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**Chapter 8**

**Responsibility for Attitudes, Object-Given Reasons, and Blame**

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1. **Introduction**

Philosophical thought about responsibility is traditionally structured by taking *actions* and their *consequences* as the kinds of things for which we are responsible.[[1]](#endnote-1) This way of thinking about responsibility highlights a difference between two modes of being responsible: direct and indirect responsibility. On the one hand, our actions are exercises of voluntary control, and we perform our actions for reasons. Their causal consequences, on the other hand, are not exercises of control, and they are no things performed for reasons.[[2]](#endnote-2) Our responsibility for consequences originates in our responsibility for actions which cause them.[[3]](#endnote-3) This allows us to say that we are directly responsible for our actions, but only indirectly responsible for their consequences. Whenever we are responsible for a consequence, our responsibility can be *traced back* to our responsibility for prior actions.[[4]](#endnote-4)

If we try to put attitudes within this traditional framework, we are faced with a puzzle. On the one hand, it seems that we lack direct control over our attitudes. In this respect, attitudes behave similarly to mere consequences of our actions. Indeed, it seems undeniable that they are *sometimes* consequences of our actions, and that we thus have, to a certain extent, *indirect* control over them: we can manage our emotions through, say, meditation, and we can form justified beliefs by, for example, proper investigation. Yet it is hard to see what another, *more direct*, kind of control over attitudes is supposed to look like. If we lack direct control over our attitudes, it seems that we should conclude that we are *only* indirectly responsible for our attitudes – in the same way as we are responsible for consequences of our actions.

On the other hand, our attitudes are within the “space of reasons”: they are subject to evaluations to which brute consequences of actions could never be subject to. Attitudes cannot only be evaluated as better or worse to have (as consequences can be evaluated as better or worse). Rather, we think of our attitudes as rational or irrational. In this respect, it seems that our attitudes do not behave like mere consequences of our actions: if I fall from the roof due to my carelessness, my broken leg will be my fault, but my broken leg is not irrational. Given our attitude’s presence in the space of reasons, they seem to be much more like actions themselves rather than their consequences. We are tempted to conclude from this second line of thought that we must be also *directly* responsible for our attitudes (in addition to sometimes being indirectly responsible for them).

Luckily, we need not decide between both lines of thought. We can endorse both. Or so I argue. We can claim that each of them is sound as long as we say that each of them is sound for another face of responsibility for attitudes. To see this, we first need to get a grip on the problem created by the two lines of thought. Understanding the nature of this problem is half the way to its solution. After sketching my assumptions about reasons and rationality in this paper (section 2), I will argue that the problem of responsibility for attitudes is ultimately a problem about *reasons* for attitudes (section 3). Resolving it requires us, first and foremost, to understand the status of the norms of rationality as compared to the status of requirements of prudence and morality. In order to motivate my own approach on understanding this status, I first spell out an argument that calls into question the normative force, and thus the very existence, of reasons for attitudes (section 4). The argument works with a plausible conceptual claim about how reasons and blameworthiness are related. In reply to the argument, I show how we can be held directly responsible for our attitudes, and how this makes the normative force of reasons for attitudes intelligible (section 5). This provides the outlines of a solution to the problem of mental responsibility (section 6).

1. **Rationality and Reasons**

Following the recent defenses by Kiesewetter (2017) and Lord (2018), I assume a reasons-based conception of rationality, rather than a conception of rationality as mental coherence (cf. Broome 2013). To be rational is to respond correctly to one’s overall accessible reasons for an attitude. If it would turn out that rationality cannot be understood as responding correctly to reasons, then my overall argument is not affected. This is because I am interested in the normative force of reasons for attitudes rather than the normative force of attitudinal coherence. If you do not agree with reasons-based conceptions of rationality, you are free to read my use of “rational” as stipulative: it refers to the property of an attitude of being adequately based on the subject’s accessible reasons for this attitude.

To be rational means, according to my terminology, to respond correctly to one’s *object-given reasons* for the attitude.[[5]](#endnote-5) Object-given reasons for an attitude are reasons that indicate (or constitute) facts about the attitude’s object rather than about the attitude itself – facts that support the attitude, or make it rational to have the attitude, by indicating (or constituting) that the attitude (partly) fulfills its constitutive aim. For example, object-given reasons for *beliefs* are (or are provided by) evidence, because evidence indicates the truth of the object of the belief, i.e., the truth of the belief’s propositional content. Scientific reports on climate change are thus object-given reasons for belief: they indicate that human-induced climate change takes place. By contrast, that I feel less existential angst if I do not believe in climate change is a *state-given* reason not to believe in climate change. It is not an object-given reason (i.e., no evidence, or not provided by evidence) against climate-change, because this fact does not indicate that the belief fulfills its constitutive aim of truth.

