

what makes reasons sufficient?

This paper addresses the question: ‘what makes reasons sufficient?’ and offers the answer, ‘being at least as weighty as the reasons for the alternatives’. The paper starts by introducing some of the reasons why sufficiency has seemed difficult to understand, particularly in epistemology, and some circumstantial evidence that this has contributed to more general problems in the epistemological literature. It then introduces the positive account of sufficiency, and explains how this captures sufficiency in both the practical and epistemic domains. Finally, the paper shows how once we understand the nature of sufficiency, it is easy to predict the full variety of ways in which rationality – both of action and of belief – can be defeated.

I preliminaries

Before we get started, it’s a good idea to get clearer on what, exactly, is at stake, starting with what I mean by ‘reason’, what I mean by ‘sufficient’, and how, at least in a preliminary way, these things are related to familiar things like rationality, evidence, and correctness. I’ll start with reasons.

If Katie needs help, that is a reason to help her. It counts in favor of helping her, even for people who are unaware that she needs help. For, given that she needs help, other things being equal, helping Katie is the right thing to do. Moreover, it’s the right thing to do, even for people who are unaware that Katie needs help – they’re just unaware what the right thing to do is. Of course, when people are unaware what the right thing to do is, it isn’t necessarily rational for them to do it. What is rational for you to do depends not on the facts, but on what you believe. And so corresponding to the sense in which the fact that Katie needs help is a reason to help Katie, there is another sense, in which if you (justifiably) *believe* that Katie needs help, then in some sense you *have a reason* to to help her, irregardless of whether your belief is true. I call the former sense the *objective* sense of ‘reason’, and the latter sense the *subjective* sense.¹

¹ See especially Schroeder [2008].

As these remarks suggest, objective reasons are connected to *correctness* or *rightness* in action; whereas subjective reasons are connected to *rationality*. An action is *correct* or *objectively permissible* for some agent just in case that agent's reasons favoring that action are sufficient (i.e., sufficiently good to justify it), and uniquely permissible or *required*, just in case those reasons are *conclusive*. Similarly, an action is *rationally permissible* for an agent just in case that agent's *subjective* reasons favoring that action are sufficient, and *rationally required* just in case they are conclusive. So the concept of sufficiency (and the corresponding concept of conclusiveness) applies to *both* objective and subjective reasons. The question I will be interested in this paper is *what makes* reasons sufficient – to which we need an answer, if the foregoing remarks make sense, that applies equally well to objective and subjective reasons.

So far I've been discussing reasons for *action*, and rationality and correctness of action. But the same distinction between objective and subjective reasons can be made among reasons *for belief*. For example, if Max is smiling, that is, in some sense, a reason to believe that he is happy – even for people who do not realize that he is happy. This is the sense in which there can be reasons to believe that Max is happy that you don't know about. But if you don't know that Max is smiling, then the fact that he is smiling doesn't affect whether it is *rational* for you to believe that he is happy or not, for what it is rational for you to believe depends only on what you believe or perceive, not on facts of which you are unaware. So there is also a sense in which if you (justifiably) *believe* that Max is smiling, then you have a reason to believe that he is happy – regardless of whether your belief is actually true. Moreover, it is *rationally permissible* for you to believe that Max is happy just in case your reasons to believe that he is happy are *sufficient*, and you are *rationally required* to believe that he is happy just in case they are conclusive.

The only hitch for seeing this as a full-fledged parallel between objective and subjective reasons for action and for belief, is that philosophers sometimes say that when it comes to belief, correctness is just *truth*. This poses a problem, because if correctness of belief is just *truth*, but truth doesn't have anything to do with the sufficiency of reasons, then correct belief will contrast with correct action, because while correct action depends on the sufficiency of reasons, correct belief will not so depend. However, the thesis that correctness of belief just *is* truth is grossly undermotivated by the true observation that a belief is correct only if it is true. For to explain this and preserve our parallel, we need only to assume that the fact that p is not true is always a conclusive reason not to believe p . This assumption is both highly plausible in its own right, and guarantees that a belief is correct only if it is true, *even on the assumption* that like action, a belief is correct just in case it is supported by sufficient reasons. So I'll be assuming that this is correct, and consequently that the parallel between action and belief is robust.

