Doxastic Dilemmas and Epistemic Blame

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Abstract. What should we believe when epistemic and practical reasons pull in opposite directions? The traditional view states that there is something that we ought epistemically to believe and something that we ought practically to (cause ourselves to) believe, period. More recent accounts challenge this view, either by arguing that there is something that we ought simpliciter to believe, all epistemic and practical reasons considered (the weighing view), or by denying the normativity of epistemic reasons altogether (epistemic anti-normativism). I argue against both accounts and defend the traditional view. An agent can be blameworthy in doxastic dilemmas for complying with their practical but not their epistemic reasons. This reveals how epistemic reasons are normative: the concept of epistemic blame helps us track epistemic normativity.

1   Introduction

Sometimes there is practical value in adopting a belief that lacks sufficient support by your epistemic reasons. Suppose, for instance, that your friend would be more confident in a job interview if you were to believe that they are the best candidate, even though you have no clue who the other candidates are.[1] You then have a practical reason to *cause* yourself to believe that your friend is the best candidate, at least if you can. Some would argue that you do not merely have a practical reason to *cause* yourself to believe that p, but also a practical reason to *believe* that p. This arguably assumes that beliefs can be based on practical reasons.[2] Here is a pressing issue that arises independently of this assumption. Let's stipulate that believing p is indeed better than not believing p. Your practical reasons could then require you to believe that p, or at least to cause yourself to believe that p, if you can. However, is there then still a normative sense of 'ought'—the *epistemic* sense—in which you *ought not* to believe that p? This question is my focus. My aim is to defend

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[1] See Stroud (2006) on a plea for doxastic partiality. Other cases of this structure include overestimating one's abilities, thereby increasing one's performance (Hazlett 2013: 44–52), discarding statistics about divorce rates (Marušić 2015), and religious and other meaning-making beliefs (McCormick 2015: 52–65).

[2] For the traditional arguments against this assumption, and thus against practical reasons for belief, see Shah (2006) and Hieronymi (2006). For recent defenses of practical reasons for belief, see McCormick (2015; 2019), Rinard (2015; 2019a; 2019b). For replies, see Arpaly (2023), Cohen and Kelly (forthcoming), Schmidt (2022), Vahid (2022).

The traditional verdict about doxastic dilemmas (TV). Even when, practically, you ought to (cause yourself to) believe that p, it might still be that, epistemically, you ought not to believe that p. In these cases, there is no answer to what you ought *simpliciter* to believe.

TV has been the standard position within epistemological theorizing: many authors deemed it essential to retain an epistemic dimension of normativity that is distinct from and largely independent of practical normativity.[3] More recently, TV fell into disrepute. Many epistemologists now think that it isn't the correct analysis of doxastic dilemmas, mainly because it doesn't tell us which 'ought' we ought to follow. Opposition to TV comes from two kinds of views:

The Weighing View (WV). There is an answer to what we ought to believe *simpliciter* in doxastic dilemmas that we can reach by *weighing* or *comparing* epistemic and practical reasons.[4]

Epistemic Anti-Normativism (EA). Epistemic reasons are not genuinely normative reasons: there is no normatively significant epistemic sense of 'ought' that normatively pulls us towards compliance with our epistemic reasons in doxastic dilemmas.[5]

In the present paper, I will argue against both WV and EA, thereby defending TV. I thus understand TV as claiming that both the epistemic and the practical 'ought' have their own distinctive normative significance in doxastic dilemmas (against EA), and that both 'ought's cannot be weighed so as to reach an 'ought' simpliciter (against WV). This is the view I will defend.

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[3] Cf. Heil (1992), Feldman (2000: 680–681), Kelly (2003: 619), Pojman (1993). Evidentialists about reasons for belief commit to TV, arguing that practical reasons are reasons to *cause* belief (or to *desire* a belief, etc.), while the only reasons to *believe* are provided by evidence; see Hieronymi (2006), Kelly (2002), Shah (2006), Skorupski (2010), Way (2016). Recent proponents of TV are Berker (2018), Christensen (2021: 514), and Wedgwood (2017: 41–46).

[4] For prominent defenses, see Reisner (2008), Howard (2020), Meylan (2020).

[5] For proponents, see Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018), Cowie (2019), Grimm (2009), Hazlett (2013), Leary (2017), Maguire and Woods (2020), Mantel (2019), McCormick (2015; 2020), Olson (2018), Papineau (2013), Rinard (2017; 2019a; 2022), Steglich-Petersen (2011), Steglich-Petersen and Skipper (2019). I adopt the label 'anti-normativism' from Kiesewetter (2022), who offers a critical discussion of these views (see also Paakkunainen 2018).

Note that TV is silent about the exact *content* of epistemic norms. It is therefore compatible with a range of views that allow for practical considerations to bear on epistemic normativity.[6] First, it is compatible with pragmatic encroachment—the view that the stakes of error affect how much evidence one needs to epistemically justify a belief (Fantl and McGrath 2009). Second, it is compatible with the views that there are non-evidential epistemic reasons against belief (Schroeder 2021) or for suspending judgment (Lord 2020; Schmidt 2023). Third, TV is even compatible with the view that there are *practical* reasons for belief—as long as one adds that there is, additionally to the practical normativity of belief, a distinctively epistemic kind of doxastic normativity (Feldman 2000). TV is compatible with all these views because it merely implies that there *is* a distinctively epistemic kind of genuine normativity, and moreover that this epistemic normativity is *distinct* from practical normativity in such a way that epistemic reasons and practical reasons can issue conflicting verdicts that cannot be combined into an all-reasons-considered verdict.

Section 2 sets up a challenge for TV: its proponents must provide an account of how deontic agglomeration fails in doxastic dilemmas by spelling out the normative significance of the epistemic 'ought'. I will meet this challenge in sections 3–4 by drawing on the recent literature on epistemic blame: I argue that we can be epistemically blameworthy in doxastic dilemmas even though we were practically required to fail epistemically. This epistemic blameworthiness reveals that a genuinely normative epistemic 'ought' to believe has been violated. Section 5 then argues that if EA fails in this way, then we should also reject WV. I here show that introducing the notion of an 'ought' simpliciter *in addition* to the epistemic 'ought' and the practical 'ought' obscures the normative situation in doxastic dilemmas. Section 6 concludes.

