

Epistemic Normativity is Independent of Our Goals

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In epistemology and in ordinary life, we make many normative claims about beliefs. We say that you ought to believe in the reality of climate change; that there are no good reasons to believe that there was significant fraud in the November 2020 US election; that you should believe the testimony of victims of domestic violence. (And, of course, some people say the converse about each of these matters.) These are perfectly ordinary, normal uses of language.

As with all normative claims, philosophical questions arise about what – if anything – underwrites these normative claims. On one view, epistemic instrumentalism, facts about what we (epistemically) ought to believe, or about what is an (epistemic, normative) reason to believe what, obtain at least partly in virtue of our goals (or aims, ends, intentions, desires, etc.).¹ More particularly, our having certain goals makes it the case that we have epistemic reasons to believe certain things, because doing so would instrumentally serve those goals. The converse view, anti-instrumentalism, denies this, and holds that the facts about what we ought or have reasons to believe are independent of our goals.²

In this chapter, I'll present the case for anti-instrumentalism. After some preliminaries in §1, in §2 I'll lay out a well-known challenge for instrumentalism – namely to say exactly what goals ground our epistemic reasons. For each possible answer, the view seems to generate problematic results. In §3, I'll consider some ways of trying to make the instrumentalist view more sophisticated to solve the problem, and reject them. In §4, I'll note a further problem for instrumentalism. In §5, I'll sketch my preferred positive anti-instrumentalist view and argue that it is more theoretically virtuous than instrumentalism.

1. Preliminaries

First, I'm taking claims about what one ought to believe, and about reasons for belief, as paradigm examples of normative claims about beliefs. Plausibly, these are systematically related: normative reasons for (and against) belief weigh against one another to determine what one, on balance, ought to believe. It is also plausible that claims about whether beliefs are justified, or (substantively) rational, are also normative claims: indeed, on a widely held view, for a belief to be justified, or (substantively) rational, just is for it to be supported by good reasons.³

Philosophers also sometimes make claims about the *value* of beliefs: on some views, there is a distinctive kind of “epistemic value” involved in true belief, justified belief, or knowledge.⁴ But we

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¹ E.g. Foley (1987), Laudan (1990), Maffie (1990), Nozick (1993), Kornblith (2002), Leite (2007).

² E.g. Kelly (2003), Cuneo (2008: ch. 7), Lockard (2013).

³ E.g. Kieseewetter (2017), Lord (2018).

⁴ Cf. Haddock, Millar & Pritchard (2009).

should not assume that claims about what one epistemically ought to believe, or what one has epistemic reasons to believe, can be translated into value-talk. In particular, the anti-instrumentalist position that facts about what we ought to or have reasons to believe are independent of our goals should not be equated with the view that there is *intrinsic value* in having true (or rational) beliefs.⁵ For it may be that not all ought-facts or reasons are to be understood or explained in terms of value.⁶ In this chapter, I make no attempt to adjudicate claims about the existence or grounds of epistemic value.

Second, I'm restricting myself to claims about what one *epistemically* ought to believe, and about *epistemic* reasons for belief – where ‘epistemic’ means something more specific than just ‘governing belief’. Some have charged that it’s not clear what the qualifier ‘epistemic’ comes to when used in this way.⁷ However, I think that the basic distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for belief is not alien to ordinary thought.⁸ Suppose we are talking (in July 2022), and it becomes clear that you believe the global pandemic will be completely over by summer 2023. I might ask, “but what reason is there to believe that it *will* be completely over by summer 2023?” There is at least a reading of my question on which, if you started talking about how the belief that the pandemic will be over by summer 2023 is psychologically comforting to you (or that it would be psychologically comforting to me!), you would have failed to understand my question. That’s not the kind of reason I’m asking for. We can call the kind of reason I *am* asking for an epistemic reason. The paradigm example of an epistemic reason for belief is an evidential reason; in this case, some evidence that the pandemic will be over by summer 2023. However, I’ll stay open on whether *all* epistemic reasons are evidential.

Third, I’ll assume that there are indeed some epistemic reasons for belief. While some have denied this, holding that *all* (normative) reasons for belief are non-epistemic,⁹ such a view is (as the pandemic example suggests) radically error-theoretic about our ordinary thought and talk. More importantly, this is not what is at issue between the epistemic instrumentalist and the epistemic anti-instrumentalist. They disagree on the *grounds* of facts about epistemic reasons and oughts, not their existence. Admittedly, things can get murky here. Since instrumentalism grounds our epistemic reasons in our goals, there’s a sense in which it lays a practical *foundation* for epistemic normativity, insofar as goals are an element of our practical lives. Still, I’ll assume that the instrumentalist should want to respect *some* kind of distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for belief.