Analogously, an object-given reason for a *desire* shows the object of the desire to be desirable in some respect; object-given reasons for *fear* indicate the danger of what you fear, and thus make it rational to experience fear;[[6]](#endnote-6) object-given reasons for *intention* are reasons for the object of intention – i.e., the intended action: that I will get poisoned if I drink a toxin is an object-given reason not to intend to drink it (and a reason not to drink it); that I get a lot of money for intending to drink a toxin is a state-given reason to intend to drink it.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In contrast to object-given reasons, state-given reasons indicate (or constitute) facts about the state of the attitude itself. The most important category of state-given reasons under discussion are *practical reasons* for attitudes, i.e., reasons that support the attitude by indicating the attitude’s value.[[8]](#endnote-8) According to those who believe in such practical reasons – i.e., *pragmatists –*, the fact that it would be beneficial to believe in a guarding angel (e.g., because one would sleep better at night) could be a practical reason to believe in a guarding angel (even in the absence of sufficient evidence).[[9]](#endnote-9) Analogously, facts about the value of any other attitude are considered to be reasons for this attitude by pragmatists.

It is often argued that practical reason are no *reasons* for attitudes, but rather mere *considerations* indicating the attitude’s value.[[10]](#endnote-10) They are no reasons because if they were, then we would sometimes be able to form attitudes *for* practical reasons: we could believe, desire, feel, or intend at will. We could just decide not to fear a dangerous tiger or just decide to intend to drink a poisonous liquid merely because we regard fearing or intending to be beneficial. I will assume here that we cannot adopt attitudes at will, and I thus agree that practical reasons are, strictly speaking, no reasons for the attitude they seem to favour.[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. **The Problem**

McCormick helpfully characterizes the conflict between responsibility for belief and the absence of doxastic control as follows:

Attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments in the doxastic realm are puzzling. For much of what we believe is beyond our control; we cannot decide to believe the way we can decide to act. It seems that such lack of control should excuse us from responsibility and judgment. (McCormick 2015: 77)

As McCormick notes, the problem is not restricted to *responsibility* for beliefs. It seems that *deontological attribution* with respect to belief is puzzling in the face of our lack of doxastic control. After all, in some sense it seems to be true that “Ought implies Can.” But how can sentences like “You should not believe this nonsense” or “There is no reason at all to believe this” be true if there is no doxastic control, that is, no “Can”? The very possibility of an ethics of belief, as well as the project of normative or deontological epistemology, seems to become questionable.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Are we dealing with one problem here, or with two? Is there a problem about responsibility on the one hand, *and* a problem about reasons, justification, and rationality, on the other? In this section, I will argue that the problem of mental responsibility is best understood as the problem of reasons for attitudes. Seeing this will allow us to rule out accounts that want to solve the problem by appeal to indirect control, and it will allow us to see the candidate solutions.

* 1. *How we seem to lack mental control*

Let us consider, first, why it seems that we cannot *control* our beliefs. Most of our beliefs seem to be passively caused by our environment. We experience the acquisition of a perceptual belief – like the belief that you are reading this text right now – as something that *happens* to us, rather than something we decide for. You do not stop and reflect upon whether you should acquire this belief after the text is in front of your eyes. Rather, belief comes immediately with perception. The same holds in cases where our perception provides us with ambiguous evidence. In these cases, we *refrain* from judgment quite automatically. To take a classical example (cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, I.32): If a tower seems to be round from distance and I know that I am not close enough for judging the tower’s shape, I cannot just decide to believe whatever strikes me as pleasing to believe. Rather, I refrain from judging quite automatically. If, however, I am close enough to the tower, I will come to believe what shape it really is without any further contribution from me (except for walking towards it).

Even in cases where we reflect about what to believe, there seems to be no place for genuine *doxastic* freedom. Imagine a scientist, Lara, who wants to find out whether a certain substance is water. Lara conducts some experiments, thinks about them, and comes to believe that it is in fact water. It seems that the only activities Lara *did* here were the experiments and her intentional deliberating or reasoning about what is true. Lara did not perform *another* action when she was done with her thinking. She did not have to actively *form a belief*. Rather, her thinking *concluded* in the formation of a belief, but this concluding is not an additional activity she had to perform.

This is confirmed by the following observation. Lara could engage in the experiments she conducts and in her activity of thinking for *practical reasons*: She could decide to engage in them or refrain from doing them depending on whether it was *important* or *of interest* to know the nature of the substance. By contrast, she could not decide to conclude her investigation for such reasons: considerations about whether it would be good, valuable, important, interesting, or useful to believe that the substance in question is water could not guide the formation of her belief when she is done with her previous activities. Rather, she will form the belief based on her evidence that was uncovered by the preceding investigation.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Thus, there is a dilemma for the proponent of doxastic control: Either we form our beliefs spontaneously; or we form them reflectively. Spontaneous belief formation seems to happen quite automatically, and thus there seems to be no room for genuine freedom. However, even when we form our beliefs reflectively, only our reflection, or intentional thinking, is active, but not the formation of our belief that results from it. As Richard Moran points out: “[T]here is no further thing the person *does* in order to acquire the relevant belief once his reasoning has led him to it” (2001: 119). Our rational capacities just work the way they do – we do not exercise direct control over the results of their proper functioning. It seems that it is not *us*, but rather our evidential situation, together with the way our rational capacities function, that determines what we believe in each situation – in which we might happen to be either with or without our contribution (cf. Strawson 2003).

