Believing for Practical Reasons

Susanna Rinard

Harvard University

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Some prominent evidentialists argue that practical considerations cannot be normative reasons for belief because they can’t be motivating reasons for belief. Existing pragmatist responses turn out to depend on the assumption that it’s possible to believe in the absence of evidence. The evidentialist may deny this, at which point the debate ends in an impasse. I propose a new strategy for the pragmatist. This involves conceding that belief in the absence of evidence is impossible. We then argue that evidence can play a role in bringing about belief without being a motivating reason for belief, thereby leaving room for practical considerations to serve as motivating reasons. I present two ways in which this can happen. First, agents can use evidence as a mere means by which to believe, with practical considerations serving as motivating reasons for belief, just as we use tools (e.g. a brake pedal) as mere means by which to do something (e.g. slow down) which we are motivated to do for practical reasons. Second, evidence can make it possible for one to choose whether or not to believe – a choice one can then make for practical reasons. These arguments push the debate between the evidentialist and the pragmatist into new territory. It is no longer enough for an evidentialist to insist that belief is impossible without evidence. Even if this is right, the outcome of the debate remains unsettled. It will hang on the ability of the evidentialist to respond to the new pragmatist strategy presented here.

**0. Introduction**

Pragmatists about reasons for belief hold that non-evidential considerations—such as prudential or moral considerations—can be normative reasons for belief. After all, says the pragmatist, prudential and moral considerations can serve as normative reasons for action, so why not belief?[[1]](#footnote-1) Evidentialists about reasons for belief hold that non-evidential considerations cannot be normative reasons for belief.[[2]](#footnote-2), [[3]](#footnote-3)

One prominent evidentialist argument against pragmatism is that non-evidential considerations can’t be normative reasons for belief because they cannot be *motivating* reasons for belief. Arguments along these lines can be found in (among other places) Kelly 2002, Shah 2006, and Parfit 2011 Appendix A. A consideration R counts as a motivating reason for A’s φ-ing just in case it was a reason for which A φ’d—in other words, just in case it was one of A’s reasons for φ-ing. It can happen that R is a good normative reason for φ-ing, and that this reason is possessed by A, and that A does indeed φ, but that R was not a motivating reason for A’s φ-ing—that A φ’d exclusively for reasons other than R. For example, it may be that the motivating reason for Sam’s giving to charity was simply that doing so would make him appear generous, and the fact that doing so would help others was not a motivating reason for him at all.

It is important to distinguish motivating reasons from explanatory reasons.[[4]](#footnote-4) A motivating reason is a *reason for which* an agent did something, whereas an explanatory reason is a *reason why* something happened—it helps explain why the event occurred.[[5]](#footnote-5) Now, it may be that every motivating reason is an explanatory reason. That giving to charity would make him appear generous is Sam’s motivating reason for giving to charity—it’s the reason for which he gave to charity—but it also helps explain why he did so.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, not all explanatory reasons are motivating reasons. Perhaps the simplest way to see this is to consider events that are not done by an agent at all. For example, suppose a tree branch happens to fall on a wine glass at a picnic and breaks it. The branch’s falling on the glass is an explanatory reason for the glass’s breaking – it’s a reason why the glass broke. But it is not a motivating reason. The breaking of the glass was not something done by an agent, and so it was not something any agent had a motivating reason for doing.

We can also find explanatory reasons that are not motivating reasons in cases in which agents are involved, and there are motivating reasons. For example, suppose Billy wants to disrupt the picnic, and so he throws a rock at one of the wine glasses, thereby breaking it. Billy’s motivating reason for breaking the glass – the reason for which he did it – was that doing so would disrupt the picnic. This also helps explain why the glass broke. But there are other explanatory reasons that we can identify at different points in the causal chain that are not also motivating reasons. That the rock hit the glass is also a reason why the glass broke, but this is an explanatory reason, not a motivating one. We can also find explanatory reasons that aren’t motivating reasons in parts of the causal chain that precede Billy’s desire to break up the picnic. Perhaps Rudolf wanted Billy to disrupt the picnic because he wanted the picnic-goers to be mad at Billy. Unbeknownst to Billy, Rudolf persuaded the picnic-goers to taunt Billy, thereby causing Billy to want to get back at them by disrupting the picnic. That Rudolf wanted Billy to disrupt the picnic is part of the explanation for why the glass broke; it is part of the causal chain that led to the glass’s breaking. It is an explanatory reason for the breaking of the glass, but it is not also a motivating reason for the breaking of the glass. It was not Billy’s motivating reason (he knew nothing about it), and it was not anyone else’s motivating reason, since breaking the glass was not done by anyone other than Billy (it was not done by Rudolf – although he wanted Billy to disrupt the picnic, he had no idea how Billy might go about this, and, in particular, did not know or suspect that he would do it by breaking a glass).

Another way to see the difference between explanatory and motivating reasons is to notice that in the case of motivating reasons, it makes sense to ask whether the reason in question was a *good* one – one that could help justify the agent’s doing what they did – whereas in the case of explanatory reasons, it doesn’t make sense to ask this question. We can ask whether Sam’s motivating reason for giving to charity – that doing so would make him appear generous – was a good one or a bad one. But there is no such distinction for explanatory reasons. That the branch fell on the glass just is the reason why the glass broke – there’s no further fact about whether this reason was good or bad.

That not all explanatory reasons are motivating reasons is important in the context of this debate between the evidentialist and the pragmatist because, as we will see below, the evidentialist will agree that in certain cases practical considerations can constitute explanatory reasons for belief. Practical considerations can play a crucial causal role in bringing it about that an agent has a particular belief. What the evidentialist denies is not that practical considerations can cause, or help explain, belief, but rather, that they can be motivating reasons for belief. If there were no difference between explanatory and motivating reasons, this evidentialist objection would not get off the ground, since all agree that practical considerations can act as explanatory reasons for belief. That is why it is particularly important, in the context of this debate, to carefully distinguish these two types of reasons.

It is easy to see the initial plausibility of the evidentialist’s claim that practical considerations are unable to motivate belief.[[7]](#footnote-7) Suppose I offer you a thousand dollars to believe that the number of stars is odd. Even if this makes you want to have this belief, if you’re like most people, this offer alone won’t be enough to actually bring you to belief.

In moving from this putative inability of practical considerations to motivate belief to the claim that such considerations aren’t normative reasons for belief, the evidentialist is relying on a version of internalism about reasons according to which a genuine normative reason for φ-ing must be able to serve as an agent’s motivating reason for φ-ing. Of course, the internalist allows that one can have a normative reason that fails to serve as a motivating reason. Their claim is merely that any genuine normative reason *could* serve as a motivating reason.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In this paper I defend pragmatism against this evidentialist argument. I will grant the evidentialist their assumption that genuine normative reasons must be able to serve as motivating reasons. However, I will argue that the evidentialist is mistaken in claiming that only evidential considerations can be motivating reasons for belief.