Finally, just as we can distinguish objective and subjective reasons, we can make a precisely analogous distinction between objective and subjective senses of ‘evidence’. Again, if Max is smiling, that is evidence that he is happy, and in one important sense, it is such evidence even if no one is aware that Max is smiling. That he is smiling is the kind of thing that we go looking for, when we go looking for evidence as to whether Max is smiling, and evidence that we have to go looking for is clearly not something of which we are already aware. So there is a natural, objective, sense of ‘evidence’. But there is also a subjective sense of ‘evidence’, on which someone who (justifiably) believes that Max is smiling has evidence that Max is happy – even if Max is not actually smiling. Of course, this is not true in the objective sense of ‘evidence’, but then, neither was it true that false beliefs can give you reasons to act or believe in the objective sense of ‘reason’. Nevertheless, it is the subjective sense of ‘evidence’ that is important for whether your belief that Max is happy is *rational* or *justified*. The fact that we can draw the same distinction between objective and subjective with respect to evidence as with respect to reasons leads, I think, to the natural hypothesis that evidence is a kind of *reason for belief*. And this is what I will assume in what follows. Consequently, I will also be assuming that the question of what makes someone’s *evidence* sufficient to justify her belief should be understood as a special case of the more general question of what makes *reasons* sufficient. Indeed, we’ll see that construing the question in this more general way will turn out to be key to seeing how to answer it.

So if evidence is a kind of reason to believe, this raises the important question of whether there are also *other* kinds of reasons for or against belief, or whether evidence is actually the *only* kind of reason for or against belief. For famously, there is a controversy over whether Pascalian considerations are reasons for or against belief. By Pascalian considerations, I mean cases like the following: suppose that there is some large reward to be gained by believing *p*, or some enormous psychic cost to believing *q*. In some broad sense, these rewards or costs would seem to ‘count in favor’ of or against believing *p* or *q*, and someone who is interested in attaining these rewards and avoiding these costs would certainly be rationally well-advised to do what is possible to have the former belief and lack the latter. So *some* say that these are reasons for and against belief.

But even those who say such things generally grant that these are not the usual type of reason for belief, and that there is a distinctive kind of rationality *distinctive* of belief, usually called *epistemic* rationality, which is not affected by such considerations. Rather than taking a stand here on whether Pascalian considerations are reasons for belief, or on whether there is any sense in which a belief counts as rational because it is well-supported by Pascalian considerations, I will use ‘epistemic rationality’ for that dimension of rational appraisal of belief which it is so widely agreed is insensitive to Pascalian considerations. This

will allow us to focus on epistemic rationality without taking a stand on whether it is the only kind of rationality of belief. That it is the central kind of rationality which has been of interest to epistemologists will be enough for our purposes. A general way of characterizing epistemic rationality – my preferred way – is that it is the strongest kind of rationality that is entailed by knowledge.²

Epistemic *reasons*, then, we may take to be those reasons which bear on the epistemic rationality of belief. This guarantees that Pascalian considerations do not count as epistemic reasons, but is non-committal as to whether they are reasons for or against belief of some other kind. According to a common and natural hypothesis, then, even if evidence is not the only kind of reason for or against belief, it *is* the only kind of *epistemic* reason for or against belief – the only kind of reason for or against belief which bears on the distinctive domain of *epistemic* rationality, the distinctive kind of rationality governing belief which is entailed by knowledge. Note that as I have defined ‘epistemic reasons’, this is a substantive thesis, but it is also a natural one.

2 what makes sufficiency puzzling for epistemology?

In part I I characterized sufficiency, the object of our investigation, in terms of its role in relating reasons – a *pro tanto* concept – to rationality and correctness – all-things-considered concepts. It plays the same role in both the objective and subjective domains – linking subjective reasons to rationality, and linking objective reasons to correctness. So if that is what sufficiency is, then what is the problem? What else is there to say?