2. What’s the goal?

⁵ Kornblith (2002: 161) seems to do this.

⁶ Cf. Way (2013), Howard (2019).

⁷ E.g., Cohen (2016).

⁸ I’ll offer a more precise account in §5.

⁹ E.g., Stich (1990), Rinard (2017). For recent defenses of the view that there are (normative) epistemic reasons for belief, see Kiesewetter (forthcoming), Howard & Leary (forthcoming). For the intermediate view that there are epistemic reasons that are normative but not “authoritatively” or “substantially” so, see Mantel (2019), Maguire & Woods (2020).

A question that all instrumentalist accounts face is: what is the goal in virtue of which our epistemic reasons obtain? That is, what goal of ours does following our epistemic reasons, or believing as we epistemically ought to, serve?

Three options immediately present themselves. The first says that our epistemic reasons are grounded in some *general* epistemic goal; say, of believing the truth (and, perhaps, avoiding falsehood).¹⁰ We have reasons to follow our evidence because this is the most effective feasible means we have to achieving this epistemic goal. The second says that our reasons are grounded in *particular* epistemic goals – like my goal of finding out whether there is intelligent life on other planets, or more mundanely, of finding out what time the café opens. Again, these particular goals will be best served by following our evidence about these particular matters. The third says that our reasons are grounded in our *practical* goals, such as my goal of living a long and healthy life, or of getting myself a coffee (or perhaps in the totality of our goals, where these can be practical or specifically epistemic).¹¹ Having true beliefs (and avoiding falsehoods) will generally be an effective means to achieving these goals – since true beliefs help us to predict and navigate the world, anticipate the consequences of our actions, and so on. And, again, following our evidence is an effective means to believing the truth.

All three answers have significant problems. The problem with the first answer is that, at least for many of us, it just does not seem true to say that we *do* have this very general epistemic goal.¹² There are various particular matters I want to have true beliefs about, but I have no general goal to believe the truth without respect to subject-matter. Indeed, if I did have this goal (and if instrumentalism were true), I wouldn't just have instrumental reasons to believe the truths that I already have good evidence for; rather, I would have instrumental reasons to *gather evidence* about all truths, no matter their irrelevance to me or my life – since this also serves my (purported) general epistemic goal. But this is plainly not so: I have no reasons (of any significant strength) to spend my time gathering evidence about, say, how many unicycles there are in Mexico City.

Whereas it's dubious that I have an epistemic goal to believe truths in general, I do (turning to the second answer) have many particular epistemic goals: there are many things I want to know (or believe) the truth about. However, there are also many things that I have no goal of knowing (or believing) the truth about: again, I have no interest in finding out how many unicycles there are in Mexico City. Now, as I just said, it seems that I do not have (strong) reasons to *gather evidence* about how many unicycles there are in Mexico City. Yet it still seems that *if* I am confronted with strong evidence that there are 5,327 unicycles in Mexico City, I then have strong reasons to believe this.¹³ But there is no *particular* epistemic goal of mine that would be served by believing this proposition. Thus, the second view can't explain my having a reason to believe it.

The third answer suffers from a similar problem to the second. While there are many practical goals of mine that would be served by having true beliefs about various matters, there is no practical goal of mine that would be served by having a true belief about how many unicycles there

¹⁰ E.g., Foley (1987: 7-8).

¹¹ E.g., Kornblith (2002).

¹² Cf. Nozick (1993: 67-8), Kelly (2003: 623, 629-30).

¹³ Cf. Kelly (2003: 625); Côté-Bouchard (2015: 340-1).

are in Mexico City. (Indeed, there are other true propositions that it would plausibly *frustrate* my practical goals to believe.)

The third answer also suffers from a further problem. On views (like the first and second) that explain epistemic reasons in terms of *epistemic* goals, there is a way of making sense of what's distinctively epistemic about epistemic reasons – they are the reasons concerned with the promotion of our epistemic goals. This allows these views to make sense of there being verdicts about what you epistemically ought to believe, setting practical considerations aside. But it seems that the third view cannot do this. Suppose I get good evidence that I may soon lose my job. If I have a true belief about this matter, that will enable me to make practical decisions that would serve my interests: to start looking for alternative employment, for example. Thus, following my evidence about this matter (i.e., believing that I may lose my job) serves my goal of not becoming (long-term) unemployed. But suppose that I also have a goal of managing my anxiety disorder, and believing that I may soon lose my job would really provoke my anxiety disorder. According to the third view, I have an instrumental reason to believe that I may soon lose my job (in virtue of my goal of not becoming unemployed), and an instrumental reason against believing that I may soon lose my job (in virtue of my goal of managing my anxiety disorder). It seems that these two reasons are of precisely the same kind: both are reasons for belief generated by my *practical* goals. And so it is hard to see what makes either reason distinctively 'epistemic'. It's then also hard to see how there is a sense – the epistemic sense – of 'ought' in which the fact that my evidence supports believing that I may soon lose my job simply settles that I ought to believe that I may soon lose my job – and to which the fact that believing this would provoke my anxiety is irrelevant.