In section 1 I describe some existing pragmatist strategies for arguing that practical considerations can motivate belief. We see that this dialectic ends in an impasse: the evidentialist and the pragmatist can be seen as having a bedrock disagreement about whether it is possible to believe a proposition in the absence of evidential considerations in its favor. I then propose a new pragmatist strategy, which I develop in sections 2 and 3. This new strategy concedes, for the sake of argument, that belief without evidential considerations is impossible. The key is to argue that evidence can play a crucial causal role in bringing about belief without being a motivating reason for it, thereby leaving room for practical considerations to serve as motivating reasons. In section 2 I present one way this can happen: agents who are motivated by practical considerations to believe can use evidence as a mere means by which to believe, just as agents who are motivated by practical reasons to complete some task use tools as mere means by which to accomplish that task. In section 3 I present a different way this can happen: evidence can play a merely enabling role, making it possible for the agent to choose whether or not to believe – a choice they can then make on the basis of practical considerations.

This paper thus pushes the debate between the evidentialist and the pragmatist into new territory. The evidentialist can no longer consider themselves victorious as long as they can establish that belief is impossible in the absence of evidential considerations in its favor. The new pragmatist strategy developed here maintains that even if the evidentialist is right about this, there are nonetheless a variety of ways in which practical considerations can serve as motivating reasons for belief.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**1. Believing without evidence**

I’ll begin by discussing existing pragmatist strategies for undermining the evidentialist’s claim that only evidential considerations can function as motivating reasons for belief. In looking for counterexamples to this claim, it is perhaps most natural to start by exploring cases in which an agent has a belief for which they lack evidence. Prima facie, these seem like good candidates for cases in which the agent’s motivating reasons for belief, if any, are non-evidential.

One kind of case of belief in the absence of supporting evidence involves agents who are mistaken about what their evidence supports. Suppose, for example, that we are tossing a fair coin. The tosses are independent, and we all know this. So far, the coin has come up heads 11 times in a row. This does not constitute evidence that the coin will land tails on the next toss. However, Stanley, who is among our company, is prone to the gambler’s fallacy, and he mistakenly thinks that a string of heads *is* very strong evidence that the coin will land tails next. This leads him to believe that the coin will, in fact, land tails on the next toss. Stanley’s belief is not motivated by a consideration which is in fact evidence for the proposition believed, since, after all, he has no evidence for that proposition.

However, I think the evidentialist should be unfazed by examples of this kind. Presumably they would hold that the motivating reason for Stanley’s belief is a consideration which he *takes* to be evidence for the proposition believed, even though it is not in fact evidence for that proposition. Moreover, Stanley would not have been lead to his belief in tails on the next toss by the observation that the coin landed heads the first 11 times if he had not taken this to be evidence that the coin will next land tails. To account for cases like this, the evidentialist should refine their claim so that it allows for the possibility that a consideration which is not in fact evidence for a proposition P, but which the agent takes to be evidence for P, could serve as a motivating reason for believing P. (Comesana (2015) makes a similar point.)

One refinement of the evidentialist’s claim that satisfies this criterion is as follows: Only considerations which the agent takes to be evidence for P can serve as motivating reasons for believing P. Perhaps some evidentialists would be happy with this formulation, but there might be some who want to allow for the possibility of cases in which an agent is motivated to believe a proposition P by a consideration which is in fact evidence for P, but which, for some reason, the agent fails to take to be evidence for P. We need not resolve this issue here. Henceforth I will suppose only that the evidentialist endorses the following comparatively logically weak claim, which is non-committal on this matter: If a consideration serves as a motivating reason for believing P, then either it is evidence for P, or it is taken to be evidence for P. We can also remain neutral on different conceptions of what it is for an agent to *take* something to be evidence for P. After all, according to the pragmatist there are considerations which constitute genuine normative reasons for believing P that neither are evidence for P nor are in any sense taken by the agent to be evidence for P. All the evidentialist needs to do to undermine this is successfully defend the claim that a consideration cannot be a motivating reason for belief unless it either is evidence, or is in some sense taken by the agent to be evidence, for the proposition believed.

In seeking to undermine this refined version of the evidentialist claim, the pragmatist may start by looking at putative cases in which the agent has a belief for which they not only lack evidence, but for which they also take themselves to lack evidence. For example, suppose a lifelong friend of yours is accused of a crime. You neither have, nor take yourself to have, any evidence that he is innocent. Nonetheless, you believe that he is innocent, purely for the sake of the friendship. You feel that you owe it to your friend to believe well of him, even in the absence of supporting evidence. (Such examples are discussed in Stroud 2006 and Keller 2004.)

Or, suppose that you must believe in the possibility of a just and equal society in order to have enough hope to go on in life. You may have, and take yourself to have, evidence that humans are, by their very nature, doomed to end up taking advantage of and oppressing each other, and no outweighing evidence to the contrary. However, if you believed that, you would be depressed to the point of being unable to function: unable to pursue your projects, unable to do your job, and unable to care for those who rely on you. So, simply in order to be able to carry on in life, you believe that a just and equal society is at least possible.

Finally, consider individuals who report having religious beliefs because these beliefs give meaning to their lives. Such individuals often insist that they do not have any evidence for these beliefs. Indeed, as they see it, the whole point of faith is to believe in the absence of evidence. (Some examples are described in Nayding 2011; see also Worsnip (ms).)

My own view is that these are all genuine examples of how non-evidential considerations can serve as reasons for which one believes.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, it is not always effective to rely on such judgments in arguing against the evidentialist, since many evidentialists are apt to deny that these cases, as described, are genuinely possible. (See, for example, Adler 2002.) One evidentialist strategy is to hold that in realistic versions of these cases, the agent actually would have some evidence for their belief—or at least, something that they take to be evidence—and it is this that would serve as the real motivating reason for their belief. For example, in a realistic version of the case, they might say, you would take yourself to have *some* evidence that your friend is innocent, even if it’s not the sort that would hold up in court. For example, maybe your long association with him has provided you with insight into his character which tells strongly against his having committed the crime of which he’s accused, and it is this, says the evidentialist, that is the real reason for which you believe he’s innocent. Similarly, it might be that you take the solace you experience when praying as some evidence that God exists, and it is this that really serves as the motivating reason for your theism, even if it is also true that this belief gives meaning to your life.

