Another Kind of Pragmatic Encroachment

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1. Introduction

What sorts of considerations help to determine whether S’s belief that p has the epistemic status that it has? If S’s belief that p is, e.g., epistemically justified, what sorts of considerations make it so? Common sense and philosophical orthodoxy agree that, at least in paradigmatic cases, evidential considerations—i.e. considerations that are truth-relevant; considerations that affect the (subjective or objective) likelihood of p—play a crucial role in determining the epistemic status of S’s belief that p. If S believes that p on the basis of considerations c1,…,cn, and if c1,…,cn provide especially good evidential support for p, then it certainly seems that these facts are part of what makes it the case that S’s belief that p enjoys the positive epistemic status that it seems to have. But do non-evidential considerations ever help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs? That is, do considerations ever help make it the case that S’s belief that p has the epistemic status that it does *without* affecting the likelihood that p is true? And if they do, when and how do such non-evidential considerations help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs?

Any epistemological account according to which non-evidential considerations help make it the case that a belief has the epistemic status it does will endorse

**Pragmatic Encroachment (PE)**: some of the considerations that help to determine the epistemic status of S’s belief that p do so without being truth-relevant (i.e. without affecting the subjective or objective likelihood of p).

But different accounts that embrace PE will develop PE in different ways, by offering alternative characterizations of when and how non-evidential considerations help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs.

This paper introduces a new way of developing PE, one that is both motivated by and grounded in an independently attractive action-oriented framework for epistemological theorizing. On the resulting epistemological account, non-evidential considerations help to explain the epistemic status of our beliefs by explaining when and why believing that p on basis b makes it the case that one’s belief that p is epistemically justified.[[1]](#endnote-1) An action-oriented approach to epistemological theorizing suggests that non-evidential factors bear on the epistemic status of S’s belief that p not by raising or lowering the evidential standard that must be met for S’s belief to be justified and knowledgeable, but rather by helping to determine the degree of epistemic-status-conferring support, strength, power, or force that the considerations which serve as S’s basis for belief have.

2. A Familiar Version of PE

It will be useful to be able to contrast this new kind of pragmatic encroachment to which I call our attention below with a more familiar alternative. This familiar alternative is

**Standard**-**Shifting Pragmatic Encroachment (SSPE):** some considerations that influence the epistemic status of S’s belief that p do so without being truth-relevant (i.e. without affecting the likelihood that p), but rather by determining the level of evidential support (where evidential support is understood in straightforwardly probabilistic terms) required for S’s belief that p to achieve a certain epistemic status.[[2]](#endnote-2)

According to SSPE, the bar or threshold for evidential support that a belief must surpass in order to achieve a positive epistemic status (e.g. to be epistemically justified, or to constitute knowledge) is determined (at least in part) by features of the believer’s circumstances that have no effect on the likelihood of p. Proponents of SSPE generally construe the evidential support relation in straightforwardly probabilistic terms. Accordingly, SSPE says that non-evidential considerations help to determine the epistemic status of S’s belief that p by determining whether the probability that p, conditional on whatever evidence serves as S’s basis for belief, is sufficiently high so as to make S’s belief epistemically justified or knowledgeable.

SSPE is most often motivated by our commonsense reactions to certain sorts of now-familiar cases involving high- and low-stakes situations. Consider Jeremy:

Jeremy is at Back Bay Station in Boston preparing to take the commuter rail to Providence for a vacation. He asks a man, “Does this train make all those little stops in Foxboro, Attleboro, etc.?” It does not matter much to Jeremy whether the train is express or not. The man answers, “Yeah, this one makes all those little stops. That’s what I was told when I bought the ticket.” Jeremy believes what the man says.

And contrast Jeremy with Matt:

It is of dire importance that Matt gets to Foxboro, and the sooner the better. While he has a ticket that gets to Foxboro in two hours, which is just in the nick of time, a train rolls into the station and he overhears the conversation above. Matt thinks to himself, “That guy may have misheard. After all, he doesn’t care so he probably didn't pay careful attention. I better go check it out myself.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

It seems that Jeremy makes no mistake in believing—indeed, we are even inclined to say that he knows—that the train will stop at Foxboro. After all, Jeremy has no reason to think the man who tells him as much is being deceitful. And the man claims that the information he passes along comes from a reliable source: the ticket counter agent. Jeremy’s case seems to be a paradigmatic case of justified—indeed, knowledgeable—belief based on testimony. And certainly we think it would be quite strange for Jeremy to withhold belief until he uncovers additional evidence that the train makes the Foxboro stop. But, given how important it is that Matt get things right in this particular situation (remember, Matt desperately needs to get himself to Foxboro as soon as possible—it would be disastrous if he got on a train that didn’t make the Foxboro stop!), Matt’s inclination to withhold belief, even after hearing the man’s testimony, strikes us as understandable, reasonable, and perhaps even mandatory. And this suggests that Matt is not justified in believing, and that he does not know, that the train stops at Foxboro. Jeremy and Matt have precisely the same evidence that the train makes the Foxboro stop; their cases are identical in this respect. The only difference between Jeremy’s and Matt’s cases is that whether the train stops at Foxboro is of great practical importance to Matt, but not to Jeremy. And so, the proponent of SSPE reasons, since Jeremy’s belief appears to be justified and, indeed, Jeremy appears to know, whereas were Matt to hold same belief on the same basis, his belief would not be justified and would fail to constitute knowledge, it must be the practical importance of getting it right in Matt’s case and the practical insignificance of getting it right in Jeremy’s case that explains why.