3. Some instrumentalist strategies for solving the problem

Let's now consider some ways of trying to make instrumentalism more sophisticated so as to solve the problem.

(a) *Rule-normativity*

One response holds that the fact that following our evidence *generally* tends to serve our goals suffices to ground reasons for us to follow our evidence on all occasions (even on those occasions on which following our evidence does *not* serve our practical goals).¹⁴ The move here is analogous to rule-consequentialism in ethics, which holds that the fact that some particular act *generally* tends to promote the best consequences suffices to ground reasons to perform that act on all occasions.

The obvious but serious problem here is an instance of that which plagues rule-normativity approaches generally. If all that matters is advancing my goals, it's unclear why the fact that following my evidence *generally* serves my goals should give me a reason to follow my evidence on an occasion upon which doing so (clearly, predictably) doesn't serve my goal. Indeed, the problem is arguably worse here than in ethics. Arguably, there are powerful moral ideals to the effect, roughly, that you shouldn't act in ways that would wreak terrible consequences were others were to act in a

¹⁴ Côté-Bouchard (2015: 348) reads Kornblith (2002) this way. Cf. also Nozick (1993: 71), Leite (2007: 463).

similar way in similar circumstances. These can be used to provide a moral rationale for rule-consequentialism. But there is no comparable rationale for rule-instrumentalism in the epistemic domain.

(b) *Requirements vs. permissions*

Another interesting defense of instrumentalism has recently been suggested by Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen (2018).¹⁵ Steglich-Petersen starts with the observation that our evidence supports countless propositions that we have never entertained. For example, your evidence supports not just the proposition that grass is green, but also the proposition that *either* grass is green *or* the moon is made of paper. Yet you didn't believe that latter proposition until you read the previous sentence, since you had never considered this proposition. (It wasn't that you suspended judgment on it: you lacked any attitude toward it whatsoever.) But this doesn't seem objectionable: the epistemic norms don't require you to "clutter" your mind with beliefs such as this one.¹⁶ From this, Steglich-Petersen concludes, your having evidence for a proposition only makes it *permissible* to believe it, not required.¹⁷ Further, Steglich-Petersen assumes that reasons are considerations that contribute toward making responses *required*. From this it follows that, when evidence makes belief permitted but not required, it is not serving as a reason for belief. But then, evidence *doesn't* typically serve as a reason for belief after all, and so the instrumentalist doesn't need to account for such reasons.

I have two replies. The first contests the claim that when evidence merely permits belief, it doesn't serve as a reason for belief.¹⁸ Consider reasons for action. There are some cases where some act is permitted merely in virtue of the fact that performing it would violate no positive requirement. For example, my tapping my hand on my head ten seconds from now is permissible in this sense. There is nothing much to recommend this action, nor any particularly good *basis* for performing it. But no requirement prohibits it, and so it is permissible. However, there are other kinds of cases that are different.¹⁹ Suppose I'm trying to decide between becoming an artist and becoming a doctor. If we fix the background facts correctly, it's plausible that either choice would be permissible. But it would be wrong to say that there are no reasons to become an artist, and no reasons to become a doctor: on the contrary, there are good, positive reasons for each choice, that would form a good basis for each. Moreover, these reasons are part of what *makes* each choice permissible. If I lacked good reasons to become an artist, it *wouldn't* be permissible for me to choose to become one.

Plausibly, the considerations that constitute reasons to become an artist get to count as reasons precisely in virtue of playing the role of making this choice permissible. Generalizing, when the permissibility of some response needs to be *earned* by way of positive considerations that *make* it permitted – as opposed to just through the absence of any prohibition to the contrary – those considerations, in making the response permitted, serve as reasons. Now, it seems that evidence is

¹⁵ Cf. also Leite (2007: 461-2).

¹⁶ Cf. Harman (1986).

¹⁷ Cf. Nelson (2010).

¹⁸ Cf. Dancy (2004).