The problem that I am interested in isn’t to say what *role* sufficiency plays, but to locate its categorical *basis* – to find out *what makes* reasons sufficient, as in the title of this paper. This is the task with which epistemologists, in particular, have struggled. Evidence of epistemologists’ struggle in identifying any categorical basis for either the sufficiency or the conclusiveness of reasons is amply provided by the many conditional fallacy-prone *conditional* analyses of sufficiency to be found in the epistemology literature. As Robert Shope ably documents in *The Analysis of Knowing*, widely cited as the authoritative treatment of the first two decades of work on the Gettier Problem³, attempt after attempt to characterize the sufficiency or conclusiveness of reasons for belief foundered on the conditional fallacy, because they attempted to characterize sufficiency or conclusiveness in *conditional*, rather than categorical, terms – as reasons that it *would be* rational to believe for.

² This rules out Pascalian considerations, on the plausible assumption that it is possible to know things that one would be better off not believing.

³ For example, by Williamson [2000] and Kvanvig [2003].

The fact that so many views foundered on this problem – it is in fact the *main* problem that Shope cites for several analyses of knowledge that he discusses in his book – is strong circumstantial evidence of how much trouble epistemologists were having, in accounting for the categorical basis of sufficiency. But what the conditional fallacy problems show, is precisely that there *must* be such a categorical basis. So *why* were epistemologists have such a hard time seeing what it could be?

The answer, I think, is that there is no systematic relationship between either the *quantity* or *preponderance* of evidence, and the epistemic rationality of belief. For example, whereas an *action* is rational if the reasons the agent has to do it are at least as good as her reasons not to, having evidence for p that is at least as good as your evidence for $\sim p$ does not suffice to make it rational to believe p – on the contrary, your evidence for p must be substantially *better* than your evidence for $\sim p$, before it is rational to believe p . But how much better? It turns out to be very hard to say. It's not a matter of the *amount* of evidence – sometimes it is epistemically rational to believe something just because you remember that you must have read it somewhere a long time ago, but this certainly isn't true for important questions for which it is easy to gather further evidence. Nor is it a matter of the *preponderance* of evidence – for questions about the distant past, for example, about which it is difficult to gather any evidence at all, it can still be rational to form beliefs, even though no side has very much more evidence than any other, but in other cases we expect a much greater preponderance of the evidence before we are willing to call a belief rational. Finally, sufficiency of evidence is not tied to the *degree of credence* which it licenses, either. Famously, it is widely held that merely probabilistic evidence – such as knowledge that only one ticket will win the lottery and there are n tickets – can license arbitrarily high confidence in the proposition that a particular ticket will not win, without making it epistemically rational to *believe* that it will not win. Yet certainly this is a standard of confidence that we do not expect for rational beliefs about history, pop culture trivia – or philosophy.

Indeed, the relationship between the strength of evidence and its sufficiency or conclusiveness gets even more puzzling. Take, for example, some proposition p for which you currently have conclusive evidence – say, the proposition that you are currently reading a philosophy paper. Quite plausibly, this evidence is *conclusive* – given the evidence, you are rationally required to believe that you are reading a philosophy paper. Believing that you are not reading a philosophy paper would be irrational, given the evidence to the contrary, and it would similarly be irrational, in your current situation and with your current evidence, to have no belief either way, about whether you are believing a philosophy paper or not. So your evidence isn't just *sufficient* to make that belief rational; it is *conclusive*. And if you don't find this case plausible, then any other case of a proposition for which you do have conclusive evidence will do.

Now note that there are infinitely many disjunctions of p with arbitrary, unrelated propositions. For most of these disjunctive propositions, you have no belief either way. And that seems to be a perfectly rational state of affairs; you certainly don't seem to be epistemically at fault for not having formed a belief about every one of them. But note that each of these disjunctive propositions is at least as well favored by your evidence as is p . This is because, first, anything that is evidence for p is at least as good evidence for $p \vee q$, and second, anything that is evidence against $p \vee q$ is at least as good evidence against p . Consequently the balance of evidence favoring $p \vee q$ must be at least as great as the balance of evidence favoring p . Yet somehow that balance of evidence rationally *requires* you to believe p , but does not rationally require you to believe $p \vee q$, because it is rationally permissible to have no belief about many or most such disjunctions. This makes it very puzzling indeed how to understand how either the sufficiency or the conclusiveness of reasons can be characterized in any categorical way. I think these are some of the difficult problems which have made it difficult for epistemologists to see their way through to a categorical account of what makes reasons sufficient.