More carefully, the proponent of SSPE can offer the following vindicating explanation of our commonsense reactions to these two cases. The level of evidential support required for Matt to be epistemically justified in believing (and so, to know) that the train stops at Foxboro is relatively high. And the reason is that it matters a great deal, practically speaking, that he board the first available train which stops at Foxboro. Because of this straightforwardly non-truth-relevant feature of Matt’s idiosyncratic situation, Matt needs more or better evidence in order to be epistemically justified in believing that the train will make the Foxboro stop than the man’s testimony can supply. But nothing of practical significance is at stake in Jeremy’s case. It just doesn’t matter, practically speaking, whether Jeremy boards a train that makes the Foxboro stop. And, for precisely this reason, the level of evidential support required for Jeremy to be epistemically justified in believing (and so, to know) that the train stops at Foxboro is relatively low. At least it is low enough such that the testimony Jeremy hears provides sufficient evidential support for the proposition that the train will stop at Foxboro to reach or exceed this level.

My aim here is not to refute SSPE. Instead, I want to contrast SSPE with another version of PE, one that offers an alternative characterization of when and why non-evidential considerations help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs. My hope is that developing the contrast with SSPE will help clarify the contours of this less-familiar alternative. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, although SSPE accounts for our commonsense reactions to Jeremy’s and Matt’s cases with relative ease, it has proved difficult to reconcile with our commonsense reactions to a slew of other sorts of cases.[[4]](#endnote-4) One reason that SSPE runs into trouble is that SSPE makes the epistemic status of S’s belief that p fragile or unstable in specific ways.[[5]](#endnote-5) In particular, a subject’s practical situation certainly can, and often does, change over time. And, as a result, S’s belief that p may be practically advantageous or beneficial at one time and practically disastrous at another. So, if SSPE is right, then the right sort of change in S’s practical circumstances can change the epistemic status of S’s belief that p without altering S’s evidential position with respect to p in any way (e.g. without giving S new evidence, without defeating some of S’s evidence, without changing the strength, weight, or force of S’s evidence). S’s belief can be epistemically justified, even knowledgeable, at one time, and epistemically unjustified, failing to constitute knowledge, at another time, even as S’s evidential position with respect to p remains fixed. Of course, that SSPE entails this counterintuitive result doesn’t show that SSPE is untenable. But, if another version of PE can lessen or avoid this kind of tension with common sense, then I suggest that, *ceteris paribus*, we have reason to prefer it over SSPE.

3. First Steps: Introducing Action-Oriented Epistemology

I turn now to the task of developing an alternative to SSPE, one which offers a different sort of answer to the question of when and how non-evidential considerations help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs. Let me begin by describing an independently attractive approach to epistemological theorizing—what I’ll call an *action-oriented approach*—that both inspires and motivates this alternative.

An action-oriented epistemologist takes a familiar idea about what our beliefs are *for* as her starting point for epistemological theorizing. The idea is this: our beliefs are meant to fulfill a map-like function in the service of action production.[[6]](#endnote-6) And she precisifies the idea in two steps.

First, belief, simply by virtue of being the distinctive kind of mental state that it is, has a certain proper function. That is, there is a distinctive job or role that beliefs paradigmatically perform or play within the believer’s mental economy, and the fact that beliefs paradigmatically perform this job or play this role is part of what makes beliefs the kind of mental states that they are. Accordingly, beliefs constitutively “aim” at being well-suited to perform their distinctive proper function. And the constitutive norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief-regulation are just those norms conformity with which most effectively results in believers like us having beliefs that achieve this constitutive “aim.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

Second, belief’s proper function is characterized by the distinctive way in which our beliefs paradigmatically subserve action production. More precisely, beliefs function to facilitate successful action by equipping us with flexible-use predictive tools (a kind of “map” of the facts) which enable environmentally sensitive action selection. Our beliefs put us in a position to predict which courses of action will best further our various ends across a wide range of different scenarios, and so to act accordingly. In this sense, then, the proper function of belief (and so, we might say, belief’s constitutive aim) is fundamentally action-oriented. Crucially, since our ends, as well as our circumstances, are varied and evolve over time, beliefs that are most well-suited to successfully fulfill their particular action-oriented function will, much like useful maps, be quite versatile: they will be well-suited to facilitate successful action across the wide range of circumstances that we might face, and in the service of the wide variety of potential end(s) that we might adopt.

On this picture, ideal cognitive function*ing* with respect to belief-regulation is just functioning that most effectively equips believers who have the kind of cognitive equipment that we have and operate in the kind of environment in which we operate with beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief’s particular action-oriented proper function. So, patterns of ideal cognitive functioning are those patterns of cognitive processing which most reliably yield beliefs (as output) that are well-suited to serve as flexible-use predictive tools to facilitate environmentally sensitive action selection across a variety of different circumstances and in the service of a variety of different potential ends.

An action-oriented epistemologist takes the fact that beliefs constitutively “aim” at being well-suited to subserve action by operating as flexible-use predictive tools as her point of departure for specifying the content of epistemic norms. And, accordingly, for the action-oriented epistemologist, evaluation qualifies as *epistemic* by virtue of being evaluation with respect to the constitutive norms of belief and belief-regulation that derive from belief’s having its distinctive action-oriented proper function.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Most fundamentally, on the action-oriented approach, a belief enjoys one kind of positive epistemic status—i.e. a belief is appropriately subject to a species of epistemic praise—when it is well-suited to fulfill this action-oriented proper function. Any belief that is not well-suited to fulfill belief’s proper function is faulty or defective *qua* belief, and is thereby criticizable along at least one fundamental dimension of epistemic evaluation. The action-oriented epistemologist might put the point like this: belief, simply by virtue of being the kind of cognitive state that it is, is governed by a certain explanatorily fundamental norm: a norm of correctness. This norm dictates that a belief is correct to the extent that it is well-suited to fulfill belief’s action-oriented proper function.