¹⁹ Some (e.g. von Wright 1963, Fogal 2018) go further and claim that there is two *kinds* of permissibility, "weak" and "strong" permissibility, here. I stay neutral on that.

needed in order to make a belief permitted.²⁰ In doing so, this evidence is playing the reason-role, even if it falls short of making the belief required. If one does adopt the permitted belief in question, on the basis of the evidence that permits the belief, one is believing on the basis of a good (normative) reason. So, in holding that evidence merely makes belief permitted, I don't think Steglich-Petersen gets out of counting it as a reason for belief.

A second problem is that Steglich-Petersen's appeal to clutter-avoidance fails to show in full generality that evidence merely permits, rather than requires, belief. Grant that, when it comes to propositions I've never considered, it's permissible to lack any attitude toward them – and thus, not required to believe them – even when my evidence decisively supports them. Nevertheless, once I am deliberating about whether p , taking no attitude toward p seems no longer to be an option: if one deliberates about whether p and can't make up one's mind either that p is true or that p is false, one thereby counts as suspending judgment, rather than as lacking any attitude whatsoever. So, once I'm deliberating about whether p , if my evidence decisively supports p , believing p seems to be the only permissible option – and, hence, is required.²¹ Indeed, this seems to be exactly what happens when I'm just confronted with decisive evidence that there are 5,327 unicycles in Mexico City. Provided this evidence draws my attention to the proposition that there are 5,327 unicycles in Mexico City, believing this proposition will be my only permissible option. (The case is thus crucially different from cases of propositions I've never considered, like the proposition that either grass is green or the moon is made of paper.) And this is so even though doing so would still not advance any goal of mine. This is inconsistent with instrumentalism.

(c) *Epistemic reasons-talk as hypothetical*

The final strategy I'll consider construes epistemic reasons-talk as hypothetical. We should distinguish two views here. First, there's the view that epistemic reasons are hypothetical in the sense that one has them only if one has the relevant goal.²² If we admit that one might lack any goal that believing in accordance with one's evidence serves, this view yields the result that we often lack epistemic reasons to believe in accordance with our evidence. While some want to bite the bullet on this claim,²³ there's a subtler view according to which judgments and talk about what epistemic reasons someone has are hypothetical in the sense that they take place *on the hypothetical assumption* that this person has the epistemic goal of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods (about the matter under consideration).²⁴

To illustrate, suppose someone possesses excellent evidence for p , but has no goal of believing the truth (either generally or about p in particular). On the present view, this person will still have a strong epistemic reason to believe p , since doing so serves the *hypothetical* epistemic goal

²⁰ Steglich-Petersen himself talks this way: see e.g. Steglich-Petersen (2018: n. 7).

²¹ Cf. Kelly (2007: 468). Notably, Harman, who initially made the clutter-avoidance objection, nevertheless affirms that it would be "absurd" to offer clutter-avoidance *as a reason not to believe something* that one is already considering (Harman 1986: 15).

²² Cf. the usage of 'hypothetical' in, e.g., Foot (1972).

²³ Papineau at one point seems to hold this view (Papineau 2013: 67). Cf. also Leite (2007: 458).

²⁴ Cf. Foley (1987: 5, 11-12, 138-40). Papineau also gets close to this view at another point (Papineau 2013: 69).

of believing the truth. This might seem to abandon the spirit of instrumentalism, since it ceases to make one's epistemic reasons dependent on what goals one actually has.²⁵ However, the instrumentalist can massage this tension by denying that something's being an epistemic reason suffices for its being a *robustly* normative reason.²⁶ They can hold that someone who lacks the relevant goal has an epistemic reason to believe p , but no robustly normative reason to believe p . Indeed, they can use this distinction to reframe the hypothetical account of epistemic reasons more precisely: someone has an epistemic reason to believe p iff, *were* they to have the relevant epistemic goal, they would have a robustly normative reason to believe p . This seems within the spirit of instrumentalism, since it makes reasons relative to goals, and makes having a *robustly* normative reason dependent on actually having the relevant goal.

This is perhaps the best version of instrumentalism going. Still, it has challenges to meet. Most importantly, it incurs a burden to make sense of something's being a (genuine) epistemic reason and yet not being robustly normative. The idea is not that epistemic reasons are (for example) motivating reasons, but rather that they are normative reasons without being *robustly* normative reasons. How is that distinction to be made out?