3 withholding and the balance of reasons

So far, we've clarified the question under consideration and seen both some circumstantial evidence that it is difficult to answer in epistemology and some of the reasons *why* it is so difficult. And so now we get to the main question: what *does* make reasons sufficient, and how is that compatible with the puzzles from epistemology? My answer is simple, and reflects received wisdom about the rationality of *action*, if not of belief. It is that reasons are sufficient when they are at least as weighty as *all* of the reasons for *each* of the alternatives. More precisely:

sufficiency A set S of reasons for X in favor of A is *sufficient* just in case for each alternative B to A , S is at least as weighty as the set of all of the reasons for X in favor of B .⁴

conclusiveness A set S of reasons for X in favor of A is *conclusive* just in case for each alternative B to A , S is weightier than the set of all of the reasons for X in favor of B .

⁴ Note that I define sufficiency for *sets* of reasons, rather than for individual reasons; this is because sometimes two reasons together are sufficient, even though neither is, separately. Some theories of reasons, according to which if R and S are both reasons to do A , $R \& S$ is also a reason to do A , can account for this by saying that $R \& S$ is sufficient, even though neither R nor S is. But other theories of reasons do not have the consequence that $R \& S$ need be a reason to do A , even though R and S both are. These theories will need to account for the join sufficiency of R and S by appeal either to sums or sets of reasons, as I do, here. See chapter 7 of Schroeder [2007].

In other words, a set of reasons is *sufficient* when it matches all comers, and *conclusive* when it beats them. I take it that this is a relatively obvious generalization about rational *action* – all it takes for an action to be rational is to be at least as well-supported by reasons as any alternative. So insofar as the positive view of this paper makes a contribution to these matters, it must lie in explaining why all of this is compatible with what makes *epistemic* reasons sufficient.

The problem arises from the fact that epistemic rationality is the kind of distinctive rationality governing belief – the strongest kind of rationality of belief entailed by knowledge, and only reasons which bear on *epistemic* rationality count as epistemic reasons. Moreover, since we can safely rule out Pascalian considerations as non-epistemic, it seemed natural to assume that the only kinds of epistemic reasons are *evidence*. But as we saw in part 2, this is what led to all of our problems, because there is no systematic connection between either the amount or the preponderance of evidence and either sufficiency or conclusiveness – and in particular, we can generate clear counterexamples to both **sufficiency** and **conclusiveness** by considering cases in which someone has better evidence for p than for $\sim p$, but not enough better to make believing p more rational than withholding.

Now, it is true that one way to take such cases is as evidence that **sufficiency** and **conclusiveness** fail to capture what makes epistemic reasons sufficient. But as we saw, that led to some very difficult problems in saying just what the categorical basis of sufficiency and conclusiveness actually is, for epistemic reasons. On the other hand, a different, perfectly good alternative, way of taking the very same cases, is as evidence that there are *epistemic reasons* that are not *evidence*. What I suggest, is that the more we look at this possibility, the more that it makes sense.

Let's start by looking more closely at the cases that seemed to make trouble for any systematic relationship between the amount or preponderance of the evidence and either sufficiency or conclusiveness – starting with the undisputed fact that just because your evidence for p is at least as good as your evidence for $\sim p$, it doesn't follow that it is rational for you to believe p . So what *is* it rational for you to do? The answer, is that in cases in which your evidence for p and $\sim p$ is tied or close enough to tied, the only rational course is to *lack* belief about p until more evidence comes in. What this makes clear is that believing p and believing $\sim p$ are not the only relevant alternatives – a third alternative is to *lack* belief.

Since in these cases lacking belief is the only rational alternative, they are cases that it is actually *easy* to account for, given **sufficiency** and **conclusiveness**. They are cases in which *lacking* either belief about p is better supported by epistemic reasons than either believing p or believing $\sim p$. On this view, the reason why it is not enough for the evidence for p to outweigh the evidence for $\sim p$, in order to make it epistemically

rational to believe p , is that this only guarantees that believing p is more epistemically rational than believing $\sim p$. In order to make it epistemically rational *full-stop*, however, it must be at least as rational as lacking belief – but for that to be the case, the evidence for p needs to be at least as weighty as the epistemic reasons to lack belief.