Crucially, however, belief’s constitutive action-oriented proper function gives rise to additional norms that govern the way in which cognition regulates belief. These are norms of ideal cognitive function*ing* with respect to belief-regulation for believers equipped with our cognitive equipment and our cognitive limitations, operating in an environment like our own, and whose mental economies are wired up in the service of action production in the way that ours are. They characterize the particular ways in which cognition ought to regulate our beliefs—the ideal way(s) in which our cognitive processing will translate a particular set of inputs (e.g. perceptual experience as of p) to doxastic output (e.g. belief that p)—so as to equip us with beliefs that are well-suited to serve as flexible-use predictive tools in the course of action production. And evaluation with respect to these additional norms constitutes another species of epistemic praise and criticism. So, these further epistemic norms characterize how belief-regulation will ideally proceed in creatures who have the kind of cognitive equipment that we have, and who operate in the environment in which we operate, so as to generate and sustain a corpus of beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief’s action-oriented proper function.[[9]](#endnote-9) And evaluation with respect to these norms is genuinely *epistemic* in character *because* these norms govern belief-regulation simply by virtue of belief’s having the constitutive action-oriented proper function that it has.

4. How an Alternative to SSPE Comes Into View

At least at first pass, it can appear obvious that our beliefs must be true in order to be well-suited to play the role of map-like flexible-use predictive tool in action selection.[[10]](#endnote-10),[[11]](#endnote-11) After all, a subway map that misrepresents the order of the stops on the subway lines will be fairly useless when it comes to navigating the city. But there are compelling reasons to doubt that a belief’s being well-suited to fulfill its action-oriented proper function always and inevitably requires accuracy. Without pretending to settle the empirical question at issue here, let me briefly canvas two of these sources doubt.[[12]](#endnote-12)

First, empirical research on what psychologists have called “positive illusions” suggests that we are, as a general rule, more successful in achieving our various ends when our beliefs about ourselves and about our relationship to the world around us are systematically distorted in particular ways.[[13]](#endnote-13) If my belief corpus includes slightly overly optimistic or inflated representations of the degree to which I am, as well as the degree to which others think of me as, intelligent, hard-working, resilient in the face of adversity, kind, caring, etc.—if, that is, my beliefs about myself and about the way in which others view me generally code a mild, but systematic distortion of the relevant facts—then it seems that, e.g., I will have an easier time making friends, I will perform better in job interviews, and I will be more successful in my efforts to convince others to invest in my business venture. And if my belief corpus slightly overestimates the degree to which I am responsible for the good in my life and slightly underestimates the degree to which I am responsible for my misfortunes, then it seems that I will be more resilient in the face of tragedy and hardship. My distorted view of the relevant self-regarding facts leads me to, e.g., slightly underestimate my own chances of failure in any given endeavor, and so to embrace an ultimately advantageous course of action where my success is uncertain, one that my aversion to risk might otherwise lead me to reject. In systematic and predictable ways, I will be more successful in selecting courses of action so as to achieve various of my ends across a wide range of different circumstances if my beliefs in certain domain(s) systematically distort the facts, than I would be were my beliefs in these domain(s) to accurately represent the facts as they are.

Second, certain of our interpersonal relationships, or, indeed, our relationship to ourselves as the authors of our own lives, seem to demand a kind of distortion or bias in our beliefs or belief-regulation. Theorists have suggested that friendship, faith in others, as well as in ourselves, and the kind of agential perspective on our own future actions that makes it possible to promise or resolve in the face of temptation without succumbing to bad faith, all require some form of what has come to be known as epistemic partiality.[[14]](#endnote-14) Friendship, for example, may constitutively involve a disposition to give one’s friend the benefit of the doubt, so to speak, interpreting evidence so as to put the friend’s behavior in a favorable light.

If these theorists are right, then it may well be that the beliefs that best equip us to participate in friendship, to have faith in ourselves and others, and to understand ourselves as the authors of our actions are beliefs that represent reality in a way that our evidence does not, strictly speaking, support. So, if friendship, faith, and understanding ourselves as the true authors of our actions are (or are prerequisites for achieving) paradigmatic human ends, then some paradigmatic human ends will be straightforwardly unachievable for us if we always and invariably regulate our beliefs by responding to our evidence in a strictly probabilistic way. And, accordingly, it seems that ideal belief-regulation, at least when it comes to beliefs about our friends, ourselves, and our control over our future actions, is not plausibly a matter of straightforward probabilistic calculation on the basis of available evidence and belief in accord with these conditional probabilities.

All this suggests that, at least for creatures who are psychologically constituted in the way that human beings are, certain beliefs which are moderately (but not wildly) skewed or distorted may well make for *better* flexible-use predictive tools not by virtue of supporting more accurate predictions, but rather by virtue of supporting predictions that, although strictly-speaking inaccurate, are nevertheless better-suited, given our human psychological constitution, to facilitate action selection across a wide range of potential circumstances we may expect to face and in the service of a wide range of paradigmatic human ends (i.e. potential ends for us). Because of our peculiar psychological constitution (e.g. our aversion to particular sorts of risk), we are, at least as a general rule, better able to select courses of action that will, in fact, lead us to achieve our various ends when our predictions about the likely outcomes of various courses of action are grounded in a slightly, but systematically distorted view of certain facts.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Moreover, ideal human cognition will involve the operation of certain domain-specific belief-regulating mechanisms which generate and sustain systematically inaccurate beliefs. These belief-regulating mechanisms are ideal in part because they are straightforwardly unreliable: they operate by *introducing* and *maintaining* a kind of advantageous systematic distortion into the way in which our belief corpus represents the facts; they are designed, as it were, to engender and sustain a certain kind of misrepresentation.

If the beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief’s action-oriented proper function sometimes code a kind of systematic distortion of the facts, then the action-oriented epistemologist should concede that epistemically correct beliefs are not always accurate. And if belief-regulating mechanisms which distort the facts really do better subserve action than their accurate counterparts could, then pursuing an action-oriented epistemological approach will involve embracing the result that the (domain-specific) belief-regulating mechanisms which routinely introduce and sustain this kind of kind of systematic distortion in our belief corpus are epistemically ideal. For the action-oriented epistemologist, belief-regulation that is the product of these mechanisms is belief-regulation that conforms with epistemic norms, and so the beliefs that these mechanisms generate and sustain are epistemically justified or warranted.[[16]](#endnote-16)

5. Weight-Shifting Pragmatic Encroachment

If all this is right, then any attempt to explain why regulating one’s beliefs in any particular way constitutes (or fails to constitute) *ideal* belief-regulation will have to appeal to non-evidential, non-truth-relevant considerations. So, an action-oriented approach to epistemological theorizing suggests that non-evidential, non-truth-relevant considerations help to determine whether and why any particular pattern of belief-regulation manifests (or fails to manifest) conformity with epistemic norms. Accordingly, for the action-oriented epistemologist, non-evidential considerations can and do help to make it the case that our beliefs have the epistemic status that they have. And they do so by helping to fix what conformity with epistemic norms looks like for believers like us.