On one neat proposal, something is a normative reason if it contributes toward *some* kind of normative status (such as its being the case that one *epistemically* ought to believe p), whereas it is a *robustly* normative reason if it contributes toward *overall* normative status (i.e., whether one ought *simpliciter* to believe p).²⁷ But this proposal still leaves some mystery. If facts about what one epistemically ought to believe have *no* bearing, in themselves, on what one ought to believe simpliciter, in what sense is its being the case that one epistemically ought to believe p really a normative status at all? Of course, we can just stipulatively define what one "epistemically ought" to believe as that which one ought *simpliciter* to believe if one has (only) the goal of believing the truth and avoiding falsehood. But we can also stipulatively define what one "counter-epistemically ought" to believe as that which one ought *simpliciter* to believe if one has (only) the goal of believing falsehoods and avoiding the truth (and then derive the notion of a counter-epistemic reason).²⁸ If the sense in which there are epistemic reasons to believe what our evidence supports (even when doing so doesn't further our goals) turns out to amount to no more than the sense in which there are counter-epistemic reasons, it's doubtful whether this form of instrumentalism really makes progress on the version that simply denies that we have epistemic reasons when we don't have the requisite goals. Indeed, it seems to suggest that we are no more criticizable for failing to respond to our "epistemic reasons" than for failing to respond to counter-epistemic reasons.

4. A further problem for instrumentalism: tradeoffs

There's another major problem for epistemic instrumentalism. This objection is typically made to "epistemic consequentialism," according to which we explain the epistemic status of beliefs in terms

²⁵ Cf. Kelly (2003: 632-4).

²⁶ Cf. Mantel (2019) and Maguire & Woods (2020). Neither Mantel nor Woods & Maguire are instrumentalists; nevertheless, the instrumentalist may make use of this part of their views.

²⁷ Cf. Maguire & Woods (2020).

²⁸ Cf. Railton (2003: 295).

of the goodness of their (expected) epistemic consequences,²⁹ but it can be adapted to apply to instrumentalism.³⁰ Suppose, to take a fanciful case, that an epistemic angel (demon?) offers you a deal: if you believe that $2+2=5$, they will give you a power to perfectly discern the truth with respect to all other matters, ensuring that your other beliefs will all reflect the truth. Surely, if you have any kind of epistemic goals, believing $2+2=5$ in this scenario on balance promotes them.³¹ Similarly for your practical goals. And yet it does not seem right to say that you have good epistemic reasons to believe that $2+2=5$ in this situation. We can see this because it still seems epistemically *irrational* to believe that $2+2=5$ in this situation; but if you did have good epistemic reasons to believe that $2+2=5$, it would be epistemically rational to do so. This isn't to say that there isn't some good sense in which it would make sense to try to get yourself to believe that $2+2=5$ in this situation if you can. But the natural way to describe the case is that it makes sense to get yourself to have a *single irrational belief* in order to get lots of other true beliefs – not that the belief that $2+2=5$ itself *becomes* rational in this case.

5. Anti-instrumentalism

Instrumentalists often pride themselves on unifying normative reasons for belief with normative reasons for action, treating both as grounded in our goals.³² However, as is increasingly appreciated, there are reasons for many other responses beyond belief and action. There are (plausibly) normative reasons for desire, intention, hope, fear, regret, shame, pride, admiration, relief, anger, love, and more.³³ Arguably, it's more important to unify reasons for belief with reasons for these other states than to unify them with reasons for action.³⁴ After all, belief, like these other states – and unlike action – is a *mental state*. More specifically, it's an *attitude*, in the sense that distinguishes all these states from states like being in pain: it is a stance directed toward an object (in this case, a proposition) that can be adopted on the basis of a reason. So it makes sense to try to unify reasons for belief with those for other attitudes.

If it turns out that instrumentalism cannot be extended to explain reasons for other attitudes, this severely undercuts the motivation for accepting instrumentalism about reasons for belief. For this would greatly diminish instrumentalism's success in unifying reasons in general. And it would also mean that that we already need to accept non-instrumental reasons, and whatever alleged weirdness attends them, about reasons for other attitudes – in which cases accepting non-instrumental reasons for belief would not seem to incur much additional weirdness.

²⁹ E.g. Berker (2013).

³⁰ Cf. Nozick (1993: 69).

³¹ Foley (1987: 8) tries to head off this problem by restricting his description to the epistemic goal to believing the truth *now*. But this seems *ad hoc*. To the extent that I have epistemic goals at all, it's very dubious that they are specially restricted to believing truly *now*. After all, my epistemic goals plausibly generate reasons for me to engage in extended process of inquiry to *eventually* discover the truth about the inquiries I care about. But if my aim was specifically to discover the truth *now*, it would generate no such reasons.

³² Cf. Foley (1987), Nozick (1993), Kornblith (2002). Cf. also Rinard (2017).

³³ Cf. Kelly (2002).

³⁴ Cf. Singh (2021).