This is a dilemma not only for the proponent of direct *doxastic* control, but for the proponent of direct control *over attitudes* in general. Most of our attitude-forming takes place without us being reflectively aware of it. We spontaneously form not only numerous *beliefs* about our environment, but also other attitudes. We form desires and intentions to make it in time to the meeting, hopes that we will still make it, fears that we won’t, regrets that we did not get up earlier to make it in time, or feelings of anger and resentment directed at the person in the car in front of us who did not drive on when they had green lights. In these cases, we would not even have the time to decide for our attitudes, even if we could. And even if we *have* the time to form our desires, intentions, and emotions reflectively, then we might intentionally engage in the activity of thinking about what is good, right, fearsome, regrettable, or deserving of our anger and blame. But the attitudes that arise from such voluntarily controlled thinking are nothing we choose. Even if we actively think about how to decide, it seems that our resulting intention or decision is nothing that we could ever directly decide for.[[14]](#endnote-14)

* 1. *How lack of voluntary control does not threaten mental responsibility*

How could this lack of control over attitudes pose a problem for our practice of holding each other responsible for our attitudes? It is helpful to state the problem as a conflict of three claims which, when all true, would result in a contradiction. Thus, to resolve the conflict, we have to reject at least one of the three claims.[[15]](#endnote-15) A first try would be to state the problem as follows: (1\*) We are responsible for our attitudes; (2\*) We are responsible for our attitudes only if we can control them; (3\*) We cannot control our attitudes.

The problem with this way of formulating the puzzle is that (3\*) would be obviously false. As mentioned on various points before, we have at least *indirect* control over our mental states: we can meditate, investigate, and actively engage in thought and reasoning. We can also control our mind indirectly by engaging in projects of acquiring, say, true beliefs and other correct attitudes (right intentions, fitting emotions) about Sankt Petersburg by going there and walking through the city. So, this first attempt of formulating the problem does not get at its core.

Given that it is not any control that seems lacking, but *voluntary* control, that is, the kind of *direct* control we have over our actions, we could put (3\*) not in terms of control, but rather in terms of *voluntary* control. Still, this would not get to the core of the problem. Note that our exercises of voluntary control – our actions – are subject to requirements of prudence and morality. If we had voluntary control over beliefs, we could evaluate someone’s beliefs in terms of how beneficial they are to the person who has them, or in terms of how harmful they are to others. Yet we would not be justified in holding people accountable for their *epistemic* failures: we would not be justified in regarding someone as criticizable or blameworthy for their epistemic irrationality, i.e., for someone’s failure to have beliefs that are properly based on their evidence. For we would only be justified to blame or criticize someone for their irrationality if this irrationality is bad either in terms of prudence or morality. Yet it seems that we are sometimes justified to blame or criticize people *for failing to properly base their beliefs on their evidence* rather than for failing to have beliefs that are not harmful for themselves or for others.

One reply is, of course, to just deny that there is such a thing as epistemic blame: we never blame people merely for being epistemically irrational; rather, we blame them for irrationality only if their irrationality is harmful to themselves or to others. We will return to this option of denying the existence of epistemic blame as well as other forms of blame for holding attitudes in section 4. For now, it is sufficient to note that denying the criticizability of irrationality would be highly controversial in the context of contemporary philosophical debates. The claim that irrationality is criticizable can be viewed as a starting intuition for defenses of the normativity of rationality (cf. esp. Kiesewetter 2017, chapter 2). If we are criticizable or blameworthy (in what follows, I will stick with the label “blame” instead of “criticism” for the sake of brevity) for such failures in our rationality, then voluntary control over attitudes would provide an extensionally inadequate explanation of our blameworthiness for irrationality: we would be blameworthy only if our irrationality is prudentially or morally bad.

Note that the kind of responsibility we have for complying to the norms of rationality cannot straightforwardly explained by reference to indirect control. Indirect control does a good job in explaining why we are responsible for phenomena that are not responsive to reasons, and thus cannot be evaluated as rational or irrational, like brute sensations. The question “Why do you feel pain?” can only be answered by giving a causal explanation (“I fell from the roof”). It cannot be answered by giving *justifying reasons* why it would be *rational* to feel pain now. For pain, understood as a mere sensation which can occur at various bodily parts, cannot be rational or irrational. It is because of this difference between mere consequences of our actions and reasons-responsive attitudes that our responsibility for the former (which include some of our sensations, like pain) is exhausted by indirect responsibility, but that our responsibility for attitudes is not – at least not as long as we assume that we are directly responsible for being (ir)rational. If we are directly responsible for being (ir)rational, then there will be cases conceivable in which we lack indirect voluntary control over an attitude, but where we are still responsible for the attitude. For the attitude might be considered as (ir)rational even if we could not exercise indirect control over it. I take this to be an intuitively plausible assumption about the norms of rationality.

Thus, any account that explains mental responsibility in terms of voluntary control must deny that we are directly responsible for being (ir)rational. Otherwise, explaining mental responsibility by reference to *direct* voluntary control would result in an extensionally inadequate account of blameworthiness for attitudes; and explaining it with *indirect* voluntary control would result in an extensionally inadequate account of responsibility for attitudes.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Proponents of explanations of mental responsibility in terms of voluntary control could argue that I misconstrued the nature of rationality. They could adopt a *pragmatist* account of attitudinal rationality: such a pragmatist account claims, roughly, that to have rational attitudes is to have attitudes that are, on balance, prudentially and morally best to have.[[17]](#endnote-17) However, this is just to deny that we are ever held accountable for failures to respond correctly to our *object-given reasons* for attitudes: it is to deny that we are responsible for being (ir)rational in the way I use the term ‘(ir)rational’ (see section 2 above). Intuitively, however, we are sometimes blameworthy for failing to comply with our object-given reasons.