More precisely, an action-oriented approach maintains that facts about what sorts of beliefs are most well-suited to play a map-like role in facilitating successful action for creatures like us determine which doxastic output epistemic norms pair with any specified set of inputs in ideal cases of cognitive processing. And these facts go beyond simple facts about the likelihood that various propositions are true conditional on our evidence. In particular, whether and to what extent S conforms with epistemic norms in believing that p is partly determined by facts about, e.g., the systematic, species-level advantages of having certain empirically identifiably “biases” built into our cognitive architecture, the nature and value of friendship and faith as paradigmatic human ends, and/or the importance, for creatures like us, of understanding ourselves as the authors of our actions. Although these sorts of facts are not straightforwardly prudential, they are, broadly speaking, practical. And, in any case, they are paradigmatically non-truth-relevant. So, an action-oriented epistemological approach leads to the conclusion that non-truth-relevant factors can help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs by determining which sorts of cognitive transitions are sanctioned by epistemic norms. Or, put differently, non-truth-relevant factors can help make it the case that S’s belief that p has the epistemic status that it has by determining whether and to what extent the particular set of considerations on the basis of which S believes that p lend epistemic support to S’s belief.

We can distinguish two different ways in which a consideration might help to determine the epistemic status of S’s belief that p. On the one hand, a consideration can help make it the case that S’s belief that p has the epistemic status that is has by constituting (or potentially constituting) S’s basis for believing that p.[[17]](#endnote-17) A consideration which operates in this way helps determine the epistemic status of S’s belief by serving as one of the *reasons for which* S believes. Imagine I believe that we’re out of milk on the basis of my partner’s reliable and trustworthy testimony to this effect. Then my partner’s testimony that we’re out of milk helps to make it the case that my belief is epistemically justified by serving as the reason for which I believe. On the other hand, however, a consideration can help make it the case that S’s belief that p has the epistemic status that is has by determining whether S’s believing that p on some particular basis, b, constitutes an instance of conformity with epistemic norms. A consideration which operates in this way does not help to determine the epistemic status of S’s belief by serving as a *reason for which* S believes. Instead, it helps determine the epistemic status of S’s belief by determining whether, and to what extent, the reasons for which S believes are capable of rendering S’s belief epistemically justified. So, considerations that operate in this latter way explain why I’m epistemically justified in believing we’re out of milk on the basis of my partner’s testimony (and why I would not be epistemically justified in so believing were my belief to be based instead on, e.g., the particular pattern of tea leaves left in the bottom of my tea cup).

It is the considerations which operate in the latter way that are of particular interest here: an action-oriented epistemologist ought to embrace the conclusion that considerations which operate in this latter way are sometimes non-evidential in character.[[18]](#endnote-18) Accordingly, non-truth-relevant considerations sometimes help to determine whether, and to what extent, the particular reasons for which S happens to believe that p render S’s belief epistemically justified. So, an action-oriented epistemological approach suggests that non-truth-relevant considerations help to determine the degree to which any particular consideration has epistemic-status-conferring strength, force, or power when it serves as (part of) S’s basis for believing that p. More succinctly, we might say that non-truth-relevant considerations determine the *epistemic weight* of those other considerations that serve (or might potentially serve) as S’s basis for believing that p. Thus, the action-oriented epistemologist must embrace:

**Weight**-**Shifting Pragmatic Encroachment (WSPE):** some considerations that help to determine the epistemic status of S’s belief that p do so without being truth-relevant (i.e. without affecting the likelihood that p), but rather by determining the epistemic weight of the considerations which serve as S’s basis for believing that p.

In effect, WSPE says that non-truth-relevant factors sometimes determine the epistemic status of S’s belief that p by determining the amount of epistemic support that those considerations on the basis of which S believes that p lend to her belief. As such, WSPE entails that the epistemic support relation is not the evidential support relation, at least insofar as the evidential support relation is understood in straightforwardly probabilistic terms.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Notice that, strictly speaking, WSPE is compatible with its more familiar cousin, SSPE. In principle, non-truth-relevant considerations might help to determine the epistemic status of our beliefs in both the ways that WSPE and SSPE describe. But I have motivated WSPE here by appealing to an action-oriented account of epistemic norms. And, at least at first pass, SSPE seems to fit rather less naturally within an action-oriented framework for epistemological theorizing. Thus, it is hard to see why the epistemologist who embraces WSPE as a consequence of her commitment to the action-oriented approach should be inclined to embrace SSPE as well.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In light of this result, it is worth noting that the action-oriented epistemologist’s way of endorsing WSPE leaves the epistemic status of our beliefs more stable than SSPE can. Thus, an action-oriented approach that embraces WSPE is well-positioned to provide a largely vindicating explanation the commonsensical idea that the epistemic status of S’s belief that p is stable so long as S’s particular evidential position remains unchanged. In particular, an action-oriented account entails that certain sorts of common and predictable changes in stakes will neither elevate or diminish the epistemic status of her beliefs. If S’s evidential position remains constant (and if S’s friendships remain stable), then the epistemic status of S’s belief that p will remain constant as well, even if it is practically advantageous for S to believe that p at t1, but practically disastrous for S to believe that p at t2.[[21]](#endnote-21) And this is because the role that non-truth-relevant considerations play in determining the epistemic status of S’s belief that p involves a kind of abstraction away from the particular believer’s idiosyncratic situation. Just as norms of ideal functioning for the human circulatory system are specified as the level of the species, rather than at the level of the individual, so too, according to the action-oriented epistemologist, are norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief-regulation. So, if the action-oriented epistemologist who embraces WSPE is right, then non-truth-relevant considerations do not influence the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to specify what constitutes belief-regulation that most efficiently and effectively equips *a particular believer* with beliefs that facilitate successful action *in her particular circumstances and in the service of her particular ends*. Rather, they influence the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to specify what constitutes belief-regulation that most efficiently and effectively equips believers who are psychologically constituted in the way that we are with beliefs that are well-suited play a map-like role in action-selection across a wide range of potential circumstances and in the service of a wide range of potential ends. And the idiosyncratic features of any particular believer’s situation at a particular moment in time simply have no bearing on whether a particular pattern of belief-regulation most efficiently and effectively equips believers who are psychologically constituted in the way that we are with beliefs that are well-suited play a map-like role in action-selection across a wide range of circumstances and in the service of a wide range of ends that, on the action-oriented approach, constitutes conformity with epistemic norms.