But it looks unpromising to try to extend instrumentalism to these other attitudes. As well as a distinctively “epistemic goal” of believing the truth (and avoiding error), is there also supposed to be a distinctive goal, that all human agents have, of fearing all and only that which is fearsome, or regretting all and only that which is regrettable? This stretches credulity.

Nor is it plausible that our reasons for these attitudes can be grounded in our *practical* goals. Suppose there’s a tiger in front of you. The facts that the tiger is big, is right in front of you, is baring its teeth, is growling, and is preparing to pounce are all very good reasons to be afraid. Yet it might be that being afraid would advance no practical goal of yours. Of course, fear does *at some very general level* serve an evolutionary function of motivating the responses needed to avoid danger. But this does not mean that every instance of fearing the fearsome will promote one’s goals. Suppose, for example, that tigers can smell fear, and that your being afraid will make it much *more* likely that the tiger attacks you. If that is so, then it seems clear that being afraid might not promote any of your goals. Still, in a perfectly good sense, you have very good reasons to be afraid.

Again, one might insist that what seem to be good reasons to be afraid in this case are actually no such thing. But this disconnect between our theory of normative reasons and the role that the notion of a reason plays in our ordinary thought and talk is a serious cost. To take another example, suppose you’re afraid that at the 2024 US election, state legislatures will use spurious concerns of large-scale election fraud to try to overturn results. And suppose the instrumentalist points out that this fear serves none of your practical goals: it makes you anxious and unhappy, and doesn’t help you do anything that will avoid the dreaded outcome. She then tells you: so, there’s no reason to be afraid that the state legislatures will overturn the election! It seems to me that this would just be an exceptionally odd thing to say. When people say that there’s no reason to be afraid of some outcome, they usually say this because (in their judgment) either there’s little good evidence that the outcome will occur, or the outcome wouldn’t actually be a bad one. The mere fact that the fear won’t advance any of your goals isn’t grounds for saying that there’s no reason to be afraid, given the way we use ‘reason’ in ordinary speech. Similar points hold for hope, regret, anger, desire, shame, admiration, and love.

What’s the positive lesson of this? I suggest it’s this: considerations that bear on the *fittingness* of some response constitute reasons for (or against) that response. The facts that the tiger is big, that it is baring its teeth, that it is preparing to pounce, and so on, are all facts that make it *fitting* to fear the tiger: they show that the tiger, the object of the attitude, merits or is worthy of fear, and hence constitute reasons to fear it. Similarly, either strong evidence that state legislatures won’t overturn the election results, or considerations showing that this outcome (somehow!) wouldn’t be bad, would show it *unfitting* to fear this outcome, and hence constitute reasons not to fear it. In short, fittingness is intrinsically normative.

We can now apply this to belief. Evidential considerations bear on the *fittingness* of belief; on whether the proposition under consideration merits or is worthy of belief in (roughly) the same

sense that an object can merit or be worthy of fear.³⁵ This is why they constitute reasons for belief. This is my preferred version of anti-instrumentalism.

This view helps us to precisify the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for belief. The epistemic reasons for (and against) belief just are those that bear on the fittingness of belief. The non-epistemic reasons (and against) for belief – if there are any such reasons – are those that do not bear on the fittingness of belief, such as those connected with how believing would promote one of your goals, or a valuable state of affairs. If such facts do count in favor of belief in some way, they do so without thereby bearing on the fittingness of belief. This is analogous to the way that the fact that fearing the tiger makes it more likely to attack (arguably) in some way counts against feeling fear, but doesn't make it any less fitting to do so.

I've already, in effect, argued that this picture is more theoretically virtuous than instrumentalism in two respects. First, it better unifies reasons for belief with reasons for other attitudes. Second, it fits better with our ordinary ways of talking about reasons: we'll cite something as a reason for you to believe something, or to be afraid of something, when it bears on the fittingness of believing or being afraid, regardless of whether it furthers your goals.

A related but distinct point is that the fittingness-based version of anti-instrumentalism fits better with what *moves us* (or, in a broad sense, motivates us) to believe things than instrumentalism does. To see this, return to an earlier example and suppose you are confronted with strong evidence that there are 5,327 unicyles in Mexico City. If you acknowledge this as strong evidence, then barring anything especially odd happening, you will likely just find yourself moved to believe that there are 5,327 unicyles in Mexico City. The evidence *persuades* you that there are 5,327 unicyles, and in being persuaded, you thereby so believe. No relevant goal that believing would serve seems to be needed for you to be moved to believe.