The evidentialist may argue in addition (or instead) that there are realistic versions of these cases in which you genuinely do lack evidence, and take yourself to lack evidence, but in those versions of the cases, you don’t really believe the propositions in question. You may accept these propositions, and act as though you believe them – you may tell your friend you don’t doubt his innocence; you may argue against those who claim that a just and equal society is impossible; you may participate fully in the life of your religious community, and declare your faith in God – but, says the evidentialist, your real attitude toward these propositions falls short of genuine belief. In short, the evidentialist will claim that there is no realistic version of these cases in which you genuinely lack, and take yourself to lack, evidence that supports the proposition in question, while also genuinely believing that proposition. The pragmatist, on the other hand, will reject these evidentialist re-interpretations of the cases, and claim that they are indeed possible, as originally described. At this point, the debate between the pragmatist and the evidentialist seems to end in an impasse.

There is a different sort of case that has often been used to motivate pragmatism. In cases of this kind, recognition of the practical considerations in favor of having a certain belief lead the agent to take steps intended to bring it about that they have that belief. The paradigm case here is Pascal (1670), who argues that the expected value of believing in God is higher than that of not believing, and concludes from this that we ought to believe. Famously, in response to the objection that one can’t simply decide to believe, he recommends that you “bless yourself with holy water, have masses said, and so on” and claims that “by a simple and natural process this will make you believe.” If things go as planned, and one ends up with the desired belief, then, the pragmatist will say, this is a case in which belief was motivated by a practical consideration.

Of course, it is true that the practical consideration caused the belief only indirectly, but the pragmatist can plausibly argue that this is no barrier to it serving as a motivating reason. After all, it is commonplace for genuine motivating reasons for φ-ing to bring about φ-ing indirectly. For example, suppose I’ve locked myself out of my house and decide to break a window in order to get in. Now, I can’t break windows directly at will. (If I sit very still, close my eyes, and try as hard as I can to break the window purely by force of will, nothing happens.) However, that doesn’t prevent me from breaking the window. I do so by throwing a large rock at it with great force. Even though the practical consideration in favor of breaking the window (namely, that doing so is the only way I’ll be able to get into my house) is only an indirect cause of my breaking the window, it is clearly the motivating reason for my doing so. Similarly, the pragmatist will say, the motivating reason for your belief in God was the practical consideration in favor of doing so, even though it caused your belief only indirectly. (See, for example, Jordan 2006.)

Once again, however, the evidentialist can resist. First, they will argue that the strategies for bringing about belief will be successful only if they give the agent evidence for the proposition in question—or, at least, cause the agent to take themselves to have evidence for that proposition. (Terminological note: henceforth, for ease of exposition, “evidence” is to be understood as including any consideration that the agent takes to be evidence, even if it is not in fact evidence.) For, the evidentialist will claim, only evidence can be a direct cause of belief. Moreover, they will say that if these strategies do provide the agent with evidence, which then causes belief, it will be this evidence that is the real motivating reason for the agent’s belief, not the practical consideration which led the agent to take steps intended to ultimately bring about that belief. So, although they will allow that the practical consideration is an explanatory reason for the agent’s belief, since, after all, it is a cause (albeit indirect) of the belief, they will deny that it is a reason *for which* one believes—that is, they will deny that it is a motivating reason for belief. (See Kelly 2002 and Shah 2006 for evidentialist arguments along these lines.) Note that the distinction between explanatory and motivating reasons is crucial to the evidentialist’s strategy here—if all explanatory reasons were also motivating reasons, the pragmatist would have won at this point.

Once again we have reached an impasse, and the heart of the disagreement is the same as it was before. The evidentialist and the pragmatist simply disagree about whether it is possible for belief to come about in the absence of evidence. The pragmatist holds that this is possible, and that in some such cases non-evidential considerations function as motivating reasons for belief. The evidentialist, on the other hand, holds that this is not possible.[[11]](#footnote-11) On their view, belief cannot come about in the absence of some evidential consideration in favor of the proposition believed. And, they claim, it is this evidential consideration that is the reason for which one believes. The evidentialist is happy to grant that practical considerations may play important—even indispensable—roles in the causal history of belief, and that they can serve as explanatory reasons for belief, but, they claim, they will never be reasons *for which* one believes.

In the next two sections I will develop a way forward for the pragmatist that involves granting to the evidentialist their side of this particular dispute. We will grant, for the sake of argument, that it is impossible for belief to come about in the absence of evidence. The new pragmatist strategy will be to argue that, nevertheless, this evidence need not be the reason for which the agent believes. Evidence can cause belief without being a motivating reason for belief. And, in some such cases, a practical consideration is the real reason for which one believes.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**2. Evidence as a means by which, rather than a reason for which, one believes**

The aim of this section is to argue that evidence can be used as a mere means by which to believe, and that, in some such cases, a practical consideration can be the reason for which one believes. (Recall that, as stipulated in the previous section, “evidence for P” should be understood to include merely apparent evidence for P—that is, considerations which the agent takes to be evidence for P, even if they are not in fact evidence for P.)

First, it will be helpful to consider some non-doxastic cases that illustrate the general idea of a means by which one φ’s that is not also a reason for which one φ’s. In fact, one of the cases discussed earlier provides an example of this: throwing a rock is the means by which one breaks the window, but it is not a reason for which one breaks the window. Now, the throwing of the rock is a cause of the breaking of the window, and so it is an explanatory reason for the breaking of the window. But it is not the agent’s motivating reason for breaking the window. The agent’s motivating reason for breaking the window was that doing so was necessary for them to get into their house. (Note, also, that the φ-ing in question is *your breaking the window*, not *your deciding to break the window*—throwing the rock is a means by which you break the window, but it is not a means by which you decide to break the window.) Here is another case. Suppose you are driving on a freeway, and you look in the rearview mirror and see a police car. You decide to slow down, in order to avoid getting a ticket. You do this by pressing down the brake pedal. In this case, pressing down the brake pedal is the means by which you slow down, but it is not a reason for which you slow down. Again, the pressing down of the break pedal is a cause of, and hence an explanatory reason for, your slowing down. But it is not your motivating reason for slowing down. Your motivating reason—the reason for which you slow down—is that doing so will help you avoid getting a ticket. The brake pedal is just used as a tool to bring about the desired change in speed. I will argue that, similarly, evidence can be used as a mere tool to bring about a desired belief. It can function as a mere means by which one believes, not a reason for which one believes.[[13]](#footnote-13)

I’ll begin by looking at some non-doxastic cases that feature merely causal relationships—cases in which something causes one to φ but is not a motivating reason for one’s φ-ing.

For example, consider certain cases in which an experience brings on a particular emotion or mood. Hearing a song on the radio that was popular when you were in high school may trigger a wave of nostalgia. Or, watching a workout buddy power through a heavy squat can make you suddenly inspired, filled with energy and ambition. Hearing the song (or watching your friend) causes you to be nostalgic (or inspired), and hence is an explanatory reason why you did so, but in neither case is the former a motivating reason for the latter.