My aim is to further apply the recent debate on epistemic blame to the broader discussion about epistemic normativity. As Jessica Brown notes, the concept of epistemic blameworthiness is central to externalist and internalist epistemologies, and it is employed in "debates concerning the norm for belief, higher-order evidence, peer disagreement, epistemic akrasia, the new evil demon problem and defeat" (Brown 2020a: 389).[7] My approach here is more general. My guiding idea is that thinking about epistemic blame and epistemic accountability can help us understand the distinction between practical and epistemic normativity (see Boult 2021a: 9; Kauppinen 2018;

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[6] See Christensen (2021: 513–515) for a similarly neutral characterization of epistemic normativity.

[7] See Brown's (2020a) footnote 1 for the relevant references.

2023; Schmidt 2024a). By showing how epistemic blame can be appropriate when epistemic and practical normativity clash, I hope to contribute to our understanding of this distinction. I suggest that epistemic normativity is, in a sense, *evaluative*: its function is to keep track of each other's epistemic character, thus allowing us to determine whom to trust and how to relate to one another epistemically. This is nevertheless compatible with the view that epistemic normativity is a *genuine* kind of normativity that presupposes epistemic reasons-responsiveness but not control.[8]

2   Skepticism about the epistemic 'ought'

Let's start by getting clear about the main challenge for TV. Many contemporary epistemologists point out that TV is puzzling. Intuitively, it indeed seems unhelpful to say that we ought, in a sense, to respond to our reasons in such a way that we end up believing that p, and, in another sense, to respond to our reasons in such a way that we end up not believing that p. This intuition against TV is illustrated vividly by Lindsay Crawford in the following passage:

> Suppose that after having been riveted by your recent lecture on Pascal's wager in your Introduction to Philosophy class, your student seeks your professional advice about what she ought to believe. She makes a compelling case that there is good evidence that her roommate dislikes her, but she also makes a compelling case to you that she would be quite a bit better off if she refrained from believing that her roommate dislikes her. So, she asks: "Should I believe my roommate dislikes me, because that's what the evidence suggests? Or should I not believe that she dislikes me, because that would make me feel better?" Having just made the distinction in class between theoretical deliberation about what to believe, and practical deliberation about whether to get yourself to have a belief, you might advise her in the following way: "Well, if you're asking whether you should *believe* that your roommate dislikes you, then yes. That said, you absolutely should do what it takes to *get yourself* not to believe that your roommate dislikes you." (Crawford 2020: 91)[9]

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[8] I'll mention this view towards the end of section 4. I spell it out in more detail in Schmidt (forthcoming).

[9] Note that, in contrast to my original doxastic dilemma in section 1, Crawford's teacher assumes *positive epistemic obligations* to (roughly) believe p if one's evidence for p is sufficient (rather than only prohibitions not to believe p if one lacks sufficient evidence for p). Importantly, all my main arguments can be run with cases in which a belief is merely epistemically prohibited. See Simion (2024) for a defense of positive epistemic obligations.

Crawford goes on to point out that your advice would be impossible to follow, and that the student might well wonder whether it is more important for her to believe that p or rather not to believe that p. After all, having an adequate conception of her roommate's attitude also seems to be important—maybe it motivates the student to address the issue or to look for another place to live. As the case is described, the student 'would be quite a bit better off if she refrained from believing that her roommate dislikes her'. It can seem, given this stipulation, that the student should follow her practical reasons and ignore her epistemic reasons, either because the latter seem to be outweighed by the former (WV), or because epistemic reasons are not by themselves normative reasons, but only when backed up by practical reasons to (make oneself) comply with epistemic reasons (EA). In any case, the distinctive normative significance of the epistemic 'ought' somehow becomes questionable due to the conflicting practical 'ought'.[10]

How does this argument against TV work? I assume that Crawford's case implies that it is, in a relevant sense, *impossible* for the student to comply both with her epistemic reasons *and* with her practical reasons—that is, she will either end up believing that p, thereby complying with her epistemic reasons, or end up not believing that p, thereby complying with her practical reasons. The argument then seems to run as follows:

(1) In doxastic dilemmas, one *cannot* comply with one's epistemic *and* practical reasons.

(2) So, it's not the case that one *ought* to comply with one's epistemic *and* practical reasons.

(3) However, one clearly ought to comply with one's practical reasons.

(4) Thus, it's not the case that one ought to comply with one's epistemic reasons.

Note that (4) doesn't straightforwardly imply WV or EA. To derive one of these views, we need an inference to the best explanation (see Mantel 2019: 216). We might discuss which view is the better explanation of (4). Is the epistemic 'ought' insignificant because the epistemic reasons are

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[10] Related lines of argument have been suggested by other proponents of EA (see footnote 5). The most explicit defenses of EA that appeal to our intuitions about doxastic dilemmas are due to Susanne Mantel (2019) and Susanna Rinard (2019a: 1932–4). Stroud (2006: 518 524) has earlier suggested that conflicts between epistemic norms and other norms, such as the norms of friendship, might call into doubt the normative authority of (traditional) epistemic norms. I focus on Crawford's case because I find it illustrative to bring out the argument's structure.

outweighed by practical reasons? Or because epistemic reasons aren't normative in the first place? Deciding what's the better explanation is a task for my opponents. I'll instead show that the argument already fails at an earlier stage.

Let's clarify the implicit assumptions of the argument. First, the step from (1) to (2) involves a version of 'ought implies can'. I won't take issue with this step here. For I want to argue that there's a distinctively epistemic kind of normativity even if we hold on to the relevant version 'ought implies can'. So it's more advisable for me to take issue with the second step of the argument, which I think involves a more questionable implicit commitment.