These facts about what psychologically moves us to believe don't on their own settle questions about what we have normative reasons to believe. Nevertheless, many think that there is some kind of tie between motivating reasons – those things that move us to act, feel, and believe – and normative reasons – those things that count in favor of acting, feeling, and believing. For example, they think that normative reasons must be capable of serving as motivating reasons, or that normative reasons will be motivating reasons for an agent who is thinking and reasoning perfectly, or similar.³⁶ There is something odd, then, if the feature that allegedly explains *why* evidential considerations are normative reasons for belief – namely that following them helps us to achieve our goals – seems completely unnecessary for evidential considerations to serve as *motivating* reasons for belief, and plays no role in explaining why such considerations actually move us.

Moreover, once we see that the considerations that bear on fittingness move us on their own even in the absence of any relevant goal, this gives the lie to instrumentalist claims that there is something “weird” about normative reasons – at least for belief – that aren't grounded in our goals. To be moved by persuasive evidence to believe something – even when believing it doesn't advance one's goals – is a natural, familiar, even ubiquitous experience. And so the idea that such evidence

³⁵ As Howard & Leary (forthcoming: 7) point out, this is compatible with *either* the view that a belief is fitting iff it's supported by the evidence, or the view that a belief is fitting iff it's true. Either way, evidential considerations at least *bear on* whether the belief is fitting.

³⁶ E.g. Williams (1981), Kolodny (2005), Shah (2006).

normatively counts in favor of such beliefs, likewise irrespective of one's goals, shouldn't be alien either. On the contrary, it merely suggests that our practice of looking to evidence in determining what to believe is broadly the right one. If anything, it's the idea that we should only believe something when it further our goals that registers as alien, given that our ordinary doxastic deliberation almost never seems to involve goal-oriented reasoning.

6. Concluding remarks: does instrumentalism “demystify” epistemic normativity?

This discussion of the alleged “weirdness” of the anti-instrumentalist picture raises a broader theme. Instrumentalism has sometimes historically been motivated by a desire to “naturalize” epistemology, or to “demystify” epistemic normativity.³⁷ As with many such “naturalizing” projects in the normative realm, however, it is obscure exactly in what sense the view naturalizes or demystifies. Consider the following principle:

(E) When your evidence supports p , you have a strong reason to believe p .

The instrumentalist doesn't want to treat (E) as brute; she wants to give it an explanation. But in providing this explanation, the instrumentalist relies on the following (by her lights deeper) principle:

(G) When believing p would further your goals, you have a strong reason to believe p .

As far as I can see, instrumentalists have very little to say in favor of (G); for them, *it* is the bedrock principle. But why is (G) supposed to be more “naturalistically respectable,” or “unmysterious,” than (E)?³⁸ Prima facie, both claims are of precisely the same form: they say that when some condition obtains, you have a strong reason to believe p . Maybe the instrumentalist just thinks that (G) is *obvious* or *self-evident* in a way that (E) is not. I don't share that judgment – and neither do the many metaethicists who have argued that merely adopting some goal does not suffice for giving oneself strong reasons to take the means to that goal.³⁹ But in any case, a difference in the *obviousness* or *self-evidence* of two claims of the same form is no difference in their *naturalistic respectability*.

You may now think that the difference between the two claims is that one makes reference only to facts about what would further our goals – unmysterious! – whereas the other makes reference to facts about what one's evidence supports – mysterious! But while this is true as far as it goes, the instrumentalist is also committed to there being facts about what one's evidence supports, since it's those facts that *combine* with one's having an (instrumental) reason to follow one's evidence to determine what one ought to believe. Moreover, the instrumentalist doesn't ground these facts *about what one's evidence supports* in one's goals.⁴⁰ So it doesn't seem like the instrumentalist enjoys any metaphysical advantage over the anti-instrumentalist here.

³⁷ Cf. Laudan (1990), Maffie (1990), Kornblith (2002).

³⁸ Cf. Bedke (2010).

³⁹ E.g., Bratman (1987), Korsgaard (1997), Scanlon (1998), Broome (2001).

⁴⁰ Cf. Kelly (2007).

Let's take stock. I have argued that the instrumentalist view is simply unable to account for the range of reasons we take ourselves to have. Of course, sometimes our judgments about the reasons we have need to be revised, and the instrumentalist could insist on an error theory according to which in many cases that we take ourselves to have epistemic reasons, we actually don't. But if we're going to do this, it had better be for the sake of winning compelling theoretical advantages on other scores. And I have argued that the instrumentalist view lacks both of its purported advantages over anti-instrumentalist views: namely, a better theoretical unification of the normativity of different domains, and a lesser degree of weirdness or mystery. If anything, it does worse than anti-instrumentalism on both scores. As such, we should reject it.