* 1. *How lack of the right kind of mental control threatens mental responsibility*

Since the problem of mental responsibility calls for an explanation (at least *also*) of the kind of responsibility we have for (non-)compliance with the norms of rationality, and since it seems that this responsibility can be made intelligible neither by direct nor by indirect voluntary control, we should now try the following formulation: (1\*\*) We are responsible for (non-)compliance with the norms of rationality; (2\*\*) We can only be responsible for such (non-)compliance if we have *direct non-voluntary* control over our attitudes; (3\*\*) We do not have such direct non-voluntary control.

I think this is a better way to state the problem. Yet we might wonder why (2\*\*) is true as stated. For what is *non-voluntary control* supposed to be? Intuitively, the control we exercise when we act – direct voluntary control – is our only paradigm of direct control, and this is the kind of control that (at least partly) explains why we are responsible for our actions and their consequences. So how could a *non-voluntary* control explain norms? Since it seems that we do not know much about the nature of this control, we also do not see, *prima facie*, how it could do this trick. It thus seems that, intuitively, there is *no* form of control – direct or indirect, voluntary or non-voluntary – that could explain how we are responsible for being (ir)rational.

The norms of rationality are *constitutive standards* for an attitude: the more irrational someone is, the less we can be sure what attitudes the person holds. If someone says that they believe that drinking water from the sink at midnight on a certain date has healing effects, but also believes in the epistemic authority of contemporary physics and thus accepts a naturalistic world-view, then we normally do not only regard the person to be irrational, but we might also come to doubt whether the person has one of the beliefs we ascribe to them. The more inconsistent someone’s set of beliefs is, the more doubtful it is what it is that the person believes. More generally: the more a person violates the norms of rationality, the more doubtful it is what attitudes the person holds.[[18]](#endnote-18)

If we are indeed responsible for complying with these constitutive standards, i.e., the norms of rationality, and if it is not obvious what form of control could explain this, then we have an interesting version of the problem of mental responsibility:

1. We are responsible to the standards of rationality.
2. We can only be responsible to the standards of rationality if there is *some* form of control that could explain why we are responsible to the standards of rationality.
3. There is no form of control that could explain why we are responsible to the standards of rationality.

The plausibility of (1) derives from the intuition that being irrational – failing to respond correctly to one’s object-given reasons – is blameworthy in some sense. This implies that we are responsible for (non-)compliance with the standards of rationality: we are legitimately subject to various reactive attitudes in virtue of our being rational or irrational. As a shorthand formulation, I will say that we are responsible *to the standards of rationality*. The plausibility of (2) derives from the intuition that responsibility requires control, or “Ought implies Can” – a claim that is, in one version or another, accepted also by philosophers concerned with the standards of rationality (cf. Kiesewetter 2017: 28; Wedgwood 2017, chapter 3). I have already motivated the idea that there seems to be no such thing as direct control over our attitudes (in 3.1), and that our familiar paradigm of control – voluntary control (direct or indirect) – cannot do the job of explaining why there is such a thing as responsibility to the standards of rationality (in section 3.2). This motivates (3). In order to resolve our philosophical perturbation caused by the three claims, we need to find reasons for rejecting at least one of them.

Thus, all the premises are intuitively plausible. There are at least two other advantages of understanding the problem of mental responsibility in this way. First, we know better *what it is* that requires an explanation. Merely saying that we need to explain how we can be responsible for our attitudes leaves it unclear what exactly it is that requires an explanation. For it is obvious that we can be said to be sometimes responsible for our attitudes in the same way as we can be said to be sometimes responsible for other consequences of our actions. We are indirectly responsible for our attitudes in this way insofar as we have *indirect control* over our attitudes: we can intentionally reason to beliefs, manage our emotions by meditation, and determine our intentions and decisions by intentionally thinking about what to do. If we understand the problem as merely requiring an explanation of our *responsibility* for attitudes without specifying what *kind* of responsibility we have in mind, then it is unclear why indirect voluntary control does not provide a satisfying explanation. Yet, as I have argued above, it is intuitively unclear how our capacity to indirectly control our mind can explain why we are responsible for (non-)compliance to the norms of rationality. Indirect responsibility for attitudes seems thus not to *exhaust* our responsibility for them. Since we do not see what kind of control could explain the special responsibility to the norms of rationality, we are faced with our problem.

Secondly, stating the problem in this way has a *metaphilosophical* advantage. For it shows us how different debates are relevant for solving the problem. For one, we need to think about the nature of responsibility and control. However, we also need to think about *the nature and the status of the norms of rationality*. Thinking about their status means to think about how we are responsible, and thus sometimes blameworthy, for (non-)compliance with our reasons for attitudes. Getting clear about this kind of responsibility might give us a clue as to what kind of control we are searching for, or about whether this search is futile (because the relevant responsibility might not require control at all). Thus, theorists of responsibility need to think about rationality and reasons, and theorists of rationality and reasons need to think about responsibility.

As long as we do not understand in what sense we are responsible for complying with our reasons for attitudes, and thus in what sense we can be legitimately blamed for irrationality, we do not understand the status of these reasons. To see this more clearly, I will spell out how we might call into question the status of the norms of rationality as norms to which we are held responsible (i.e., how we might question (1)), and how this can give rise to three different approaches to our problem, before I sketch my own solution (denying (2)).