The same treatment is possible to explain the rationality of failing to believe all of the disjunctions of p with arbitrary other propositions, in a situation in which you are rationally required to believe p . In this situation, believing p is better supported by epistemic reasons than both believing $\sim p$ and lacking belief with respect to p – but lacking belief with respect to $p \vee q$ is as well-supported by epistemic reasons as believing $p \vee q$. That is why it is rationally permissible to lack a belief about $p \vee q$, even though it is not rationally permissible to lack a belief about p . In order for this structure to obtain, given that the epistemic reasons to believe $p \vee q$ are at least as weighty as the epistemic reasons to believe p , there must be further epistemic reasons to lack belief about $p \vee q$ that are not epistemic reasons to lack belief about p . In fact, it is intuitively easy to say what those reasons are: for given that you already believe p , there is little further good in believing $p \vee q$, if your only basis for it is p , because there is nothing that you can rationally infer from it, that you can't already infer from p . This seems intuitively like a reason not to bother having a belief about $p \vee q$.

Once we conceptualize lacking belief as a genuine alternative to believing p and believing $\sim p$, there is therefore no trouble seeing how to fit cases from epistemology into the framework provided by **sufficiency** and **conclusiveness**. To do so, we need only think of lacking belief as a genuine alternative to believing, and think of lacking belief as something that there are genuine epistemic reasons to do. The chief obstacle to seeing this as a real possibility has been the identification of epistemic reasons with evidence – for if the only epistemic reasons are evidence, and evidence is always either evidence for p or evidence for $\sim p$, then there cannot be any epistemic reasons to lack belief. But once we characterize epistemic reasons simply as those reasons – whatever they are – that play a role in determining what is epistemically rational, we can see that though there is some attraction in the thesis that the only epistemic reasons are evidence, that thesis is also *substantive*, and we can see that it plays a substantial role in making it so hard to see what the categorical basis of sufficiency actually is, in epistemology.

Indeed, my account requires only a very modest departure from the thesis that only evidence can be an epistemic reason. For it is consistent with everything that I have said here that the only epistemic reasons *to believe* are evidence, and the only non-evidential epistemic reasons are reasons to *lack* belief. It only requires a tiny overgeneralization to move from the plausible thesis that the only epistemic reasons *to believe*

are evidence to the problematic thesis that the only epistemic reasons are evidence. And this in turn makes it easy to see how easy it was to get started on this wrong track.

4 defeaters

In the last section I outlined my positive account of what makes reasons sufficient, and explained why it is consistent with the putatively problematic cases from epistemology. These cases are genuinely problematic, I argued, only given a natural but misguided overgeneralization about what sorts of things can be epistemic reasons, and dissolve once we take lacking belief about p as a serious alternative to both believing p and believing $\sim p$ – an alternative in favor of which there can be epistemic reasons, in the sense of the right kind of reasons to bear on epistemic rationality. In this final section of the paper I want to emphasize how important it is to get right what makes reasons sufficient, if we want to be able to predict and explain the variety of ways in which the rationality of action – and of belief – can be *defeated*.

Suppose that Jill tells Jack that there is water at the top of the hill. It is natural to infer, about this case, that other things being equal, it is a case in which it is epistemically rational for Jack to believe that there is water at the top of the hill. But there are several different ways in which other things could fail to be equal – and each way in which other things could fail to be equal is a kind of *defeater* for the rationality of this belief. Since defeaters prevent Jack's belief from being epistemically rational, and epistemic rationality is linked to the sufficiency of epistemic reasons, the possible defeaters must affect whether Jack's epistemic reasons to believe that there is water at the top of the hill are *sufficient*, or not. One of the main virtues of **sufficiency** is that it predicts and explains the differences between different ways in which this can happen.

For example, suppose that Jack has actually been to the top of the hill and seen for himself that there is no water. In that case it isn't epistemically rational for him to believe that there is water at the top of the hill, simply on Jill's testimony, after all – for he has better evidence to the contrary. Defeaters like this one, in which the agent has better *contrary* evidence, are known as *countervailing* defeaters. But not all defeaters are like this, and epistemologists typically distinguish *undercutting* defeaters as a second class. For an example of an undercutting defeater, imagine that Jack has had many opportunities of getting testimony from Jill, and by long experience has discovered that she is unreliable. In that case, it isn't epistemically rational for Jack to believe that there is water at the top of the hill, either – but not because Jack has contrary evidence, just because the testimony of unreliable people isn't as good of evidence as the testimony of reliable people.