In this second step, the argument emphasizes that there is clearly a normatively significant sense of 'ought' in which one ought to comply with one's *practical* reasons in doxastic dilemmas. After all, (a) the student in Crawford's case would be 'quite a bit better off' if she didn't believe that her roommate dislikes her, and we can assume (b) that there are *reasonable means available* to her to bring it about that she doesn't hold that belief—say, by swallowing pill that induces disbelief, or by engaging in reliable strategies of self-deception that don't take up much of her time and energy. This, in turn, makes it difficult to see how there could still be a normatively significant sense in which the student ought to comply with her *epistemic* reasons. What's the point of telling her that, although she should *practically* cause herself not to believe that p, she still ought *epistemically* to believe that p? Intuitively, if you ought to get a specific haircut, you're also permitted to have that haircut. Similarly, if you ought to cause yourself not to hold a belief, then you're permitted to not hold that belief. It cannot be impermissible to be in a state that you should have caused yourself to be in: belief-states are not an exception (Rinard 2017).[11]

Note first that this argument is convincing if we throughout employ the *practical* sense of 'ought': given all the prudential and moral reasons at play in doxastic dilemmas, it's practically better to comply with your practical reasons rather than to comply with your epistemic reasons. However, on this reading of the argument, the conclusion will then merely state that

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[11] Cf. Parfit (2011: 432), who claims that 'ought's to be in states are nothing but 'ought's to bring yourself into the state, or to desire to be in the state. I discuss this reductive view of 'ought's to be in states in Schmidt (2022: 1810–16). Importantly, Parfit rejects the view that 'ought to believe' just functions like 'ought to be in a state', and so rejects Rinard's view that beliefs are not an exception. I ultimately agree: intentional mental states *are* an exception, since they're responsive to reasons. Evaluating them like a non-mental state obscures an important facet of their normativity.

> (4p)   In doxastic dilemmas, it's not the case that you ought *practically* to comply with your epistemic reasons.

Now, (4p) is clearly not in conflict with TV. The proponent of TV can just insist that you still ought *epistemically* to comply with your epistemic reasons in doxastic dilemmas. Indeed, this might allow the proponent of TV to explain the intuitive plausibility of the argument: the argument is *sound* if we consistently read the 'ought' as the practical 'ought', but otherwise it's *not even valid* because it switches between different senses of 'ought' in its premises.

However, the most charitable reading of the argument needn't make use of different senses of 'ought'. Instead, the argument can be understood as drawing on our intuitions about *normative* 'ought's: if there is no genuinely normative sense of 'ought' in which you both ought to comply with your epistemic reasons and your practical reasons, but there *is* some genuinely normative sense of 'ought' in which you ought to comply with your practical reasons, then it's not the case that you ought (again, in any genuinely normative sense of 'ought') to comply with you epistemic reasons. To spell out this argument, we can define this sense of 'ought' the argument employs as the disjunction of all genuinely normative senses of 'ought':

$$\text{ought}_N =_{def} \text{ought}_{Practically} \text{ or } \text{ought}_{Morally} \text{ or } \text{ought}_{Prudentially} \text{ or } \text{ought}_{Simpliciter} \text{ or } \dots$$

Here, 'ought$_N$' functions as a *placeholder* for any 'ought's with genuine normativity. So it doesn't matter for the argument what the correct disjunction of genuinely normative 'ought's turns out to be – whether it includes an 'ought' *simpliciter* that we gain by weighing or comparing epistemic and practical reasons, or whether it includes the moral and prudential 'ought's.[12] Questioning the validity of the argument would be an unconvincing move in the eyes of opponents of TV. So we should instead read the argument along these more charitable lines: as employing 'ought$_N$'.

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[12] It's widely held that you can be *all-things-considered* or *practically* justified not to do what you *morally* or *prudentially* ought to do, and so you might not be *blameworthy* for not doing it. However, even if we tie genuine normativity to blameworthiness, as I propose that we should, we can still say that domain-relative moral and prudential 'ought's are normative: by weighing them, we gain the practical 'ought', and we can clearly be blameworthy for violating this 'ought' (absent excuse or exemption). See Kauppinen (2023: 138–142) for discussion. I assume that practical reasons include normative prudential and moral reasons, and that they can be weighed to derive the overall practical 'ought'.

We then must ask whether the argument's premises are true. Note that there's an implicit premise in the step from (2) and (3) to (4), namely:

Agglomeration. If you ought$_N$ to φ and you ought$_N$ to ψ, then you ought$_N$ to [φ and ψ].

This principle allows us to derive from the claims (2') that it's *not* the case that one ought to [φ and ψ], and (3') that one ought to φ, that (4') it's not the case that one ought to ψ. Or, plugging in the contents of our argument: since it's (2) not the case that one ought to comply with one's epistemic *and* practical reasons, but (3) one ought to comply with one's practical reasons, (4) it's not the case that one ought to comply with one's epistemic reasons. So we need *Agglomeration* to derive (4) from (2) and (3) (cf. Rinard 2019a: 1932–4).

I argue that *Agglomeration* fails in doxastic dilemmas. Explaining why it fails is a challenge for anyone who wants to defend TV while maintaining 'ought implies can': in doxastic dilemmas, even though it's not the case that you ought to [comply with your epistemic reasons and comply with your practical reasons] (due to 'ought implies can'), it's still the case that you ought to comply with each set of reasons separately. The challenge I meet in this paper is to make sense of this *prima facie* puzzling verdict by showing that epistemic and practical 'ought's don't agglomerate.[13]

The dialectic of the rest of the paper is as follows. I first show how the concept of epistemic blame allows us to track epistemic normativity (section 3). I then develop this idea into an argument against Agglomeration and against EA by showing that we can be epistemically blameworthy in doxastic dilemmas (section 4). Next, I argue that, if we reject EA, then we should also reject WV to avoid a dubious third kind of normativity 'simpliciter' (section 5). I return to Crawford's case in conclusion to illustrate how the resulting view makes TV intelligible (section 6).

3   Epistemic blame and the normativity of epistemic reasons

To understand the normative significance of epistemic reasons, it can help to turn to practical reasons—that is, prudential and moral reasons—as paradigm reasons with normative significance. Epistemologists with sympathies for TV might think that if there is a paradigmatic instance of a

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[13] One could stick with *Agglomeration* and TV by denying 'ought implies can', thus blocking the step from (1) to (2). So anyone who wants to preserve a distinctively epistemic normativity must either deny the relevant version(s) of 'ought implies can' that the argument employs, or else deny that epistemic and practical 'ought's agglomerate.

genuinely normative domain, then this is the epistemic domain (see Lord forthcoming). However, my aim here is to find a plausible reply to those who are skeptical about the normativity of epistemic reasons, but who take the normativity of practical reasons for granted. Turning to the practical to make sense of the epistemic thus bears more hope of being dialectically convincing.