1. **Mental Blame and Reasons for Attitudes**

A promising line of thought for questioning (1) starts off by considering cases of trivial belief (section 4.1): why, one might wonder, should we be blameworthy for whether we form irrational trivial beliefs – i.e., beliefs that have no impact on ourselves or others? I show how we can extend this line of thought to conclude in a denial of the very existence of reasons for attitudes (section 4.2). If there are no such reasons, then there are no norms of rationality to which we could be held responsible. To avoid this position, which I label *nihilism*,[[19]](#endnote-19) we either have to adopt *pragmatism* about reasons for attitudes, i.e., the idea that some reasons for belief are provided by the value of the attitude itself; or we have to make sense of epistemic blame and other forms of mental blame while assuming that reasons for attitudes are merely object-given. I call this last option, which I endorse, *constitutivism*.[[20]](#endnote-20)

* 1. *Denying epistemic blame*

Gilbert Harman (1986: 12) famously points out that the following epistemic requirement would lead to “cluttering one’s mind”:

(ER) One ought to believe everything that is sufficiently supported by one’s evidence.

According to the recent consensus, (ER) is not plausible. To see why, consider that my current belief-stock implies the proposition that [I am sitting in my office *or* the moon is made of cheese *or* Hitler is alive *or* there is no human-induced climate change *or* ...]. There is no doubt that this disjunctive proposition is true right now while I am sitting in my office, no matter how many odd (but meaningful) claims we add. It is true because the first claim, that I am sitting in my office, is true. At the same time, it seems that I do not always believe this disjunctive proposition while I am sitting in my office. Most importantly, I would neither be irrational nor blameworthy (or criticizable) in any sense for *not* believing such disjunctive propositions. It follows that there is no unconditional norm to believe everything that is sufficiently supported by my evidence. This far, contemporary epistemologists agree.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Yet many philosophers want to modify (ER) to a more plausible claim by spelling out under which conditions our evidence requires us to believe a proposition. They thus include *background conditions* for when our *sufficient* *evidence* provides us with *decisive* *reasons* to believe, i.e., conditions under which sufficient evidence makes it the case that we *ought* to believe a proposition. In this vein, Benjamin Kiesewetter (2017: 184–185) responds to Harman’s clutter-objection by proposing that the central requirement of theoretical rationality is to believe what one’s evidence sufficiently supports *if one attends to this evidence*. According to this proposal, if I attend to the fact that I have sufficient evidence for a specific disjunctive proposition, then I would be irrational, and thus criticizable, if I do not come to believe it. Thus, I *ought* to believe it.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Yet we can reasonably wonder whether Kiesewetter’s modification will do. Steglich-Petersen (2011) argues that epistemic reasons are not sufficient *by themselves* to determine what we ought to believe. And this, I take it, is independent of whether one attends to them. I may have strong evidence in favour of *p* to which I attend, and yet it seems that it still might be false that I ought to believe that *p*:

Suppose, for example, that the subject matter is whether there is an even number of dust specks on S’s desk. Let us also suppose that S has excellent evidence, and thus epistemic reason to believe in the sense defined, that there indeed is an even number of dust specks on his desk. In spite of this epistemic reason, it does not seem to be the case that S ought to form the belief that there is an even number of dust specks on his desk. It may be that S as a matter of fact cannot avoid forming that belief, since we are psychologically disposed to form beliefs that are supported by consciously considered evidence. But it is nonetheless not the case that S ought to form that belief. If S failed to form the belief, we wouldn’t fault him or regard him as normatively worse off for that reason (Steglich-Petersen 2011: 23).

One could object that two levels of evaluation get confused here: practical and epistemic. Even if S is not necessarily blameworthy from a practical perspective when he does not believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, he is, according to this objection, still blameworthy *from an epistemic perspective*. However, it is important to see here that certain emotional reactions that are usually conceived of as forms of blame – like resentment or indignation – seem to be inappropriate towards the person in Steglich-Petersen’s example. Why should we *resent* S for believing some utterly unimportant truth nobody cares about? Surely, S should not feel *guilty* about failing to believe it either. Furthermore, it is unclear what, if any, consequences S’s purported epistemic failure should have for future relationships with other people who know about this failure.[[23]](#endnote-23) Being epistemically irrational only *once* does not seem to have any effect on, for example, whether one is a trustworthy source of information as long as this single case of irrationality is an exception.[[24]](#endnote-24) So, in what sense then, is S *blameworthy*?[[25]](#endnote-25)

I will call any form of blame that arises *merely* from the fact that someone fails to properly base one’s doxastic attitudes (belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment) on one’s evidence *epistemic blame*. We can reasonably ask whether there is such a thing as epistemic blame. Until now, it seems that *merely* failing to believe what one’s evidence sufficiently supports does not give rise to epistemic blame. Rather, it seems that it at least has to *matter* in some way that one believes what one’s evidence sufficiently supports in order for such a requirement to be placed on us. Whether it matters, however, seems not itself to be determined by one’s evidence, but rather a matter of *practical* considerations that show it to be important that one believes what one’s evidence sufficiently supports. If we end up blameworthy only in cases with such practical stakes – for example, when we fail to believe in human-induced climate change or have racist beliefs – then there does not seem to be much point in a notion of purely *epistemic* blame.[[26]](#endnote-26)

* 1. *Mental blame and reasons*

Analogously to the doubts about the existence of epistemic blame arising from our consideration of trivial propositions, we can formulate doubts about the existence of *mental* blame. I will call any form of blameworthiness that arises merely from the fact that someone fails to respond correctly to one’s reasons for attitudes *mental blame*. That is, if a subject is blameworthy for their attitude in virtue of the fact that they had indirect control over their attitude, then the resulting blame is *not* mental blame.