Sometimes an experience or thought causes an associated thought. For example, suppose you are driving through a neighborhood and the scent of blooming lilacs wafts through the window. This makes you think about a house you are hoping to buy, whose backyard is filled with lilac bushes. Or, suppose you are reminiscing about your grandparents’ salt shaker, and this makes you think about their pepper grinder. The scent of lilac is the cause of your thinking about your hopeful future home, but it is not a reason for which you do so; thinking about your grandparents’ salt shaker causes you to think about their pepper grinder, but it is not a reason for which you do so. (Again, my claim is just that these are not motivating reasons. They are, as all causes are, explanatory reasons.)

Similarly, I claim, there are certain mundane cases, not uncommon in ordinary life, in which evidence causes you to believe something without being a reason for which you do so. For example, suppose your best friend calls you on the phone. Upon picking up, you hear an odd tone in her voice, which immediately causes you to believe that something is terribly wrong. There is, I submit, a realistic version of this case in which the tone in your friend’s voice is a mere cause of your belief, not a reason for which you adopt that belief. Or suppose that, while driving to work, you have a visual experience as of a pick-up truck plowing into a van, which triggers the belief that there’s been a traffic accident. Again, I claim that there is a realistic version of this case in which the experience is a mere cause of, and not also a motivating reason for, the belief that there’s been an accident.

Anyone who wishes to claim otherwise owes us an account of what is different about these transitions from evidence to belief in virtue of which they count as more than merely causal, while the other transitions—from experience to mood, from one thought (or experience) to an associated thought—do not. These transitions are similar in many respects. Importantly, they all feature very little involvement by the agent. In each case, the transition from the first state into the second state happened immediately and involuntarily, one in simple reaction to the other. There was no conscious deliberation or reasoning; the agent did not ponder and reflect; they did not weigh various considerations and then settle, or make up their mind, one way rather than another. The agent did not choose, or decide, to be in the second state on the basis of the first; they had no voluntary control over the matter. The transition was not governed or directed or guided by the agent’s desires or aims. Indeed, it may be that the agent would have preferred not to end up in the second state at all, and would have chosen not to be, if they could have. In short, in each case, transitioning into the second state from the first seems like something that just *happened to* the agent, rather than something that they *did* for a reason.

Of course, it is compatible with this that there are other versions of these cases in which the very same evidence could function as a genuine reason for which one has these beliefs. For example, one might carefully consider the tone in their friend’s voice (or their visual experience as of an accident) and choose to believe, on that basis, that something must be wrong (or that there really was an accident). For all that’s been said here, in these and other cases evidence is a motivating reason for belief.[[14]](#footnote-14) But the point is that it doesn’t *have* to be. Even the evidentialist who thinks that evidence *can* serve as a motivating reason for belief needn’t think that it *always* does. In cases like the ones described above—in which the transition happens automatically and involuntarily, with no involvement by the agent, either in the form of conscious reasoning or in the form of deliberation, or decision, or choice, or control, or guidance by preference or desire—I don’t see why we should think of evidence as anything more than a mere cause of belief.

I will now consider some ways in which one might try to resist this conclusion. First, an objector might appeal to the following claim: (\*) when evidence E causes belief B in the particular way that’s required for a belief to constitute knowledge, E is a reason for which one believes B. If we suppose that in the cases I’ve described the agent’s belief might constitute knowledge – that the agent might know that there was an accident, or that something is wrong with their friend – then (\*) is incompatible with my claim that in these cases the evidence is not a motivating reason for belief. However, the very cases in question function just as well as counterexamples to (\*). The minimal involvement by the agent in the transition from evidence to belief need not prevent that belief from constituting knowledge, but it does, or so we have been arguing, mean that the evidence is not functioning as a motivating reason for belief. Here, belief is something that just happened to the agent, not something they did for a reason. If this belief constitutes knowledge, then here knowledge, too, is something that just happened to the agent.

An alternative strategy would be to appeal to the basing relation in place of knowledge, as follows: (\*\*) if E is the basis for belief B, then E is a reason for which one believes B. This, in combination with the claim that, in the cases in question, the evidence is the basis for belief, is incompatible with my claim that evidence is not, in these cases, a motivating reason. In this simple form, the strategy is not promising. It is often stipulated that “basis” is to be understood as equivalent to “reason for which.” If so, to assert that, in these cases, the evidence is the basis for belief is simply to assert the negation of the claim for which we have been arguing. On the other hand, we may want to leave conceptual room for the possibility that a basis may not be a motivating reason. If so, then the pragmatist need not object if one proposes to use the language of basing in such a way that, in these cases, the evidence counts as the basis of belief. This leaves unaffected our arguments that the evidence is not a motivating reason.

Looking at specific accounts of the basing relation, however, may suggest some different strategies. One type of approach to the basing relation has it that a belief that P is based on some consideration R only if the agent believes that R is a good reason to believe P. (See, for example, Longino 1978 and Audi 1993.) Accordingly, one may suggest that the crucial difference between the evidence-to-belief transitions described above, and the other transitions (from experience to mood, or from an experience or thought to an associated thought), is that in the former case the agent believes that the first state is a good reason for being in the second, whereas in the latter cases they do not. That is, the strategy would be to appeal to this putative difference in arguing that in the former cases we have genuine motivating reasons, whereas in the latter cases we have mere causation. This strategy is not successful, however. The agent in the evidence-to-belief cases may lack the meta-belief that the evidence is a good reason to have the belief, but they may be caused by that evidence to have that belief nonetheless. Perhaps, for example, they don’t take the tone in their friend’s voice (or the experience as of an accident) to be evidence that something is wrong (or that there was an accident); or, perhaps they do take these things to be evidence, but they are a pragmatist who denies that evidence provides a good reason for belief in this case. Either way, the point is that one cannot appeal to the putative presence of the meta-belief to argue that the evidence is a motivating reason rather than a mere cause, because we can easily imagine versions of the cases in which the meta-belief simply isn’t there.

The other main approach to the basing relation emphasizes the way in which evidence causes belief. As long as evidence causes belief in the right way—for example, in a way that avoids deviant causal chains—then, according to these accounts, the belief is based on the evidence. (See, for example, Moser (1989, 157) and McCain (2012).) Inspired by these accounts of the basing relation, an objector may propose that R is a motivating reason for one’s φ-ing just in case R causes one’s φ-ing in this “right way.” They may then claim that the kind of causation involved in the belief cases I present is “right,” and conclude that, in these cases, the evidence is a motivating reason, not a mere cause. The problem, however, is that if this kind of causation gets classified as “right,” there seems to be no good reason to classify the kind of causation found in the non-belief cases I discuss as “wrong.” The kind of causation in operation in these other cases is no more like paradigm cases of deviant causal chains than the kind of causation in operation in the belief cases. Indeed, as I pointed out in the original argument above, the kind of causation involved in the belief cases, and the other cases, seems to be the same in all relevant respects.