When a person violates a demand of morality, we often take certain *blaming responses* to be appropriate towards this person. For instance, when a person pushes you aside 'in contemptuous disregard of [your] existence' (Strawson 1962: 49), it might be appropriate for you to feel resentment towards this person. Bystanders might rightly feel indignant. Furthermore, the person might later in life, after reconsidering their moral values, feel guilty about what they did to you. These blaming responses—resentment, indignation, and guilt—reveal the normative significance we attach to the moral demand that the person has violated. For if a person responded correctly to their moral reasons, then such reactive blaming responses would be inappropriate.

If this is correct, and if epistemic reasons have normative significance in a similar way as practical reasons do, then we would expect there to be *epistemic* blaming responses that we sometimes appropriately show when *epistemic* norms are violated. However, some epistemologists have recently argued that we cannot appropriately blame people for violating *purely* epistemic norms. They consider cases in which we fail to believe something that is sufficiently supported by our evidence, but where our belief would have no further practical significance. Examples include not holding a well-supported belief about the number of grains of sand on a beach, or about phone book entries (Mantel 2019; McCormick 2020; Steglich-Petersen 2011: 23; Rinard 2022: 5). These epistemologists conclude from our blamelessness in these cases that epistemic norms and reasons *lack* normative significance—at least in the absence of some practical reason to pursue the truth. That is, they argue for EA by appealing to the idea of epistemic blameworthiness.

Their arguments have a weak spot. For they don't consider the wide array of blaming responses we show in day-to-day interaction. There might be distinctively *epistemic* blaming responses that are often appropriate when a person violates epistemic norms. These responses might be appropriate even when there aren't any practical reasons for pursuing the truth. It seems that resentment, indignation, and guilt are indeed often inappropriate towards epistemic norm violations. However, distinctively *epistemic* blaming responses could still be appropriate. If so, then these epistemic blaming responses might reflect the normative significance of epistemic norms and reasons—similar to the way in which resentment, indignation, and guilt reflect the normative

significance of moral demands and reasons. The normative significance in the epistemic case will be different since the blaming responses are different. Yet this is just what to expect since we're dealing with different kinds of normativity. Note also that prudential criticism doesn't typically come as resentment or indignation, and yet prudential reasons are normative.

Recent accounts that spell out a distinctively epistemic kind of blame rely on the premise that we can blame each other without showing passionate reactive attitudes (Brown 2020a; 2020b; Boult 2021b; forthcoming; Piovarchy 2021). These accounts fit well with the broadly Scanlonian tradition of thinking about blame (see Hieronymi 2004; Scanlon 2008; Smith 2013), which has motivated further views that acknowledge that blame can come in many shapes and sizes (see, e.g., McKenna 2012; Fricker 2016; Sher 2006). According to these accounts, we might blame a person in a 'cool' way—by ceasing to be friends, or by reducing our trust, or by no longer caring as much about their opinion as we did before. While such relationship modifications can happen without blame—as when people just drift apart—they sometimes happen because one judges the relationship to be impaired by a vice (Schmidt 2024a: 17): if your friend cancels on you because he's dishonest, then that's a reason to blame him; if he just cancels on you because he's depressed, that might also affect your relationship, but it doesn't typically warrant blame.

Applied to the epistemic domain, we might say that when a person fails to believe what they epistemically ought to believe, then we often modify our *epistemic relationship* towards them by not accepting their testimony as readily as we did before, and we might become reluctant to engage in rational discourse or share information with them, since we normatively expect them to comply with epistemic norms (Boult 2021b; Kauppinen 2018; Schmidt 2024a). Furthermore, we might desire that the person had not believed badly, even become angry at them for their epistemic failure, and expect them to acknowledge their fault and to take steps to ensure that it won't happen again (Brown 2020a). This practice might improve our collective flourishing as an epistemic community: upholding the practice of epistemically blaming people who violate epistemic norms, and so blaming them even in cases where the epistemic norm violation was trivial or even practically beneficial, might serve us to reinforce our overall epistemic norm compliance (Piovarchy 2021).

My argument won't rely on any specific account of epistemic blame. I merely assume that blame can take a range of forms that can be broadly classified as 'negatively modifying one's relationship'. Recent accounts of epistemic blame agree that such responses can count as epistemic blame, even though they disagree whether the *nature* of epistemic blame can be captured in terms

of relationship modifications. The idea that blame can be non-passionate or non-emotional has been opposed (Menges 2017; Wallace 1994; 2011; Wolf 2011). So, one could object that there is no such thing as epistemic blame because only emotions like resentment, indignation, or guilt count as blame. The cool epistemic analogues at best count as 'bad epistemic evaluation' (Smartt 2023).[14] However, even if proponents of EA were to deny that *blame* is appropriate in response to purely epistemic norm violations, a form of epistemic *criticism* that is directed at the person is plausibly still appropriate. Although this epistemic criticism wouldn't amount to blame, its existence could still reveal the normative significance of the epistemic 'ought' (see Kauppinen 2018). That is, even if epistemic criticism would not deserve the label 'blame', this wouldn't show that epistemic normativity isn't 'genuine'—instead, the different labels would just indicate the different ways in which epistemic normativity and moral normativity matter for our lives.

For the sake of terminological simplicity, I prefer to stick with the word 'blame'. What is important is that blame differs from harmless evaluative criticism which merely ranks an option according to some standard (e.g., moving the Queen to d5 *is worse than* moving her to g5 according to chess standards). Blame, in my terminology, is a kind of criticism that is *directed at a person* (on personal criticism, see Kiesewetter 2017: chapter 2). Moreover, and partly because of this, blame is often *taken personally*: being called irrational can *sting*, in a similar way as being called immoral can sting, especially when one considers the criticism to be unwarranted.