Here is the initially plausible argument for a radical claim. As long as being rational does not matter, it seems that we cannot be blameworthy for failing to be rational. Since object-given reasons do not necessarily indicate that having an attitude *matters*, failing to be rational can never, *by itself*, make us blameworthy. This means that there is no such thing as mental blame. However, if there is no such thing as mental blame, then it is hard to see how object-given reasons could have any normative force – it becomes doubtful whether (purported) object-given reasons for attitudes are *reasons* at all. Call the radical conclusion that there are no reasons for attitudes *nihilism about reasons for attitudes*.[[27]](#endnote-27)

One important assumption in the argument is that there are reasons for attitudes only if there is mental blame. We can spell out this assumption as a general condition that a kind of consideration must satisfy in order to be a kind of reason:

*Reasons and Blame (RB).* Considerations of kind K are reasons for or against φ-ing only if we can be blameworthy for φ-ing just in virtue of the fact that φ-ing is (or seems to be)[[28]](#endnote-28) decisively supported by considerations of kind K.

(RB) is a very plausible principle. This is because it is a very *minimal* claim about how reasons and blameworthiness are connected: It must be *possible* to be blameworthy for non-compliance with these (purported) reasons. If it is not possible, a consideration does not deserve its status as a reason for a response. Harman’s clutter-objection from 4.1 would not get any grip on us if we would not assume that failing to comply to an epistemic norm is supposed to make us, at least normally, blameworthy or criticizable (in some sense). If we would not assume this, then we could just accept that by not drawing all the implications from our current beliefs we fail to believe what we ought to believe: we would just constantly violate an epistemic norm, but that would not have any further significance. However, the normative force of this “ought” would then be mysterious: why comply with this norm if no one can hold us legitimately accountable for non-compliance? The norm would at best have the force of the norms of etiquette: we can reasonably ask why we have a reason to comply with the norms of etiquette in a given situation, and there are cases conceivable in which we ought not to comply with them (cf. Kiesewetter 2017: 4).

Epistemologists propose background conditions on epistemic norms, like Kiesewetter’s attending-condition (cf. section 4.1 above), because they want to make sense of the *normative force* of these standards: they want to explain why it *matters* to us whether we comply with the norms, why we can be (at least normally) blamed if we fail to comply with them. The whole project of spelling out a notion of epistemic blame is, I take it, to understand the normative force of evidence: of why it *matters* to comply with epistemic norms.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Note that (RB) is not even controversial for objectivists about the meaning of “ought” and “reasons,” who claim that whether a subject ought to or has reasons to φ depends on the actual circumstances the subject is in rather than on what (apparent) facts about the circumstances are epistemically accessible to the subject. (RB) is plausible to objectivists because, even according to them, it is *possible* to be blameworthy for non-compliance with reasons: namely, in cases in which these reasons *are* accessible to the subject.[[30]](#endnote-30)

If (RB) is as uncontroversial as I present it, how can it support such a radical claim as *nihilism*? It only supports nihilism if we assume that we are *never* blameworthy merely in virtue of the fact that we fail to respond correctly to (what seem to be) decisive reasons for attitudes. If we were never blameworthy, then what we deem to be decisive reasons for attitudes would, assuming (RB), turn out to be no reason after all. They would lack the specific normative force of reasons. However, I have merely presented a case of irrational belief in the last subsection (the dust-speck case) where we do not seem to be blameworthy for our non-compliance with (what seem to be) decisive object-given reasons for this belief (i.e., reasons provided by sufficient evidence to which you attend). How can a *single* case support such a *general* conclusion?

To see how it might support such a conclusion, note how the dust-speck case shares a *general structure* with analogous examples: S does not believe some unimportant proposition *p* even though S has sufficient evidence for *p* (to which S attends). If *all* cases with this general structure imply that S is not blameworthy, then it seems that we are never blameworthy in virtue of the fact that we fail to properly base our beliefs on our evidence. For cases in which the proposition *is* important to know seem, *prima facie*, not to help us to make sense of epistemic blame. In cases where it is morally or prudentially important to believe what is sufficiently supported by the evidence, it might seem that the subject’s blameworthiness is grounded in moral or prudential failure, rather than in failure to base one’s belief on the evidence.