6. Situating PE Between Strict Evidentialism and Straightforward Pragmatism

The pragmatic encroachment thesis is usefully situated between two more extreme theses, both of which deny that non-evidential considerations ever help to explain the epistemic status of our beliefs. On the one hand, epistemic purism maintains that the epistemic status of S’s belief that p is exclusively a function of truth-relevant considerations (e.g. S’s evidence for and against p). Thus, the epistemic purist rejects PE by embracing the thesis that considerations only ever help to determine the epistemic status of a belief by virtue of their truth-relevant character (i.e. by virtue of affecting the likelihood that the proposition believed is true).[[22]](#endnote-22) On the other hand, the straightforward pragmatist maintains that the only normative standards by which we might evaluate S’s belief that p are practical standards. So, straightforward pragmatism entails that all and only considerations that bear on whether S believing that p is practically advantageous or beneficial help to determine the normative status of S’s belief that p. In effect, then, the straightforward pragmatist rejects PE by simply denying that there is any distinctively epistemic way of evaluating belief.[[23]](#endnote-23)

For the epistemic purist, the epistemic domain is thoroughly encapsulated, isolated, and autonomous. Epistemic evaluation is entirely *sui generis*. And for the straightforward pragmatist, the epistemic domain simply collapses or dissolves. The only normative evaluation of belief is straightforwardly practical evaluation, and the only normative standards governing belief are straightforwardly practical standards. There is no *distinctively epistemic* species of normative evaluation, and there are no *distinctively epistemic* normative standards governing belief. In contrast, the defender of PE aims to offer an intermediary position, according to which the epistemic domain remains distinctive, but is not *sui generis*. If she is right, then the epistemic domain is not a fully autonomous normative domain. Epistemic evaluation is unique in character, and epistemic standards are certainly distinguishable from standardly practical standards, but epistemic evaluation is not thoroughly independent of or encapsulated from practical evaluation.

Since my primary aim is simply to introduce a novel way of developing and defending PE, I do not offer decisive arguments against PE’s competitors here. But by way of illuminating what I take to be an attractive result of the action-oriented version of the pragmatic encroachment thesis that I develop above, it is worth pointing out that epistemic purism and straightforward pragmatism both stand in tension with certain facets of our commonsense reactions to certain cases. Consider:

Bella knows that she can secure a great sum of money merely by believing that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy. An eccentric billionaire has promised the payout as a prize for anyone who manages to believe this particular evidentially-unsupported proposition.

Or, a somewhat less contrived case:

Denise is the public defender in a criminal case. Denise’s evidence (e.g. the information included in the case file, her gut feeling after meeting and chatting with her client) suggests it is overwhelming likely that the accused, her client, is guilty. Nevertheless, Denise believes that it is reasonably likely that her client is innocent. Intuitively, at least, Denise’s belief is both epistemically irrational and unjustified. Let us stipulate that Denise believes in a way that violates epistemic norms.[[24]](#endnote-24) Yet, as a result of believing that her client is likely innocent, let us stipulate that Denise is able to present a much more compelling defense in the courtroom than she otherwise could. In effect, having an epistemically unwarranted belief about her client’s innocence guarantees that Denise more successfully discharges her legal and moral obligations to her client and furthers her own professional ambitions than she otherwise could.

In such cases, the subject’s idiosyncratic circumstances guarantee that she stands to gain a substantial practical benefit if she adopts a belief that is not supported by her evidence. And, crucially, that there is some significant practical advantage to believing that p for the subject is entirely independent of whether pis, in fact, the case.

Common sense tells us that if Bella does manage to believe that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy, it seems clear that her belief will be regrettably faulty, imperfect, or flawed, at least along one important dimension of evaluation. And if Denise believes her client is innocent, it seems similarly clear that she will be appropriately subject to a kind of criticism. That Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs manifest a lack of regard for their evidence bothers us. And we think this ought to bother them. Nevertheless, common sense also tells us that there is some very important, perhaps overriding sense of ‘should’ in which these subjects’ practically advantageous, but evidentially unsupported, beliefs are precisely the beliefs they should have. We can easily imagine encouraging Bella and Denise to do whatever it takes to adopt and sustain these practically advantageous beliefs. Indeed, we can even imagine being moved to help Bella or Denise discount or ignore evidence that makes it difficult for them to form or sustain their practically advantageous beliefs.

The epistemic purist is poorly-positioned to vindicate our commonsense reactions to Bella’s and Denise’s cases.

To see why, imagine both Bella and Denise somehow manage to form and sustain the relevant evidentially unsupported, but practically advantageous beliefs. If the epistemic purist is right, then Bella and Denise do make a kind of mistake here. Both subjects fail to believe in accordance with their evidence, and so, according to the epistemic purist, both subjects’ beliefs are epistemically faulty, defective, or flawed. Moreover, epistemic purism is certainly compatible with the position that epistemic evaluation is one species of evaluation among many. And so the epistemic purist can acknowledge that from some non-epistemic (plausibly practical or prudential) perspective, Bella and Denise make no mistake: they believe precisely as they should, given their circumstances.