Perhaps the objector would say that the belief cases involve the operation of the agent’s rational capacities, whereas the other cases do not.[[15]](#footnote-15) Again, though, the challenge is to say what the difference is between these cases in virtue of which the former should count as involving the rational capacities while the latter do not. As noted above, it does not seem that the belief cases feature greater involvement by the agent.

A different strategy for objecting is to point out that, if we asked the agent why they have the belief in question (e.g. that something is wrong with their friend), it would be natural for them to respond by pointing to the evidence that caused that belief (they noticed a strange tone in their friend’s voice). However, this does not show that the evidence was a motivating reason rather than a mere cause. If I ask why you’re feeling nostalgic, it’d be natural for you to respond by pointing to the cause – the radio played a song that was popular when you were in high school. Or, if I ask why you’re thinking about the house you want to buy, it’d be natural for you to respond by pointing to the scent of lilac bushes (which is reminiscent of the lilacs in your hopeful future home). In both of these cases, what you mention in your response is operating as a mere cause, not a motivating reason.

The objector may reply that we need to distinguish two types of why-questions: one that asks for a justification, and the other that asks for a mere cause. If we make this distinction, and then specify to the agent that we’re asking the former kind of why-question, they will, says the objector, in the case of belief, respond by citing evidence, but they won’t, in the other cases, respond by citing the mere cause. However, we can easily imagine versions of the belief cases in which one would not reply in this way. As pointed out above, it can happen that evidence causes one to have a belief, but one doesn’t take that evidence as providing a good reason, or justification, for the belief in question.

The objector may respond by further clarifying the type of why-question they have in mind: not one that asks for a mere cause, and not one that asks for a *good* justification, but rather, one that simply asks for the reason for which the agent believes – for the agent’s motivating reason. The objector would then claim that, in response to *this* why-question, the agent would, in the belief cases, respond by pointing to the evidence; but they would not respond in the other cases by pointing to the mere causes. Again, however, we can easily imagine agents who would not exhibit this asymmetric pattern of responses. (I am one such agent!) The objector might insist that most ordinary people would, but that is just to insist that most ordinary people would have the objector’s view of the cases, rather than mine.

Even were we to suppose that most ordinary people would take the objector’s view of the matter, it wouldn’t follow that they would be right to do so. After all, it is not in general true that if someone thinks that R was a motivating reason for their φ-ing, then R was, in fact, a motivating reason for their φ-ing. So why make that assumption in these cases? If, on careful reflection, we can find nothing else that relevantly distinguishes the belief cases from the other cases, then we should treat them all alike, namely, as all involving mere causation, rather than motivating reasons.

This completes my argument for the claim that, in certain ordinary cases, evidence can serve as a mere cause of (not a motivating reason for) belief. I will now rely on this claim in arguing for the primary claim I aim to establish in this section, namely, that evidence can be used by an agent as a mere means by which to believe (just as an agent can use a tool as a mere means by which to accomplish some task), and that, in some such cases, a practical consideration can be the reason for which one believes.

Consider a case in which there are strong practical considerations in favor of having a particular belief. Suppose, moreover, that the agent has some way of putting themselves in the position of having some evidence that would function, along the lines of the cases discussed above, as a mere cause of (and not a motivating reason for) the belief in question. On the basis of the practical considerations in favor of belief, they decide to use this mechanism as a means by which to believe. If all goes to plan, they will end up with the belief they desire. Moreover, says the pragmatist, in cases of this kind it is the practical considerations in favor of belief that constitute the motivating reasons for belief. The evidentialist will not be able to argue against this claim in the way they did previously, by holding that the real motivating reason was the evidence that most directly caused the belief, because it is built into the specification of the case that this is not so.

More concretely, consider the Pascal’s wager case discussed above. Imagine an agent who is convinced by Pascal’s argument that the practical considerations on balance favor believing. They decide, on this basis, to believe. They know that if they take certain actions—like joining a particular community of people, or attending certain events, or reading certain books—they will acquire evidence for God’s existence that will function as a mere cause (not a motivating reason) in bringing about belief in God. For example, perhaps they will have a religious experience that will, automatically and involuntarily, with no conscious deliberation or any other significant form of involvement by the agent, trigger belief. They can then use this as a mere means by which to bring about the belief they desire. Here, the motivating reasons for their belief are practical.

Supposing the evidentialist has agreed that it is possible for evidence to function as a mere cause of belief, what options do they have left for resisting the pragmatist’s claim that, in cases like this, practical considerations are motivating reasons for belief?

They might claim that in these cases there are no motivating reasons for the belief at all. But this view comes with a high cost: it is hard to square with commonsense views about motivating reasons in certain non-doxastic cases. Consider, for example, the cases discussed above of breaking the window, or slowing down when you see the police car. In these cases we are happy to say that the reasons for which the agent breaks the window, or slows down, are practical. We are happy to say this even though the way in which the agent did these things was to put in motion a multi-stage causal process that ultimately brought about the desired result. If so, then it would be unmotivated to deny, in the structurally analogous Pascal’s wager case just described—in which the practical considerations operate similarly indirectly, via intermediate factors, such as evidence, which are not, in this case, themselves motivating reasons—that these practical considerations were the motivating reasons for believing in God.

Might the evidentialist reject the commonsense verdicts about these non-doxastic cases? This would involve saying that practical considerations were *not* motivating reasons for slowing down, or breaking the window, and that, indeed, the agent had no motivating reasons for doing these things at all. It seems the evidentialist would be forced to say that, in general, we do not have motivating reasons for anything we do indirectly. It is worth noting that several prominent evidentialists, at least, have not wanted to say this. For example, both Thomas Kelly (2002) and Pamela Hieronymi (2009), in the course of defending their anti-pragmatist views, explicitly reject the idea that one can have motivating reasons only for actions that are performed directly, and embrace the commonsense idea that practical considerations can be motivating reasons for non-basic actions (such as breaking the window or slowing down).[[16]](#footnote-16) Presumably these evidentialists, at least, would agree that it is a significant cost of the evidentialist strategy we have been considering that it forces them to reject this natural position.