Addendum: A Brief Reply to Carter

J. Adam Carter (this volume) articulates a version of epistemic instrumentalism – “telic virtue epistemology,” inspired by Ernest Sosa – that is somewhat different to those that I considered in my paper. First, he holds that in believing a proposition, one aims at truth (7). Second, he holds that it's in virtue of this aim that beliefs are assessable as *successful* (when true), *justified* (when they are formed competently, viz. the manner in which they are formed reliably gets at the truth), and *knowledge-constituting* (when they are “apt” – that is, successful [true] *because* competent) (4-5). But third, the (aim-dependent) normativity involved in these assessments is not, on Carter's view, “substantive”: that a belief has any of these statuses (including that of justification) doesn't entail that one *should* have it or, in fact, that one has *any* normative reason to have it (2, 4). Rather, it is “evaluative,” in that it specifies what it is for a belief to be good *qua* belief. In this, beliefs are like basketball shots, which likewise can be evaluated as good *qua* basketball shots when they are successful, competent, or apt (successful because competent). Here again, that a basketball shot was good *qua* basketball shot doesn't establish that one should or had a reason to take it (for an even clearer illustration, consider gunshots). In fact, on Carter's view, “there are no substantive epistemic norms” (6): whether one ought to form true or competent or apt beliefs depends on whether one has independent non-epistemic reasons to do so.

A full response to this detailed, interesting view is impossible in the space available here. But I'll briefly highlight what I take to be the central disanalogy between beliefs and basketball shots, one that makes belief (in my view) subject to its own distinctive (viz., epistemic) set of *substantive* norms, and not merely to evaluative assessment.⁴¹ It's this: beliefs have their own distinctive *fittingness conditions*, whereas basketball shots don't. A belief is a response to an object (namely, a proposition) that can merit or be worthy of belief; when it does, the belief is fitting. By contrast, while basketball shots, gunshots, chess-playing, knot-tying, and so on are all assessable as *successful* or *unsuccessful*, and as executed *correctly* or *incorrectly*, they don't have their own distinctive fittingness conditions: they are not obviously responses to objects at all, and if they are, those objects (say, basketballs) don't *merit*

⁴¹ The view I lay out here is much in debt to Howard & Leary (forthcoming).

those responses. A basketball does not *merit* being shot competently or successfully, and it is not in any good sense fitting to do so.⁴²

As Howard & Leary (forthcoming) point out, fittingness conditions are widely conflated with success or correctness conditions, when the former actually apply in a much narrower range of cases than the latter. This conflation has encouraged the mistaken inference that because correctness or success conditions seem only to give rise to a kind of “formal” or “non-substantive” normativity (as examples like basketball shots and chess show), the same must be true of fittingness conditions. By contrast, on the view that I (with Howard & Leary) favor, fittingness is intrinsically normative: considerations that make or show responses to be fitting always constitute reasons for those responses. Given that beliefs have fittingness standards but basketball shots don’t, there will be a distinctive kind of fit-related reason for beliefs (*viz.*, epistemic reasons), but not for basketball shots.

The better analogues for belief are not rule-constituted activities like shooting a basketball or playing chess or tying a knot, but rather other attitudinal mental states like desire, hope, fear, regret, etc. These states also admit of fittingness conditions, and hence there are distinctive fit-related reasons for each of these attitudes. By contrast, it is much harder to see how to extend the instrumentalist picture to these states. For all the differences between the kinds of instrumentalism I considered and Carter’s, it seems to me that this remains a challenge for his version of the view.

To reiterate one last point: when I say that there are substantive, epistemic reasons for belief (that are not grounded in our aims), this is not to say that justified, true or known beliefs are intrinsically *valuable* (compare Carter, 3-4). Indeed, it is a hallmark of fit-related reasons that they are *not* reducible to considerations of value. I agree that *if* we assume a value-centric picture of (substantive) normativity, substantive epistemic norms will be hard to defend. But as I tried to make plausible in my paper, such a value-centric picture of normativity should be rejected. The view that evidential considerations don’t constitute reasons for belief is enormously revisionary: it flies in the face of the way that we talk and think, and well as the way that such considerations play the reason-role in our deliberation, moving us to believe. As such, there need to be *extremely* compelling reasons to accept any view that would deny them this status.

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⁴² For what it’s worth, the word ‘apt’, which Carter (following Sosa) uses to mean ‘successful because competent,’ registers to me as meaning something more like ‘fitting’. For this reason, talk of an ‘apt basketball shot’ sounds somewhat unnatural to me.

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