But once the epistemic purist concedes that epistemic evaluation is one species of evaluation among many, and that, at least in these cases, different species of evaluation pull in different directions, then she faces a dilemma. On one horn, the epistemic purist might deny that epistemic evaluation is genuinely and inescapably normative in its own right. That is, she might endorse a kind of error-theoretic account of the fact that we think that Bella or Denise (or a third party, for that matter) ought to be troubled by the fact that their beliefs are so flagrantly lacking evidential support. On such an account, this sort of reaction is just mistaken or confused. So, adopting this horn of the dilemma amounts to suggesting that, contra common sense, we should not regard the epistemic shortcomings of Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs as genuine shortcomings at all.

On the other horn, the epistemic purist can embrace the idea that epistemic evaluation and, e.g., practical (or prudential) evaluation are both genuinely, but entirely independently, normative. Epistemic shortcomings and practical shortcomings are both genuinely regrettable, and independently so. But if the epistemic domain and the practical domain are wholly independent and both genuinely normative in their own right, then we should feel no pressure to navigate conflicts between epistemic and practical evaluation when they arise. However, we do feel such pressure, especially when we focus on cases like Bella’s and Denise’s. Moreover, we have no trouble navigating the conflict between epistemic and practical demands that these cases generate: practical demands trump epistemic demands. Although we think Bella and Denise should regard the fact that their beliefs are flagrantly lacking evidential support as genuinely regrettable, we also think it is obvious that the practical virtues of their beliefs outweigh or overpower this flaw. And the emerging purist picture is poorly positioned to supply a vindicating explanation of why this is. Rather, it seems the epistemic purist must offer an error-theoretic account of why our reactions to Bella and Denise give a kind of priority to practical standards for evaluation.

So, whichever horn of this dilemma the purist adopts, it seems she is forced to concede that epistemic purism won’t vindicate (all of) common sense.

At least at first pass, it seems that the straightforward pragmatist fairs no better. The straightforward pragmatist maintains that the only normative standards that govern belief are practical standards. Common sense suggests that our subjects’ evidentially unsupported beliefs are the beliefs that they should have precisely because these beliefs are uniquely practically advantageous or beneficial in the circumstances these subjects face. From a strictly practical point of view, we think Bella and Denise believe precisely as they ought to believe. But if this is right, it seems the straightforward pragmatist must concede that Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs are flawless. And, in turn, she must concede that Bella and Denise are thoroughly uncriticizable for believing as they do. So, straightforward pragmatism seems poorly positioned to provide a vindicating explanation of the fact that our commonsense reactions to Bella and Denise involve thinking that both these subjects make a genuine and regrettable, if understandable and forgivable, mistake by holding beliefs that lack sufficient evidential support.[[25]](#endnote-25)

7. Applying WSPE to Cases

The action-oriented epistemologist who embraces WSPE is particularly well-positioned to vindicate our commonsense reactions to cases. Grant that Bella’s and Denise’s evidentially unsupported beliefs are uniquely well-suited, given each subject’s peculiar circumstances and ends, to facilitate their own successful actions. Still, an action-oriented epistemologist might argue that the belief in question wouldn’t have similarly facilitated successful action across the wide variety of different circumstances that human beings normally face, and in the service of the wide range of paradigmatic human ends. Thus, Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs are not, in fact, well-suited (in the relevant sense) to fulfill belief’s particular action-oriented function as *flexible-use* predictive tools. Metaphorically speaking, they are overly specialized: perfectly suited for use in a very narrowly circumscribed situation, but rather poorly suited for use across the wider range of situations that our subjects might reasonably be expected to face. Alternatively, the action-oriented epistemologist might argue that Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs are generated and sustained by belief-regulating processes that do not reliably give rise to beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief’s action-oriented function, and cite this result as grounds for a kind of negative epistemic evaluation. Here, the particular species of epistemic criticism in question is, in the first instance, criticism leveled at the pattern of belief-regulation that underwrites Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs, and then (derivatively) at the belief itself. In effect, the diagnosis here is that Bella and Denise get lucky: their cases are cases of serendipitous malfunction or malfunctioning with respect to belief or belief-regulation.

Interestingly, however, the action-oriented epistemologist might contrast Bella and Denise with Frida or Jayla.

Frida overhears an acquaintance mentioning that she heard Frida’s close friend made a truly cruel and tasteless remark at a recent social gathering. Frida, herself, was not present at the gathering, and she has no independent evidence that the acquaintance is lying or otherwise untrustworthy. Moreover, Frida knows that although her friend is generally sensitive and respectful, her offhand remarks can, on rare occasion, be cruel and tasteless. Frida’s evidence makes the proposition that her friend made a cruel and tasteless remark more likely than not. And let us stipulate that a third party with all the same evidence would reasonably believe as much. Still, Frida remains skeptical. She believes that it’s more likely that her acquaintance has misperceived real cruelty and tastelessness in what was, in fact, a harmless and inoffensive remark (perhaps, she might speculate, the acquaintance has failed to fully appreciate the contextualized meaning of her friend’s use of a certain word, or has failed to detect the sarcastic, even satirical tone of her friend’s remark).

Jayla is a job candidate. She has no evidence that she is especially well-qualified for the position to which she has applied as compared to her competitors, and she has no evidence that either her credentials or her personality are more likely than her competitors’ to impress the hiring committee. Given the evidence that Jayla has, a third party might reasonably believe that Jayla is an average candidate, somewhere in the middle of the pack, and not particularly likely to stand out from her competitors. But Jayla remains optimistic about how she measures up. She believes that, although the competition is stiff, she is a good candidate for the position, and that the hiring committee will recognize as much. Jayla is not delusional—she recognizes that there is a good chance she will not get the job. But her beliefs about her chances of getting the job manifest slightly more optimism than they would were they to perfectly match the probability that she will get the job, conditional on her evidence.