Sometimes, we blame each other for violating non-normative 'ought's, such as norms of etiquette, or for not playing chess well. So how do we make sure that the existence of certain blaming responses reveals the normativity of the epistemic 'ought'? According to Antti Kauppinen, normatively significant norms are "rules that someone is accountable for conforming to" (Kauppinen 2018: 3). As I would like to put it here, some forms of blame are appropriate *just because* an epistemic norm has been violated. We sometimes *do* blame others for violating non-normative rules of etiquette or norms of good chess playing. But if we do so, then we do so because

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[14] For a reply to Smartt, see Boult (2024b). In this issue, Tricia Magalotti (2024) argues that the 'coolness' of epistemic blame makes it impossible to phenomenally grasp epistemic blameworthiness. While I think that epistemic blame is often cool, I argue elsewhere that blame for rational failure can come with a demand that the blameworthy person genuinely apologizes, and so could involve morally laden emotional responses—e.g., when epistemic mistakes downstream cause harm to others but no subjective moral duty was violated (see Schmidt 2024b; forthcoming: chapter 7). If this is correct, then we *can* often phenomenally grasp blameworthiness or epistemic and other kinds of irrationality.

we think that the person normatively ought to comply with etiquette or chess norms in this context: there might be *moral reasons*, for instance, to comply with etiquette or chess norms in the specific situation. A genuinely normative 'ought', by contrast, need not be backed up by reasons from another domain to give rise to legitimate personal criticism or blame when it's violated. This is what John Broome (2013: 27) means when he says that non-normative 'ought's are at best *derivatively* normative. Note that, since our focus is on instances of doxastic dilemmas in which the person successfully complies with their practical reasons but not with their epistemic reasons, any sense in which the person is blameworthy could only be epistemic: their blameworthiness must arise due to their failure to respond correctly to their epistemic reasons, thus revealing the normative significance of the corresponding epistemic norm.

Focusing on epistemic blameworthiness is helpful *dialectically*: since both opponents and proponents of TV accept some connection between normativity and blameworthiness (or criticizability), the question of whether a subject in doxastic dilemmas can be blameworthy (or criticizable) is a central hinge of the debate around which the debate can progress.[15]

4   Epistemic blameworthiness in doxastic dilemmas

With these clarifications in mind, let's turn to my main argument against EA. Suppose that you comply with your practical reasons in doxastic dilemmas, and you consequently violate an epistemic norm. If there's still a sense in which you're blameworthy, then this must be due to your violation of this epistemic norm – it's the only norm you've violated. Let's start with what I take to be the clearest case of epistemic blameworthiness in a doxastic dilemma:

Dogmatic Dan

Dan gets accepted in his community only if he disregards scientific evidence about p. Given the high social costs, it is practically reasonable for Dan to comply with the pressure within his

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[15] For statements by proponents of TV concerning a connection between criticizability and the normativity of (epistemic) reasons, see, e.g., Boult (forthcoming: ch. 1.4), Kauppinen (2018; forthcoming), Kelly (2003: 628), Kiesewetter (2017: ch. 2), Paakkunainen (2018: 135), and, for some statements by opponents concerning such a connection, see Grimm (2009: 253–5), Mantel (2019: 223), McCormick (2020), Rinard (2022: 7), as well as Maguire and Woods (2020)'s distinction between mere 'operative criticizability' and 'robust criticizability' (the latter is at issue here).

community and to adopt their belief-forming practices. As a result, he ends up having epistem-
ically unjustified beliefs that manifest dogmatism.

I claim that epistemic blame towards Dan can be appropriate, although he ought to have caused himself to be blameworthy: he had decisive practical reasons to allow himself to become a person who holds beliefs that manifest dogmatism. Clearly, dogmatism is the kind of disposition that makes it appropriate to modify one's epistemic relationship with Dan: to reduce one's trust in him, to be reluctant to engage in rational discourse or share information with him, and to desire that he hadn't believed badly. Therefore, the fact that one ought to have caused oneself to violate an epistemic norm isn't always a justification or excuse for violating it. *Some* doxastic dilemmas are cases where the subject causes their own epistemic vice for excellent practical reasons. In these cases, the person is practically required to violate an epistemic norm, but they aren't completely justified nor fully excused: they're still blameworthy in an important sense. Thus, cases of practically required epistemic vice show that the epistemic 'ought' has normative significance.

A worry with this argument is that Dan is blameworthy for his *vice* but not for his individual unjustified beliefs. This objection assumes that Dan is blameworthy *only* for being dogmatic, and not *also* for his unjustified belief. However, we can be blameworthy for the *manifestations* of our vices in our actions and attitudes. Dan can become *less blameworthy* if he, despite his dogmatism, still revises one of his unjustified beliefs in response to epistemic reasons against it.

As an analogy, consider a coward who on occasion doesn't act cowardly although he is confronted with danger. In such a case, the coward makes some extra effort not to let his actions be influenced by his vice of cowardice—say, he resists his impulse to run away. So, even if we grant that he is blameworthy for his cowardice, he seems to be *less blameworthy* if he sometimes manages not to act cowardly. We aren't at the mercy of our vices: it is often up to us whether we allow them to manifest. This implies that we are often blameworthy not only for our vices themselves, but at least *also* for their manifestations in our actions and attitudes.

How could this thought carry over to *epistemic* vices? Clearly, beliefs aren't just passive states, like headaches or tickles. Rather, they are often exercises of our epistemic agency insofar

as they are our responses to our epistemic reasons.[16] Suppose that Dan, despite his dogmatism, still revises one of his unjustified beliefs in response to counterevidence. In this case, Dan is keeping his epistemic vice in shackles. He is *less blameworthy* than if he didn't revise the belief. Thus, Dan's degree of epistemic blameworthiness isn't just a function of his epistemic viciousness. It also depends on whether he revises his epistemically unjustified beliefs in response to epistemic reasons.[17]

We might even wish to say that someone who less frequently acts or believes badly is thereby also *less vicious*: a coward who often controls his cowardice is less of a coward than someone who doesn't; a dogmatic person who often actively revises unjustified beliefs is less dogmatic than someone who doesn't. That is, the fact that they less often act or believe badly (due to their own agency) implies that they are less vicious.[18] When Dan revises an unjustified belief on the basis of counterevidence, he *therein* becomes less dogmatic.