In order to support nihilism about reasons for attitudes more generally, we would need cases for other attitudes that are analogous to the dust-speck case in that we judge an attitude intuitively to be decisively supported by object-given reasons, but where the subject is not blameworthy for failing to comply with these (purported) reasons *and* where it is hard to see how subjects could ever be blameworthy in all structurally analogous cases. My task here is not to spell out these cases, because I will not endorse nihilism, but rather present a viable alternative. I think, however, that a strong case for nihilism can be made by spelling out such cases.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In order to avoid nihilism about reasons for attitudes, we have two options. First, we could endorse *pragmatism about reasons for attitudes*. That is, we could argue that reasons for attitudes are practical reasons, rather than (merely) object-given reasons. If there were practical reasons, then failing to comply with these reasons would matter in a straightforward sense: in not responding to them correctly, we would fail to promote value. Thus, endorsing (RB), together with an argument that we are never blameworthy merely for failing to comply with our object-given reasons, can motivate pragmatism.[[32]](#endnote-32) In the remainder of this paper, I would like to explore how we could avoid nihilism while still regarding reasons for attitudes as purely object-given. My account will provide the material to make it intelligible how we are responsible to the norms of rationality, which I understood as described in section 2, i.e., as non-pragmatic norms to respond correctly to one’s object-given reasons.

1. **Blame and Irrationality**

We can motivate the idea that we are sometimes blameworthy for being irrational by focusing on certain emotions (section 5.1). This will give us a clue towards a general account of mental blame as marking the impairment of relationships (section 5.2). Understanding mental blame will provide a diagnosis and the outlines of a solution to the problem of mental responsibility (section 6).

* 1. *Blame for emotions*

I have motivated the threat from nihilism by thinking about epistemic blame and reasons for belief. I now suggest that we might get a clue about how to avert this threat by thinking about reasons for emotion and how we blame each other for emotional irrationality. This will suggest a general account of mental blameworthiness that is also applicable in the doxastic realm.

Take *admiration* and *love*. You can be blameworthy in some sense if and because you do not *admire* features of the world that are *admirable*, or if and because you do not *love* someone who is *worthy of your love*. Whether you are blameworthy will depend on whether we understand admiration and love as stable dispositions or as occurrent feelings. For we might well imagine a case where I am confronted with something admirable (say, I am standing in front of the ancient pyramids), but where I do not *feel* admiration (say, due to my being stressed out from travelling), and where I am not blameworthy (I am excused due to stress). Yet one might think that I would be blameworthy in some way if I do no not have a disposition to feel admiration for what is admirable under usual circumstances. Similarly, if I do not feel the love for my partner in a specific moment (say, because I am stressed out by them right now), this need not make me blameworthy. Yet if I do not have any disposition to feel love for them, I might plausibly be said to be blameworthy for this lack of love for someone who would deserve it.

We here have some potential counterexamples against the nihilist’s premise that there is no such thing as being blameworthy in virtue of non-compliance with (purported) object-given reasons for an attitude. How might the nihilist respond to these cases?

They could try to deny that we are blameworthy for failing to admire the admirable and love whom is worthy of our love *in virtue of the fact* that we fail to respond correctly to object-given reasons for these emotions. According to this objection, we should give another explanation for the blameworthiness involved in such cases. A nihilist might start out with the following thought: When something is admirable or worthy of our love, this essentially involves *practical considerations* in some way, i.e., considerations that explain why it *matters* to have these emotions. More precisely, they could argue that our intuition that the emotionally irrational are blameworthy arises only because we assume that they could have responded to these practical considerations (rather than to their object-given reasons): what they are blameworthy for is failing to *cultivate* admiration and love – for cultivating admiration and love is something we can do for practical reasons.

In reply, I merely point out that we can very well imagine cases where there was no reasonable opportunity to cultivate admiration and love, and where our intuitions about the criticizability of those who fail to acknowledge admirability and lovability do not fade: there is still something substantially wrong with a person who fails to feel the way we would expect a rational person to feel when it comes to emotions like admiration and love. What exactly is wrong with them will become clearer when I spell out my proposal about the nature of mental blame below.

A worry with the way I motivate the idea of mental blame here is that I focus on specific emotions. One might point out that, even if I am right that we blame one another for certain forms of emotional irrationality, this could at most save the idea that there are reasons for these emotions, but not that there can be reasons for other attitudes. We might conceive of a position that grants that we can be blameworthy for failing to comply with object-given reasons for certain attitudes, but not for others. According to this position, there might be, for example, no epistemic blame: we would never be directly blameworthy for our beliefs merely in virtue of our failure to properly base our belief on our evidence. Rather, we would be blameworthy only if we failed to properly manage our doxastic life.

My objection to this position is that it is odd. It grants that there are reasons for certain emotions. But it denies that there are reasons for other attitudes. However, there seem to be too many structural analogies between reasons for attitudes for such a position to be coherent. The reasons in virtue of which we are blameworthy for emotional irrationality are object-given: they are provided by the constitutive aims of admiration (the admirable) and love (the loveable). Also reasons for belief, desire, and intention are object-given reasons provided by the constitutive aim of the respective attitude. Because of this striking structural analogy, I deem it to be more promising to explore how we can be blameworthy also for violations of epistemic norms and of other norms of rationality, rather than accepting a scattered account of reasons for attitudes according which we can be blameworthy only for some failures of rationality, but not for others.