The principle of **sufficiency** predicts and explains the important differences between these two ways of the epistemic rationality of Jack's belief being defeated – and they correspond to two different ways in which his epistemic reasons to believe that there is water at the top of the hill could turn out to fail to be sufficient. Because sufficiency is just a matter of the *balance* of reasons, a reason that would otherwise be sufficient can be made *insufficient* either by increasing the weight of the reasons for the alternatives, or by decreasing its weight until it is less than that of the reasons for the alternatives. The former is what countervailing defeaters do, and the latter is what undercutting defeaters do. The conceptual difference between countervailing and undercutting defeat is therefore built into the principle of **sufficiency**.

Moreover, the same distinction between countervailing and undercutting defeat, to which epistemologists have paid so much attention, is predicted by **sufficiency** to arise for the case of reasons for action, as well. Starting with the objective case, an action that would otherwise be the correct thing to do can fail in the circumstances to be the correct thing to do because there are further reasons for an alternative – as in murderer-at-the-door cases, in which lying is objectively permissible. Such cases involve countervailing defeat for the correctness of action. But there are also undercutting defeaters for the correctness of action. These are cases on which particularists have lavished much attention, such as cases in which telling a lie is a less serious infraction than it otherwise might be – such as while playing the game of Diplomacy.

Just as the objective correctness of action can be defeated in either the countervailing or the undercutting way, the same thing goes for the subjective rationality of action. Believing that the person at the door asking for your friend's whereabouts is out to murder her defeats the rationality of telling him where she is, and believing that you are playing Diplomacy may defeat the rationality of always telling the truth. Again, these defeaters divide into countervailing and undercutting varieties, in a way that **sufficient** makes sense of.

So why am I going on at such length about the merits of predicting and explaining the differences between different kinds of defeat? First, because this provides further support for the characterization of what makes reasons sufficient that we get from **sufficiency**. But second, because the differences among possible kinds of defeat are at the center of one of the hardest problems in epistemology: the Gettier problem. Along with avoiding the conditional fallacy, the other chief difficulty in providing an analysis of knowledge is being able to correctly predict and explain the variety of ways in which *knowledge* can be defeated, without overgeneralizing. Consequently, although there is no space to adequately argue this here, I believe that understanding sufficiency correctly puts us in an improved position to understand *knowledge*.

5 conclusion

My ambitions in this paper have been simple: to provide a uniform characterization of what makes reasons – whether objective or subjective – sufficient, and to show how that characterization is consistent not only with the rationality of action, but with the epistemic rationality of belief. My positive account is simple, and if not for the fact that it raises so many putative problems in epistemology, it would seem obvious. So the main contribution has been to show that epistemic rationality really could work in this simple way. This simple picture, however, is at the heart of a much larger project, for it both raises further problems, and promises potential for several kinds of payoff. Let me close by mentioning just one of the issues worth further investigation.

The most important further problem raised by the view in this paper, is the question of just what *does* distinguish the class of epistemic reasons, if it is not simply a matter of being evidence. Answering this question, I believe, requires a general solution to what is known as the ‘wrong kind of reasons’ problem. In the case of epistemology, the problem is to distinguish between epistemic and non-epistemic (Pascalian) reasons for belief, but this is just one case of a general problem. For reasons for intention, reasons to fear, reasons to admire, and reasons for every other kind of attitude are subject to precisely analogous distinctions. Making good on the thesis that there are epistemic reasons to lack belief ultimately requires not just isolating a position in logical space according to which this is true, but finding a solution to the wrong kind of reasons problem which predicts this. The problem is that most mainstream solutions to the wrong kind of reasons problem start by assuming that the only epistemic reasons are evidence, and then try to structure their theories so as to predict this assumption. Consequently, the view in this paper requires a very different strategy for solving the wrong kind of reasons problem than is popular in most quarters. This is something I’ve argued for elsewhere, but much work remains to be done, and these are not independent projects.⁵

⁵ Special thanks to Kritika Yegnashankaran and to an audience at the first annual Saint Louis Area Conference on Reasons and Rationality.

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