In any case, Dan's blameworthiness partly depends on how often (and how severely) he violates epistemic norms of belief—at least insofar as it is *up to Dan* to revise his beliefs.[19]

Suppose that we ask Dan *why* he has one of his dogmatic beliefs. If his belief isn't severely pathological, but rather responsive to evidence to a sufficient degree, then he is *answerable* for his

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[16] I endorse a very minimal account of epistemic agency according to which beliefs are often *an agent's responses to epistemic reasons* while brute states like headaches aren't. This makes beliefs candidates for things for which we could be *directly* responsible—rather than merely indirectly by managing our beliefs through actions and omissions. See Boyle (2011) and Hieronymi (2006; 2008; 2009) for more substantive accounts of epistemic agency.

[17] Cf. Boult (2024a), who analyses degrees of epistemic criticizability as a function of *epistemic justification* and *agent culpability*. Boult acknowledges that epistemic viciousness factors into how epistemically criticizable a person is, insofar as reduced culpability for a belief—say, when a person's resistance to evidence is partly explained by trauma— also implies reduced epistemic criticizability. Yet epistemic criticizability is also influenced, on Boult's view, by how epistemically unjustified *the belief itself* is.

[18] Plausibly, we can conceive of two equally vicious people where one of them manifests their vice less frequently in their actions or beliefs *because of environmental luck*—just think of the coward who is rarely in danger, or the dogmatic person who is rarely confronted with counterevidence to their beliefs. By adding "due to their own agency" in brackets, I put these cases aside. It's controversial whether environmental luck can make one less blameworthy.

[19] Of course, one might doubt whether beliefs are *in any sense* exercises of agency: that is, one might doubt whether beliefs can count as responses to reasons at all, so that they aren't even directly rationally evaluable, just like brute sensations. I won't engage with such radical doubts here that arguably question the whole enterprise of normative epistemology (see Alston 1988). Such doubts need a separate reply that I develop in Schmidt (forthcoming).

belief (Smith 2005; Hieronymi 2006; 2008). Suppose that he tells you that he was brought up with this belief and always had more important things to do than to reconsider it. If this was the explanation of why he holds his belief, then his practical reasons for *remaining* in this belief-state were decisive: he ought to have behaved in a way so that he remains in the belief-state; for he had no reasonable opportunity to get rid of this belief. In a sense, his belief is non-culpable (Schmidt 2024b). While such non-culpability is a *practical justification* for remaining in the belief-state, it doesn't render him *epistemically* blameless. Rather, Dan's upbringing ingrained a disposition towards holding epistemically unjustified beliefs. We *rightly expect* him to drop these beliefs, and we'll reduce our epistemic trust if he doesn't. That he had decisive practical reasons to stick with the belief neither implies an epistemic *justification* nor a *full excuse* for the belief.

What about cases in which a person holds an epistemically unjustified belief *without* thereby manifesting an epistemic vice? It doesn't matter for my argument whether such a person is blameworthy: what matters is that it's *possible* that (a) the person does the right thing, practically, (b) fails to believe the right thing, epistemically, and (c) is still blameworthy for not believing the right thing. *Dogmatic Dan* shows that there are such cases.

Maybe we might wish to endorse a strong connection between character and blame. According to George Sher, for instance, "the force of many excuses is precisely to imply that the agent did *not* manifest the relevant character flaw" (Sher 2002: 383). While this doesn't imply that one is always excused, and thus never blameworthy, when acting out of character,[20] it at least suggests that appealing to virtue or to a lack of a vice *often* amounts to a good excuse. However, being excused means that one isn't blameworthy but *would* be blameworthy absent excuse. So even if one would often be excused in doxastic dilemmas because one's epistemic failure doesn't always manifest a bad epistemic character in these cases, the epistemic norm violation would still be normatively significant: one *would* be blameworthy absent excuse.[21]

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[20] See Kauppinen (2016) and Sher (2002) on this Humean claim. The absence of vice doesn't always seem to amount to an excuse: *especially* a wise person might be blameworthy for an unjustified belief because she had more control over it than an epistemically vicious person (see McCormick 2015: 93–94; 103–104; cf. also Sher 2002: 385).

[21] The notion of epistemic excuses has mainly played a central role in externalist accounts of epistemic justification (see Littlejohn forthcoming; Williamson forthcoming). However, some recent suggestions are compatible with internalism: Worsnip (2021: 162–164) suggests that epistemic irrationality is excusable in cases of *cognitive overload* (when the amount of evidence cannot be processed) and when one has *practical justification not to revise one's*

Alternatively, one could hold that epistemic mistakes in doxastic dilemmas are never excusable. Instead, they always increase the person's overall degree of epistemic blameworthiness, at least slightly. Whether we should say this will depend on what we should count as an epistemic excuse, and on our specific account of epistemic blame. Yet no matter what we say about these issues, *Dogmatic Dan* already shows that we must reject Agglomeration: although it's not the case that Dan ought to comply with both the epistemic 'ought' *and* the practical 'ought', he is still blameworthy for not complying with the epistemic 'ought'. I conclude from this that both the epistemic 'ought' and the practical 'ought' retain their normative significance even if it's not the case that we ought to comply with both of them. We therefore must reject EA.

One might worry that, according to the proposed view, the epistemic 'ought' is at best *evaluative* rather than genuinely normative (Rinard 2022: 4, 10). According to this objection, our practice of evaluating epistemic agents in terms of their epistemic blameworthiness is just concerned with descriptive facts about how an agent's belief relates to their evidence, and thus only with evaluating how well they respond to evidence in automatically forming beliefs. One might instead wish to reserve the term 'genuine normativity' for norms with the primary function of guiding our voluntarily controlled actions.

I agree that the epistemic domain might not be 'genuinely normative' in this specific sense: epistemic norms might indeed not guide our actions by which we can influence our beliefs. Yet some now argue that epistemic norms govern our distinctively intellectual actions, such as inquiry, reasoning, or assertion.[22] In any case, the sense of 'genuinely normative' I am interested in here applies to domains that give rise to interpersonal criticism or blame when its norms are violated, and thus to domains that matter for how we should relate to one another.[23] In evaluating someone

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credences (say, because the house is burning right now). For reasons given above, I deny that the latter is always an excuse. See Flores and Woodard (2023: 2558, 2561) for similar and further proposals of epistemic excuses.