A different way the evidentialist might respond is by presenting the pragmatist with a dilemma. Suppose, on the one hand, that when you acquire the evidence intended to cause a particular belief, you have not forgotten the causal history of how you came to have that evidence. That is, you remember that practical considerations in favor of so believing lead you to put yourself in a position of receiving that evidence. If so, then, says the evidentialist, the evidence will be unable to cause the belief in question. Your memory of how you came to have it will prevent it from doing so. Suppose, on the other hand, that by the time you receive the evidence, you have forgotten about the practical considerations that lead you to acquire it. If so, then, claims the evidentialist, these practical considerations can’t be the motivating reasons for your belief.

I will challenge the evidentialist’s claims about both horns of this dilemma. First, suppose you do not forget about the role played by practical considerations in your coming to have the evidence. Of course, it is possible that in some cases this might interfere with your coming to have the belief. However, I see no reason why this *has* to be so. After all, as the literature on irrelevant influences on belief has shown, there is no barrier to having a belief while being fully aware that a factor irrelevant to the truth of the proposition believed played a crucial causal role in your coming to have the belief.[[17]](#footnote-17) Most of us are in this situation with respect to many of our beliefs (especially religious, political, and philosophical beliefs).

For example, you may know that you chose grad school A over B because the former offered you more fellowship money. Moreover, you may know that, had you attended grad school B, you would have become a utilitarian, rather than a Kantian. You can know all this even while becoming, and remaining, a firm Kantian. You’ll simply regard yourself as lucky to have ended up in a PhD program that fosters true beliefs about morality. It is possible to acquire and retain certain beliefs, and regard them as true, even though you recognize that they were caused by a procedure not generally reliable at producing true beliefs (namely, attending whichever grad school offers you the most fellowship money, and then coming to have the beliefs fostered by that environment).

Similarly, I see no reason why remembering the role played by practical considerations in the causation of evidence would *have* to prevent that evidence from then causing belief. For example, we can imagine a religious experience so powerful that it would immediately compel belief, even in someone who knew they were caused to have this experience via a process they put into motion for the purpose of ending up with that belief. After having the experience, and acquiring the belief, their new outlook would simply be that they were lucky to have arrived at the truth via a procedure that is not generally reliable at producing true beliefs (namely, deciding to influence your beliefs on the basis of practical considerations).

However, just for the sake of argument, let’s suppose that I am wrong about this. Let’s suppose, as the defender of this evidentialist response maintains, that evidence caused by practical considerations can successfully cause belief only if the agent forgets that the evidence was caused in this way. This puts us on the second horn of the evidentialist’s dilemma. Is the evidentialist right that if, by the time one comes to φ, one has forgotten all about a certain consideration, then that consideration cannot be the motivating reason for their φ-ing?

I will now argue that the answer is *no*. Consider the following scenario. Suppose you come home from work one day stressed out and exhausted. You know that the only way for you to relax is to listen to a particular music album. This music is so absorbing that, as soon as you start listening to it, you forget many things, including whatever considerations led you to decide to listen to it in the first place. Nonetheless, it is clear that the motivating reason for your listening (which you bring about by means of pressing various buttons) is that doing so will help you relax. This is true even though by the time you are listening, you have forgotten all about this motivating reason. Similarly, says the pragmatist, even if the belief-causing procedure is such that, by the time you come to believe, you have forgotten all about the considerations that led you to put it in motion, it can still be true that these practical considerations in favor of believing are the motivating reason for your belief. Whether something is, in fact, the motivating reason for your φ-ing is one question; whether you remember that it was is another matter. The two can come apart.

The evidentialist might respond by proposing that, although the practical consideration is, in this case, one’s motivating reason for *forming* the belief, it is not one’s motivating reason for *sustaining* that belief.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In considering this suggestion, it will be helpful to first look at a slightly revised and elaborated version of the music case. Suppose that, once the music starts, it will play for an hour, and that this is the length of time needed for the calming effect. (A shorter duration would not suffice.) The agent knows this when they are deliberating about whether or not to listen to the music. When they decide to listen to music because doing so will calm them down, what they are deciding to do – the option they are deciding in favor of – is *to listen to music for an hour* (and not to merely start listening to music). Suppose, moreover, that there is a 5 minute time lag between when one presses the button and when the music starts playing, and during that 5 minutes one undergoes amnesia that makes one forget the practical considerations in favor of listening to music. Here I don’t think there is any temptation to say that the practical consideration was the agent’s motivating reason for starting, or beginning, to listen to music, but not their motivating reason for continuing to listen to music. Rather, the practical consideration was their motivating reason for *listening to music for an hour*. This is so even though the agent has forgotten this reason before the music even starts playing.

It may be helpful to imagine what the agent would say if they were to have their memory restored later on. Suppose the amnesia is temporary, and the next day they remember the full story of how they came to listen to music. When a friend asks them what they were doing last night, they reply, “I was listening to music.” Suppose the friend continues, “What was your reason for doing that?” It would be natural to reply: “Well, listening to this particular music for an hour always calms me down, and I was really stressed out after work.” Here I think we’d be happy to say that the agent has, in retrospect, correctly identified their motivating reason for listening to music for an hour, even though, while they were doing so, they didn’t remember that this was their motivating reason.

At this point, the evidentialist may propose that the practical consideration was not their motivating reason for *listening to music for an hour*, but rather their motivating reason for *deciding to listen to music for an hour*. As we saw above, though, this kind of view comes with a high cost. In general we do think we have motivating reasons not (or not merely) for deciding to do things, but for actually doing things. (As described above, several prominent evidentialists have explicitly said this in print, in the course of defending their evidentialism.) When, in deliberation, we consider reasons, we consider them as reasons for or against actually doing something (like living in the country, or wearing a raincoat, or listening to music), not as reasons for or against *deciding* to do that thing. Often the reasons we consider don’t look like reasons for *deciding* at all. It’s actually listening to music for an hour that would calm me down, not merely deciding to do so. (Someone who decided to listen to music but then didn’t do it would not experience the calming effects.) So when this consideration leads one to actually listen to music for an hour, it seems right to say that it was operating as their motivating reason for doing that very thing – listening to music for an hour.

If this is the right thing to say about this music case, then we should give an analogous treatment of the belief case in which we forget the practical considerations before we come to believe. Suppose, then, that you know you will forget about the practical considerations in favor of belief before you even start believing. And suppose you know that what the evidence will cause you to do is *believe for some considerable period of time* (not merely to form the belief initially)—and, that you will gain the benefits of belief only if you have the belief for a considerable period of time (merely forming the belief is not enough). If so, then what we should say about this case is perfectly analogous to what we said about the music case: the practical consideration in favor of believing P for a considerable period of time was your motivating reason for *believing P for a considerable period of time*. It would not be right to say that the practical consideration was your motivating reason for forming, but not sustaining, the belief.

This concludes my defense of the pragmatist against the second evidentialist reply. It is worth pointing out that, even if the reader disagrees with my claims about one horn of the evidentialist dilemma, as long as they agree with me that the evidentialist is mistaken about the other horn, that will be enough to undermine this second evidentialist reply.