Like Bella and Denise, Frida and Jayla have beliefs that are not supported by their evidence (at least insofar as evidential support is understood in straightforwardly probabilistic terms). And, as the earlier discussion of positive illusions and of epistemic partiality in friendship suggests, both Frida’s and Jayla’s beliefs seem to be practically beneficial or advantageous. But, that earlier discussion also suggests that it is no happy accident—no merely lucky result—that Frida’s and Jayla’s beliefs are well-suited to facilitate action. It is easy to imagine how, in general, giving one’s friends the benefit of the doubt as Frida does here will lead one to act in ways that build and sustain friendships. Indeed, this is part of what makes it plausible that a disposition to give one’s friends the benefit of the doubt just as Frida does here is partially constitutive of true friendship. And, quite plausibly, it is precisely because the kind of optimistic bias that Jayla manifests engenders more successful action that this kind of bias is wired into our psychology.

So, it seems that general facts about human psychology and the nature of friendship guarantee that a systematically distorted way of responding to one’s evidence in situations like Frida’s and Jayla’s reliably best equips believers like us with beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill their proper function in facilitating successful action in the service of paradigmatic human ends. If the belief-regulating mechanisms that govern Frida and Jayla’s beliefs are sufficiently encapsulated, restricted to a circumscribed domain, then the action-oriented epistemologist who endorses WSPE will say that Frida and Jayla are models of ideal belief-regulation, and, indeed, that this fact explains why their beliefs turn out to be well-suited to guide their actions. More precisely, the action-oriented epistemologist who embraces WSPE will explain that, from the epistemic perspective, the testimony that Frida’s acquaintance gives carries less epistemic weight for Frida than it would for a third party. And it is the fact that it is Frida’s friend whose behavior is at issue that explains why this is. Jayla’s evidence that she is well-qualified for the position, and that she is likely to make a good impression in her interview, carries more epistemic weight for her than it would for a third party. And this result is explained by the fact that, when it comes to our beliefs about our own talents, abilities, chances of success, etc., ideal cognitive functioning for believers who are psychologically constituted as we are involves belief-regulation that manifests an optimism bias. Accordingly, the action-oriented epistemologist will say that, unlike Bella and Denise, Frida and Jayla are not epistemically criticizable for believing as they do; their beliefs are epistemically flawless. Still, the same will not hold for a third party to either case who believes as Frida and Jayla do. And, crucially, explaining why involves an appeal to paradigmatically non-truth-relevant factors.[[26]](#endnote-26)