[22] For an insightful defense of epistemic norms for actions, see Flores and Woodard (2023), who also appeal epistemic criticism in defense of their main claim. See also Boult (forthcoming: chapter 5) on how epistemic blame might imply that some actions, such as assertions, are subject to epistemic norms. For some recent pushback, see Arpaly (2023).

[23] See also Kauppinen (2018; 2023). We could also capture prudence as a genuinely normative domain on my proposal if we accept that in being imprudent, one fails to relate appropriately to oneself. I am here motivated primarily by a use of 'normative' that is central to the debate on the normativity of rationality. Here the idea that irrationality is personally criticizable is taken as a strong indicator for the normativity of rationality (cf. Kauppinen 2019: 3; Kiesewetter 2017: chapter 2; Way 2009: 1). I also regard irrationality as a relational failure (Schmidt forthcoming).

as epistemically (un)trustworthy, for instance, we don't merely evaluate the person as an unreliable indicator of truth. Rather, we judge their epistemic character as displaying an epistemic vice, thereby epistemically blaming the person (see Schmidt 2024a: 16–18). Furthermore, epistemic norms *can* guide our beliefs, even if it turns out that they don't guide our actions: epistemic reasons can *directly motivate* our beliefs, in the sense that we can base our beliefs on epistemic reasons by taking them to normatively favor a belief we hold (see footnote 16; cf. also Kiesewetter 2022). These two criteria—liability to personal criticism and direct motivation—characterize normative reasons. So it wouldn't be an obstacle to genuine epistemic normativity if the epistemic 'ought' was 'merely' evaluative and not action-guiding, but only belief-guiding. Rather, evaluating each other's doxastic states in epistemic terms is essential for figuring out whom to trust and whom to epistemically engage with and how (see Schmidt forthcoming).

5   Against the Weighing View

The previous sections have argued that we can be epistemically blameworthy in doxastic dilemmas. This reveals that epistemic reasons retain their normative significance in doxastic dilemmas: they give rise to a genuinely normative epistemic 'ought'. I will now argue that this conclusion is incompatible with WV. That is, I argue that, as soon as we properly acknowledge the normative significance of epistemic reasons, we should also reject accounts that propose that we can weigh or compare epistemic and practical reasons to determine what we ought to believe *simpliciter*.

Note first that there are two possible readings of WV. On the first reading, the verdict of the *epistemic* reasons isn't normatively significant: only the 'ought' simpliciter, that resulted from our weighing epistemic and practical reasons properly, determines what we ought to believe. That is, if the 'ought' simpliciter goes against the epistemic 'ought', then we cannot be blameworthy for violating the epistemic 'ought'. However, this first reading of WV flies in the face of my argument in section 4. For the epistemic 'ought' has its own distinctive normative significance in doxastic dilemmas: we can be blameworthy merely for violating it, even if there is another 'ought' that pulls us in another direction—such as the practical 'ought', or, for that matter, the 'ought' simpliciter. We should thus reject this first version of WV.

Therefore, the only version of WV that could, *prima facie*, be compatible with the argument in section 4 claims that the epistemic 'ought' *retains* its normative significance: we might end up blameworthy when we fail to comply with the epistemic 'ought', even if we simultaneously

comply with the 'ought' simpliciter. According to this version of WV, there are three normatively significant 'ought's at play in doxastic dilemmas which can happily coexist: epistemic, practical, and simpliciter. Let us call this version of WV the

Tripartite Analysis (TA). In doxastic dilemmas, there is something one ought epistemically to be-
lieve, something one ought practically to (cause oneself to) believe, and something one
ought simpliciter to believe. Each 'ought' has its own distinctive normative significance.

TA is a version of WV because it assumes that the 'ought' simpliciter can be derived by weighing or comparing epistemic and practical reasons. For the sake of argument, I grant the proponent of TA that there might be some plausible mechanism of weighing or comparing epistemic and prac-tical reasons to arrive at an 'ought' simpliciter (see footnote 4 for proposals). My argument will be that, even if there was such a mechanism, we should still be hesitant to introduce a third 'ought' simpliciter alongside the epistemic and the practical 'ought': an 'ought' simpliciter is either super-fluous or it even obscures the normative situation.

I will now present this dilemma for TA. The dilemma has the following two horns:

(a) Either the practical 'ought' and the 'ought' simpliciter always require the same response; then the 'ought' simpliciter is superfluous,
(b) or the practical 'ought' and the 'ought' simpliciter sometimes require different responses; then introducing an 'ought' simpliciter obscures the normative situation.

Consider (a) first. It is unclear what we gain by adding an 'ought' simpliciter that always algins with the practical 'ought'. We've established that the epistemic 'ought' and the practical 'ought' hold normative significance on their own. Given this, an 'ought' simpliciter that never conflicts with the practical 'ought' seems rather superfluous. The view might attempt to express that the practical 'ought' has some kind of *priority* in doxastic dilemmas. I agree that it has priority in the sense that it would be *practically better* to comply with the practical 'ought'. Yet this trivial ob-servation hardly justifies introducing a third normative domain.

If (b) was true, then the 'ought' simpliciter would sometimes go against the practical 'ought'. Christopher Howard (2020: 2234), for instance, argues that we sometimes ought

simpliciter believe what is best supported by epistemic reasons even though it would be practically better not to believe it. In his case, borrowed from Kelly (2002), one gains decisive testimonial evidence about the ending of a movie that will ruin one's cinematic experience. Howard claims that one ought simpliciter to believe what the testimonial evidence supports, because the practical costs of belief are not yet above a certain threshold below which only the epistemic reasons are relevant (see also Reisner 2008). Above this threshold, only the practical reasons matter.

This proposal renders the normative significance of the 'ought' simpliciter dubious. For on Howard's view, one's practical reasons can require one to violate the 'ought' simpliciter. Suppose that you have easy means to cause yourself not to believe the truth about the movie ending (say, swallowing a belief-erasing pill). Given that it is practically better for you not to have a belief about the ending of the movie, you ought practically to cause yourself not to hold this belief. Now, what is the point of saying that you still *ought simpliciter* to hold the belief although you ought practically to cause yourself not to hold it? At best, this emphasizes that you will *fail as an epistemic agent* if you follow your practical reasons instead of your epistemic reasons. But this verdict can be captured just by appealing to the epistemic 'ought'. On the other hand, if you decide *not* to cause yourself not to have the belief about the movie ending, although you could easily do so, then you are plausibly *prudentially* criticizable for failing to do so (you might regret not having taken the pill). Again, no matter how the case turns out, you violate an 'ought' that has normative significance. This normative situation is captured by TV. There is no need for an 'ought' simpliciter.