This also concludes my defense of the main claim of this section: that there are some cases in which practical considerations in favor of believing act as genuine motivating reasons for believing, even though evidence was the most direct cause of belief, because this evidence was used as a mere means by which to believe: it was a mere cause of belief, not a reason for which you believe.

**3. Evidence as an enabling condition**

In the previous section I drew attention to cases in which evidence causes belief immediately and involuntarily, with little involvement by the agent. In this section I’ll describe cases in which evidence plays a very different role: it makes it possible for the agent to choose whether or not to believe—a choice they can then make for other reasons, such as the practical advantages (or disadvantages) of the belief. In such cases, without the evidence belief would be impossible. The agent would simply be unable to believe, and would have no choice in the matter. What the evidence does is bring belief under the agent’s voluntary control. It makes it possible for them to choose whether or not to believe. When evidence functions in this way, I’ll say that it acts as an enabling condition. I will maintain that there are cases in which evidence acts as in this way, and that they illustrate another way in which practical considerations can serve as motivating reasons for belief.[[19]](#footnote-19)

I’ll begin by describing a non-doxastic case which illustrates the general idea of an enabling condition. Suppose you have recently learned of the many health benefits of consuming a tablespoon of cod liver oil every day. You would like to start doing so for the sake of your health. However, you face a problem. You find cod liver oil disgusting—so much so that drinking it is, for you, simply impossible. (Perhaps you can’t even attempt to do so without vomiting.) Luckily, you discover that if you mix it with a cup of orange juice, both the smell and the taste are masked. This makes it possible for you to drink it. It’s not delicious, and you could easily decide not to drink it. But now you have a choice in the matter, whereas before you didn’t. You can now act on your knowledge of the health benefits of cod liver oil, and choose to drink it for that reason—in which case the health benefits function as a motivating reason. This is compatible with the observation that adding orange juice was causally necessary for you to drink it. The presence of orange juice plays the role of an enabling condition, which leaves room for something else to act as a motivating reason.

I’ll now describe three cases involving belief, and invite you to share the judgment that, in these cases, evidence acts as an enabling condition, and practical considerations serve as motivating reasons for belief.

First, imagine someone for whom there are significant practical advantages to believing in God. Doing so would give meaning to their life, say, or would improve their relations with their family. As it stands, though, they can’t see even a shred of evidence in favor of God’s existence, and this, let us suppose, presents an insuperable barrier to belief. Then, however, they start to encounter a number of different people who claim to have had various religious experiences. As they hear one such narrative after another, belief becomes a genuine possibility.

Now, it’s not, as in the previous section, that this evidence just immediately triggers belief, in the way an experience can trigger a mood, or one thought can trigger an associated thought. Rather, in this case the agent has a choice in the matter. If they didn’t regard the practical considerations as overall in favor of belief, and so didn’t want to believe, they could choose not to. It would be perfectly possible for them to maintain a skeptical attitude and resist belief, even while hearing these narratives of religious experience. But it is also possible for them to decide—on the basis of the practical considerations in favor of doing so—to go ahead and believe that these narratives are true and that God really does exist. If so, then these practical considerations function as motivating reasons for belief.

Here is the second case. Suppose you are about to compete in a race. You learn—rather to your surprise—that the people competing this year are exactly the same as the people you competed against in this same race two years ago, when you won. We can, I claim, imagine a possible agent for whom this information would serve as an enabling condition for the belief that they’ll win again this year. If they didn’t have it—if they had no idea who they would be competing against—they wouldn’t be able to believe they’d win, even if they wanted to. With it, though, they can choose whether or not to believe, and they can make this choice on the basis of practical considerations.

For example, suppose they’re the sort of person whose performance is enhanced by the belief that they’ll win. Such a belief fills them with confidence and enables them to perform in peak condition. If so, then they may, for this very reason, decide to believe that they’ll win. Suppose, on the other hand, that they’re the sort of person who will perform best if they don’t have a belief either way about whether they’ll win. Uncertainty about their success is what they need to spur them to try their hardest. If so, then, for this very reason, they may choose not to believe that they’ll win, even though they still know that they’ll be competing against the very same people that they beat two years ago. In short, we can see how someone could, in the presence of this information about their competitors, choose to have whichever doxastic state—belief, or lack thereof—would best enhance their performance. These practical considerations would then be the reasons for which they believe.

Here is the third case. Suppose you have a friend who promised you a week ago that they would quit smoking for good. Today, though, you saw them at a store buying cigarettes. When you confront them, they tell you that the cigarettes were for their uncle, not themselves. Once again, I claim, we can imagine a possible version of this case in which you have a choice about whether or not to believe what they say, and in which you can make this choice on the basis of moral or prudential considerations. For example, it may be that this friendship is of vital importance to both of you—indeed, that it is necessary for both of your continued mental health. Moreover, the friendship would be jeopardized by your failure to believe what your friend told you. If so, then you may decide, for these reasons, to believe them. Alternatively, suppose you know that the friendship could withstand doubt on your part. Moreover, your friend’s smoking habit is completely destroying their health. It is vital that they succeed in quitting, they’ll do so only if you get very serious with them about it any time they slip. If this is the situation, then you may decide to remain uncertain about whether those cigarettes really were for their uncle. For the sake of your friend’s health, you cultivate your doubts, so that you will be vigilant enough to help keep them on the straight and narrow.

In the previous section I presented one way in which practical considerations can be motivating reasons for belief, even though evidence plays a crucial causal role in the formation of belief. The three cases just presented illustrate a different way in which this can be so. Evidence can play an enabling role, making it possible for the agent to choose whether or not to belief. They can make this choice for other reasons—such as moral or prudential considerations—which then serve as motivating reasons for belief.

**4. Conclusion**

Practical considerations, I have maintained, can be motivating reasons for belief, even if evidence plays a crucial causal role in bringing about belief. The agent can use evidence as a mere means by which to believe, just as we use tools as mere means by which to perform tasks which we are motivated to do by practical considerations. Evidence can also play an enabling role, making it possible for us to choose whether or not to believe—a choice we can then make for practical reasons.[[20]](#footnote-20)

These arguments move the debate between the evidentialist and the pragmatist into new territory. It is no longer enough for the evidentialist to insist that belief is impossible in the absence of evidential considerations in its favor. Even if they are right about this, the outcome of their debate with the pragmatist will remain unsettled – it will depend on how they respond to the new pragmatist strategy presented here.

In the introduction I made a simple observation that seemed to support the evidentialist’s claim that practical considerations cannot motivate belief: offering you money is not sufficient to bring you to believe that the number of stars is odd. How should we think about this case in light of the arguments made in this paper?