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1. And so, if justification is a prerequisite for knowledge, then non-evidential considerations help to explain the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to determine when and why believing that p on basis b helps to make one’s belief knowledgeable. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Prominent defenders of SSPE include Fantl & McGrath (2002), Hawthorne (2004), and Stanley (2005). Kim (2017) provides a contemporary survey of the relevant literature. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Both these cases are lifted directly from Fantl & McGrath (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See, e.g., DeRose (2009), Reed (2010), or Neta (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For further discussion, see Anderson & Hawthorne (forthcoming) and Eaton & Pickavance (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This action-oriented approach is at least foreshadowed in the work of the American pragmatists (see, e.g., Peirce (1877)), and also in one of the theoretical commitments that stands behind embodied/enactive research programs in psychology and cognitive science (see, e.g., Clark (1997) or Engel, et al. (2013)). I’ve argued that we ought to favor an action-oriented approach to epistemological theorizing over an alethic or truth-oriented alternative in Nolfi (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This way of thinking about the nature of belief is not new (see, e.g. Burge (2010), Kornblith (2002), Lycan (1988), Millikan (1993)). I remain neutral here among competing (e.g., etiological vs. dispositional) accounts of function. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Notice that, at least insofar as the action-oriented epistemologist is committed to the thesis that epistemic evaluation is genuinely normative, she owes an account of *how and why* the constitutive norms for belief and belief-regulation that derive from belief’s action-oriented proper function come to have genuinely normative authority and force. I have tried to show that the action-oriented epistemologist can discharge this explanatory burden in other work. So, without pretending that there isn’t significant philosophical work for the action-oriented epistemologist to do to secure this result, I will simply assume in what follows that the action-oriented epistemologist has a story to tell that explains how and why norms that derive from belief’s constitutive action-oriented proper function come to enjoy genuine normative authority and force. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On the action-oriented approach, then, the project of spelling out these norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief-regulation is very much like the project of spelling out the norms of ideal operation of any particular part of the human circulatory system. As will emerge in what follows, just as an attempt to characterize the norms of ideal functioning that govern the operation of the human heart must be informed by empirical inquiry, and will be hostage to empirical results, so too must an attempt to characterize the norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief-regulation. And just as norms of ideal functioning that govern the operation of the human heart will be specified with respect to the paradigm of the human circulatory system, so too will the norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief-regulation be specified with respect to proto-typical or paradigmatic human psychological constitution. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. After all, as Quine (1969) puts it, “creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind.” [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Papineau (1987), Lycan (1988), Kornblith (1993) and (2002), Millikan (1993), and Burge (2003) develop the action-oriented approach along precisely these lines. I suspect that a (sometimes suppressed—see Millikan (1993), sometimes explicit—see Kornblith (2002)) assumption that accurate representation *is just what it takes* for beliefs to be well-suited to serve as predictive tools in guiding action often underwrites the popular thought that beliefs constitutively aim to accurately represent the facts. But, as the arguments that follow show, this assumption ought to be rejected. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Hazlett (2013) for a more extensive discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For an overview of the relevant psychological results, see, e.g., Taylor & Brown (1988) and (1994) or Johnson and Fowler (2011), Sharot (2011). See Hazlett (2013) or McKay & Dennett (2009) for a philosophical discussion of some of the relevant psychological research. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. On friendship, see Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006). On faith, see Preston-Roedder (forthcoming). On promising and resolving in the face of temptation without succumbing to bad faith, see Marušić (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Of course, a particular believer might encounter circumstances in which this kind of typically advantageous systematic distortion in her belief corpus happens to frustrate her efforts to achieve some particular end. The point here is more general: in abstraction from the actual ends any particular believer might happen to have and from the idiosyncratic circumstances in which any particular believer finds herself, believers who are psychologically constituted in the way that we are and who operate in the kind of environment in which we operate are best-equipped to act in the pursuit of ends (as yet unspecified) if we have a belief corpus that encodes the relevant sort of systematic distortion. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Insofar as the action-oriented epistemologist embraces something like the idea that, at least in normal circumstances, epistemic justification/warrant converts correct belief into knowledge, then these considerations should persuade the action-oriented epistemologist to reject the thesis that knowledge is factive. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. This is the way in which my having a visual experience as of my coffee cup’s being empty typically helps make it the case that I am justified in believing that my coffee cup is empty: my belief is based on my visual experience and, at least in the usual sort of case, my belief is epistemically justified as a result. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I have argued elsewhere (see Nolfi (2018)) that considerations which operate in the former way to confer positive epistemic status on our beliefs are always truth-relevant. But those arguments are independent of the arguments on offer here (which concern considerations that play a different sort of role in determining the epistemic status of our beliefs). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Indeed, one might take the philosophical import of WSPE simply to *be* that we ought to embrace an alternative account of evidential support, one that is not straightforwardly probabilistic, but instead practically-infused. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Perhaps it is possible to motivate WSPE in a way that proves to be more friendly to SSPE, without relying on an action-oriented epistemological framework. Or perhaps it is possible to develop an action-oriented epistemological account in a way that is ultimately congenial to SSPE, as well as WSPE. Although I am somewhat skeptical on both fronts, I simply cannot give either the attention each deserves in this piece. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Of course, if S’s belief that p is a belief about F, who is S’s close friend at t1, but with whom S has fallen out by t2, then, assuming true friendship really does require having a positively skewed view of your friend’s actions and character, the epistemic status of S’s belief that p may well change from t1 to t2 even as her evidential position remains constant. In this sort of case, an action-oriented approach suggests that the changing status of S’s relationship with F may change the epistemic weight of the evidential considerations on the basis of which S forms beliefs about F’s actions and character. Thus, WSPE does not remove all potential instability in epistemic status of S’s belief, even while S’s evidential position remains constant. It does, however, avoid the particularly pervasive and predictable species of instability that seems to plague stakes-motivated versions of SSPE. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Actually, matters are slightly more complicated here since the epistemic purist might embrace both a truth condition and an anti-gettier condition on knowledge, and so might accept that whether S’s belief that p constitutes knowledge depends on more than just whether S’s belief that p is based on evidence conditional on which p is sufficiently likely to be true. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Stich (1993), Papineau (2013), McCormick (2014), and Rinnard (2015) express some sympathy for straightforward pragmatism. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. It is worth making explicit that this stipulation is compatible with a very wide range of views about what, precisely, conformity with epistemic norms in any particular instance requires. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Perhaps the straightforward pragmatist can do better here. Indeed, I am indebted to Susanna Rinard for helping me appreciate ways in which the straightforward pragmatist might endeavor to account for our intuition that Bella and Denise make some sort of genuine and regrettable mistake. For example, the straightforward pragmatist might point out that believing in the absence of evidence is often practically disastrous. And so, the way in which Bella and Denise ignore or disregard their (lack of) evidence in regulating their beliefs is risky. Accordingly, then, the straightforward pragmatist might suggest that Bella and Denise are criticizable for subjecting themselves to an objectionable (or, perhaps, simply regrettable) level of risk in believing as they do. And perhaps this is enough to account for our intuition that both Bella and Denise make some sort of genuine and regrettable mistake. Bella’s and Denise’s circumstances might well be such that the risk they incur here is ultimately justified or reasonable. Sometimes one’s situation is such that taking on what would generally be an unacceptable level of risk is precisely the thing to do. But incurring this risk might still be regrettable. It might be unfortunate the Bella and Denise find themselves in situations where engaging in a risky form of belief-regulation turns out to be the thing to do. And, all things considered, it would be betterif these subjects’ circumstances simply did not require them to engage in this kind of risky belief-regulation in order to secure the relevant practical benefits. Notice that the straightforward pragmatist’s strategy here involves distinguishing at least two different species of evaluation: one that yields a positive result (i.e. Bella and Denise believe in precisely the way that they ought to believe), and another that yields a negative result (i.e. Bella and Denise accept a regrettable level of risk by believing as they do). But once we have distinguished these two different species of evaluation, then the distance between the straightforward pragmatist’s view and the action-oriented epistemologist’s view shrinks considerably, perhaps to the point of being merely terminological. As we will see, the action-oriented epistemologist might propose that Bella and Denise make a kind of regrettable mistake because they engage in a risky kind of belief-regulation: this kind of belief-regulation is unacceptably likely to yield beliefs that are not well-suited to facilitate successful action. In effect, then, the action-oriented epistemologist can vindicate our intuitive reactions to Bella’s and Denise’s cases by distinguishing a straightforwardly practical species of evaluation from a species of evaluation according to which Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs fall short by virtue of being the product of belief-regulating processes that fail to reliably produce beliefs that are well-suited to facilitate successful action. And so the real disagreement between the action-oriented epistemologist and the straightforward pragmatist seems to be a disagreement about whether this second species of evaluation is properly classified as *epistemic* evaluation. But given the principled way in which the action-oriented epistemologist circumscribes the epistemic domain (recall that, epistemic evaluation is evaluation with respect to standards or norms that derive from the constitutive proper function of belief), it seems that the straightforward pragmatist simply begs the question against the action-oriented epistemologist in resisting the action-oriented epistemologist’s suggestion that the relevant sort of criticism of Bella’s and Denise’s beliefs is paradigmatically *epistemic* criticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I am grateful to participants at the 2017 Northern New England Ethics and Epistemology Workshop for invaluable feedback on this material, and I am especially indebted to Tyler Doggett, Brian Kim and Susanna Rinard for their extensive written comments on earlier versions of this piece. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)