In reply to this second horn, adherents of TA might argue that there are still cases other than doxastic dilemmas in which we need an 'ought' simpliciter to explain the normative situation. Selim Berker (2018: 443–445) mentions cases in which it is practically equally good to disbelieve p or to suspend judgment about p, while one is epistemically required to disbelieve p (since one's evidence against p is excellent). According to Howard (2020), one ought simpliciter to disbelieve p in these cases, even though one's practical reasons leave it open whether to disbelieve or to suspend judgment: now the epistemic reasons can tip the balance towards disbelief. Contrast this verdict with the view I propose. According to my proposal, all we can say in this case is that practically, it doesn't matter whether you suspend judgment or disbelieve, while epistemically, you should disbelieve. But isn't there a need for an 'ought' simpliciter here?

I do not see why. First, these cases are very specific: the practical reasons for two doxastic options are equally balanced while the epistemic reasons only favor one of these options.

Introducing a third normative domain next to the practical and the epistemic just because of such rare cases seems exaggerated. Second, the proposed view can capture these cases: you fail epistemically if you suspend judgment about p or believe p, and you fail practically if you believe p. Each failure could make you blameworthy absent excuse or exemption. However, you can just easily comply with both the practical and the epistemic 'ought' *by disbelieving p*. So of course, if you want to avoid being blameworthy either practically or epistemically, then you should ensure, just from a plain practical perspective, that you disbelieve. Maybe you do not care about your epistemic norm violation. If so, then either you are epistemically excused, or your not-caring might reveal a flaw in your epistemic character, thus rendering you epistemically blameworthy. Again, there is no need to introduce a domain 'simpliciter' next to the epistemic and the practical domain. For we can give a satisfactory description of the normative situation without it.

Reverse cases are discussed by Jaakko Hirvelä (2023: 1809–1810), who argues that sometimes believing and suspending are epistemically permissible but one *practically* ought to believe. He claims that there's a further sense in which one *ought* to believe what one practically ought to believe, rather than suspend judgment. Again, I think we can fully capture these cases (if they're possible) by saying that one practically ought (to cause oneself) to believe but one would be epistemically permitted to either believe or suspend. Our blaming-responses will vindicate this result.

If we were to introduce a third normative domain simpliciter, we might wonder why this domain should be *more* normatively significant than either the epistemic or the practical domain, given that each of these domains is already significant in its own right: each domain can give rise to blameworthiness when its verdicts are violated, even without normative backup from other domains. The theoretical purpose of introducing a third normatively significant domain that houses the 'ought' *simpliciter* next to the practical and the epistemic domains is dubious.

I conclude that introducing an 'ought' simpliciter that results from weighing epistemic reasons against practical reasons is either superfluous, because its verdict is always identical to the practical 'ought' (the first horn of the dilemma), or it introduces a dubious *third kind of normativity* that is distinct from practical and epistemic normativity (the second horn). Again, the problem with this third kind of normativity is that its purpose is unclear, given that we have already established that both the epistemic and the practical 'ought' each have their own normative significance, which allows us to explain the normative situation in doxastic dilemmas and other cases. In

doxastic dilemmas, no matter what we do, we fail to live up either to epistemic norms or to practical norms, and we can still end up blameworthy for violating each of them.[24]

6   Conclusion

To illustrate the proposed overall account, consider how it applies to the case described by Crawford (see section 2). I agree with Crawford that your advice to the student—that she ought epistemically to believe that her roommate dislikes her but that she ought practically to cause herself not to believe it—seems unhelpful. But this is only because you fail to clarify the normative significance of the epistemic 'ought'. One thing the student could be asking is how she ought *practically* to proceed in deliberately *influencing* her own beliefs. If this is her question, then there is only one answer: "If it is really better to feel good than to have an adequate conception of your roommate's attitude to you (something you might wish to doubt), then you should (make yourself) believe that she does not dislike you, at least if you have some reasonable means to cause that belief." However, this answer does not exhaust everything that can be said about the student's normative situation. You should additionally make the student aware of another question: how would she fare as an epistemic agent if she violates the epistemic norms? That is, you should *add*: "But note that if this is how you proceed with your doxastic life, you violate an epistemic norm, and you might even end up being a wishful thinker, so that others have reason to negatively modify their epistemic relationship towards you: you will affect your standing within your epistemic community." If we clarify this, then we see how the epistemic 'ought' has its distinctive normative significance (against EA), and how there is no point in trying to weigh or compare epistemic reasons with practical reasons to reach an 'ought' simpliciter (against WV).

This also helps us to explain why we *tend to think* that epistemic reasons are irrelevant in doxastic dilemmas: we unwittingly switch from the question of what we ought epistemically to believe to the question of how we ought practically to influence our doxastic life. This is

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[24] A similar view has recently been developed independently by Kauppinen (2023). One important difference to Kauppinen's paper is that the challenge for TV that I spelled out in section 2 is a serious one *even if there aren't any genuine practical reasons for belief, but only practical reasons to manage or influence one's beliefs*: as long as there are cases in which we cannot (in a relevant sense) fulfill both the epistemic and the practical requirement, TV faces a serious challenge, whether or not we allow for genuine practical reasons for belief. I have argued that TV can be defended against this challenge by appealing to the possibility of epistemic blameworthiness in doxastic dilemmas.

understandable because when asking 'What ought we to believe?', our question is ambiguous between 'How ought we to *proceed* with our beliefs by shaping them through our actions?' and 'How are we to be evaluated epistemically if we proceed in one way rather than another?'. Both questions are interesting normative questions, and their answers will sometimes point in opposite directions. I conclude that the proposed view allows us to reject that epistemic and practical 'ought's agglomerate, and thus provides a defense of TV.

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