We should think of it as like a case in which you want to slow down to avoid getting a ticket, but your brakes are not functioning; or like a case in which you want to drink cod liver oil for the health benefits, but you don’t have any orange juice to mix it with. In other words, we should think of it as like any other case in which there are practical considerations in favor of φ-ing, and you want to φ for these reasons, but you lack the means necessary for doing so. There are different things we might say about such cases, and the pragmatist can remain neutral between them. One might say that the practical considerations still provide the agent with genuine normative reasons for slowing down, or drinking the cod liver oil, even though, under the circumstances, the agent is unable to actually slow down, or drink the oil, for these reasons. If so, then the pragmatist will say the same thing about the belief case: the practical considerations do provide the agent with genuine normative reasons to believe that the number of stars is odd, even though, under the circumstances, the agent is unable to actually believe this for these reasons.

Alternatively, one might say that the fact that one lacks the means by which to slow down, or the means by which to drink cod liver oil, means that the practical considerations cannot function as genuine normative reasons for doing so. If so, then the pragmatist will say the same thing about the belief case.

Whichever way one goes, the important thing is that when one *does* have the means—when one has functioning brakes, or orange juice—we do not hesitate to say that the practical considerations provide good normative reasons. Similarly, says the pragmatist, whatever we say about cases in which we lack the means by which to believe, when we do have the means—for example, when one has a way to acquire evidence that would function as a mere cause of belief, or when one has evidence that enables them to choose whether to believe—practical considerations constitute genuine normative reasons for believing. And that is all they need to establish in order to maintain, against the evidentialist, that non-evidential considerations can be normative reasons for belief.

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1. Pragmatists include (among many others) Richard Foley (1987), Gilbert Harman (1999), William James (1979), Berislav Marusic (2015), Miriam McCormick (2015), David Papineau (2013), Robert Pasnau (2015), Andrew Reisner (2009), Susanna Rinard (2017), and Stephen Stich (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Evidentialists include (among many others) William Clifford (1999), Thomas Kelly (2002), Derek Parfit (2011), Nishi Shah (2006), Jonathan Way (2016), and Allen Wood (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Here, evidence should be taken broadly, as including, for example, a priori considerations, and, in general, any consideration that is indicative of truth. Also, note that the evidentialist could hold that there are some propositions (such as simple logical or conceptual truths) for which we lack evidence, but which we are justified in believing nonetheless. Finally, note that “evidentialism” is sometimes used to name a different thesis—one that concerns only *epistemic* justification, and is therefore compatible with pragmatism as defined here. (See, for example, Conee and Feldman 2004.) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to emphasize this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The following sentences all express motivating reasons: “People live different lives for different reasons;” “Ralph holds his belief for good reasons;” and “I am a vegetarian for the following reasons: it’s morally right, and it’s good for my health.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Some might hold that the motivating reason and the explanatory reason, although closely related, are strictly speaking different: the motivating reason is *that giving to charity would make him appear generous*, while the explanatory reason is *that Sam believes that giving to charity would make him appear generous*. I don’t take a stand on whether or not they are identical, or just closely related in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In this paper, “R motivated S to φ” is equivalent to “R was a motivating reason for S’s φ-ing.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Different ways of precisifying this “could” claim will result in different internalisms. These differences do not matter for the arguments given here. Internalism is discussed in (among many others) Williams (1979), Raz (2011, 28) and Setiya and Paakkunainen (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There are many different evidentialists, and many different arguments given for evidentialism and against pragmatism. Some evidentialists will agree with the pragmatist that practical considerations can function as motivating reasons for belief, and will appeal to different considerations in arguing for their view. Nothing said here is intended to persuade such evidentialists. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here and henceforth, by “non-evidential considerations” I mean considerations that neither are, nor are taken by the agent to be, evidence in favor of the proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Different evidentialists will disagree about whether this impossibility is conceptual (and hence metaphysically necessary) or psychological (and hence metaphysically contingent). Against the evidentialist who takes the impossibility to be merely a contingent feature of human psychology, the pragmatist may try to argue that it is enough if a consideration could serve as a motivating reason for some metaphysically possible creature—if so, they might say, it can constitute a normative reason even for creatures like us. However, this is not the strategy I will pursue on behalf of the pragmatist. The strategy I will pursue in this paper could potentially persuade an evidentialist who requires that a normative reason for creatures like us be able to serve as a motivating reason for creatures like us. The strategy could also potentially persuade an evidentialist who views the impossibility as a metaphysical necessity. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Another pragmatist strategy, but one that I will not pursue here, would be to argue that even if the evidence is a motivating reason for belief, that does not prevent the practical considerations which caused the agent to expose themselves to evidence from also constituting motivating reasons for that belief. In short, the pragmatist could argue that there can be multiple motivating reasons at different locations in the causal history. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The arguments given in this paper do not rely on any specific assumptions about exactly which sorts of entities fall into the categories “means by which,” “reason,” “evidence,” etc. For example, is a means by which one φ’s an activity, an object, an action, a state, a fact, or something else? It is sometimes natural to talk one way and sometimes another, and I will do so freely in the text, but nothing important hangs on these details. Similarly, although for ease of exposition I sometimes talk one way rather than another, the arguments do not rely on any assumptions about whether evidence, or reasons, are to be identified with facts, propositions, known (or believed) facts (or propositions), mental states, combinations of mental states, or something else. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Pragmatists come in different stripes, and some may wish to deny that evidence, by itself, is ever a motivating reason for belief. But the pragmatist need not rely on any such claim in arguing against the evidentialist. They can make the argument given here without denying what the evidentialist would presumably wish to maintain, namely, that evidence is at least sometimes a motivating reason for belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This proposal was suggested to me by [removed for blind review] in conversation. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For example, Kelly writes, “In general, S’s φ-ing might be based on a reason R even if S cannot φ directly, but can only φ by performing some intervening action which leads to her φ-ing.” (p. 16) Hieronymi writes, “When we say that we cannot believe at will, we do not simply mean that we cannot believe as a basic action. I hope it is clear and uncontroversial enough that *both* basic and non-basic actions are voluntary in whatever sense believing is not: whatever divides believing from raising one’s right hand…also divides believing from…making soup, rearranging the furniture, or traveling by air.” (p. 156) (I assume that Hieronymi also holds that whatever can be done voluntarily (in the relevant sense) can be done for practical reasons.) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See, for example, White 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to discuss this response. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leary (2017) argues that practical considerations can cause one to be more sensitive to evidence than one otherwise would be, and that in such cases they count as motivating reasons for belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It is worth noting that these two lines of argument are independent of each other. If one of them is unsuccessful, that will go no way toward undermining the other. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)