do not. A straightforward example is evidence.

Some theories of evidence, such as orthodox Bayesean theories, take mental states to be evidence. This is an internalist view in the relevant sense. On the other hand, some philosophers offer accounts of evidence that are essentially non-mental, for example Jonathan Dancy and John Skorupski in some of their work on reasons.[43] Evidence for them has various accessibility constraints, but the facts themselves are the evidence. These are externalist views in the relevant sense.

Finally, there are mental state views of evidence that identify evidence with veridical mental states. Perhaps most famously, there is Timothy Williamson's view that our evidence is our total knowledge.[44] More recently, Velislava Mitova has developed an account of evidence as true beliefs.[45] Although these are mental state

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[42] This commits me to the view that requirements are more finely grained than their contents; they are as finally grained as the the conjunction of their contents and their source.
[43] See Dancy (2000) and Skorupski (2010).
[44] Williamson (2000).
[45] Mitova (2017).

views, they are external in the relevant sense, because they link evidence to veridical states of the world.[46]

The final upshot is methodological rather than substantive. As with many views in philosophy, welfarist pluralism does not meet a standard of neutrality. It is a committed view, committed both in the sense that it has several substantive components and in the sense that it is not compatible with various positions in as yet unsettled debates in philosophy. The methodological point is this. The plausibility and correctness of welfarist pluralism partially depends on the plausibility and correctness of a number of other, contested views in philosophy.

4. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have outlined the basic ideas underlying welfarist pluralism. My aim has been to set out and motivate the view, if only incompletely, by looking at a selection of its more promising features.

Perhaps the most important amongst the features of welfarist pluralism discussed in this paper is the way in which components of wellbeing provide distinctive types of grounds for reasons for belief. The fact that epistemology itself is a source of reasons for belief distinguishes welfarist plurlaism from standard forms of pragmatism on the one hand. On the other, the fact that wellbeing is the source of normativity for those reasons assimilates welfarist pluralism to standard forms of pragmatism. The proposed existence of an epistemic component of wellbeing also links welfarist pluralism to a particular kind of account of the value of truth, one

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[46] This classification of internal and external differs from the one I use in Reisner (2016). This is regrettable, but cannot be helped.

which may be better positioned to explain relevance and interest intuitions than other accounts on offer.

I close this paper with a pair of observations. Clifford's evidentialism is no longer a popular view about the ethics of belief. Contemporary evidentialists typically do not see their views as having an ethical component in the way that Clifford saw his as having one. Contemporary pragmatists have not been inclined to see conformity to truth-related epistemic norms as inherently morally worthy. The account developed here, by tying believing what is true – or indicated to be true – to wellbeing, offers a path to arguing that alethic reasons are in a certain sense moral reasons. Although much of what Clifford says is surely wrong, I am surprised to find myself not only offering conjectural support for a part of his view, but also to find that I now am inclined to think that connecting the true and the good is an admirable *desideratum*.

This leads to the second observation. This paper's subjects are issues I have worked on for 20 years. The paper represents an incomplete effort to set out and explore a conjecture that I favour but cannot fully defend. In recent times it has become clearer that work on reasons for belief has a connection to world events, as we live in an age where there is a concerted assault on the importance of believing those things that evidence and sound reasoning suggest are true. During the times, and there have been many, when I have been inclined towards believing a version of strict pragmatism about reasons for belief, I have worried about the way that the view loses a grip on the intuitive importance of truth, or at least of striving to believe the truth. I was no more impressed by the answers given by evidentialists of varying stripes, and consequently I have wondered what an account that is closer to at least my own intuitions could be like.

I have offered one possible answer in this paper, or at least a programme for giving an answer. Truth is important to us, not because of some dubious talk of the constitutive norms of belief or related arguments, but because the connection between our mental lives and the world around us is central to our wellbeing. In an earlier era, it might have been said that the gods love truth, that it was dear to them. Even as we sometimes try to run away from it, I suggest that the truth is dear to us, too. If this is right, then truth matters because it is important for us, and its normative grip is in the same family as the normative grip of morality and prudence.

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