* 1. *The nature of mental blame*

My suggestion is that in failing to be rational, we often display blameworthy vices.[[33]](#endnote-33) The inability to acknowledge the admirable and lovable is a defect in character that has specific normative consequences for our relationship with others. These normative consequences result from emotional irrationality independently of whether the person could manage their emotion. Why explore the world with someone who cannot admire its admirable features? Why be in a romantic relationship with someone who cannot appreciate you as being worthy of their love? Even though these defects in character do not, by themselves, warrant responses like resentment, indignation, and guilt, they warrant blame insofar as it can be rational not to get involved in specific ways with the people who suffer these defects: certain types of relationships with them would necessarily be impaired.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The key to understanding how we can be responsible to the norms of rationality is, I propose, to acknowledge a broader concept of blame that goes beyond blame as essentially involving such passionate responses as resentment and indignation.[[35]](#endnote-35) If we have a broader concept of blame in mind, then our intuition that responsibility for attitudes requires control will fade, and we are free to deny claim (2) of the problem of mental responsibility.

Angela Smith argues that some reactions rightly deserve the label “blame” without involving passionate components (2013: 32).[[36]](#endnote-36) Especially when blaming loved ones for moral failures, we might do so without hostile emotions. Furthermore, we might mark an impairment in our relationship to someone by “dispassionately ‘unfriending’ someone on one’s Facebook page, for example, or by simply refusing to trust anymore, and these too should qualify as blame” (ibid.). According to such a concept of blame, viewing the relationship to someone as impaired *just is* the blame (Hieronymi 2004).

Thus, here is a sketch of the general account of mental blame I propose.[[37]](#endnote-37) If we come to see a person’s irrational vices, we might reconsider our relationship with them. We might want no longer to be friends with the person. We might cease to promote their personal projects or not take pleasure in their successes when we see that they adopt their aims and choose their means only because they are greedy, weak-willed, cowardly, intemperate, ungenerous, unjust, gullible, or dogmatic. According to Owens, when I am gullible, then “I cannot be trusted to think and feel as I ought” (2000: 124). We might also no longer want to please the person whose viciousness we have discovered, and no longer accept credit from them for our own actions. We might doubt their judgments more generally because of a general sense of distrust we develop towards them. These are all reactions we can only show to fully responsible beings, because we can only have the relationships that are presupposed by these reactions towards fully responsible beings. Neither computer nor children can display such defects in character that give rise to the reactions described above. Furthermore, I take this form of criticism, insofar as it is legitimate, to be grounded (at least partially) in the vicious person’s irrationality. For a fully rational person is not blameworthy.

What could epistemic blame be like according to this general account of mental blame? We should grant that there are cases of epistemic blame, i.e. cases where a subject’s blameworthiness is grounded merely in the fact that they fail to believe what their evidence sufficiently supports (i.e., cases analogous to the dust-speck case). Kauppinen (2018) proposes that epistemic blame is a form of *distrust*. To distrust someone epistemically is, in some way, *more* than just treating them as an unreliable source of information – as we would do with a computer that makes unreliable predictions.

I might epistemically distrust someone insofar as I am not ready to provide them with information because I fear that the person will draw the false conclusions from the information. Consider Tom, who always irrationally suspects other people to conspire against him. If I tell Tom that two of his colleagues recently meet more often for lunch than usual, he might interpret this – irrationally – as evidence that they conspire against him.Tom is not trustworthy epistemically because he is paranoid. His epistemic irrationality is a manifestation of some vice – a defect in his epistemic character. Distrusting Tom is compatible with assuming that he could not have avoided the rational defect he suffers. Yet my distrust is grounded in this defect, and *only* in this defect. I do not want to provide Tom with certain information because I do not trust him that he will understand its implications.

Even though legitimate distrust seems to presuppose that one’s epistemic irrationality is not just an occasional lapse, there is *nothing more* I need to know about Tom than that he regularly fails to properly base his beliefs on his evidence when it comes to certain topics in order to for it to be rational to distrust him epistemically. I can view my epistemic relationship to Tom as impaired in certain respects. Part of this relationship is that we regard each other as trustworthy sources of information, and that we know about each other that we draw the right conclusions from the information we provide each other with. We cannot view our relationship with an unreliable computer as impaired in this way, because we do not have such relationships with computers.

I think Tom is a plausible example of someone who is epistemically blameworthy. We might not *necessarily* be blameworthy for failing to believe what our evidence supports (even if we attend to it). A person is not blameworthy for occasional lapses in their epistemic rationality. Similarly, people are not blameworthy for occasional lapses in their moral conduct (e.g., some lapses due to stress). However, as soon as there is some kind of *pattern* behind these cases of irrationality – if irrationality cannot be excused as an occasional lapse –, we view our relationship to irrational people as impaired in specific ways, e.g., by partly losing our epistemic trust. If irrationality adds up in such a pattern, it begins to *matter* for our relationship to the person, and consequently for our actions related to the person. Yet our blame is not grounded in the fact that the person violated any *practical* requirement. It is grounded in the fact that the person violated (and might violate again) the standards of attitudinal rationality.

The existence of purely epistemic blame is what epistemic instrumentalist accounts *à la* Steglich-Petersen fail to capture when they argue that the normative force of evidence depends on further aims that are promoted by believing what the evidence supports.[[38]](#endnote-38) Being irrational, which includes failing to believe what one’s evidence supports, is sometimes sufficient to make us blameworthy. In this sense, evidence has normative force on its own.

1. **The diagnosis: responsibility and reasons without control**

The problem of mental responsibility *originally* got a grip on us because we assumed that we are responsible only for what we control (cf. section 3.1). We here assumed that the control at issue is *voluntary* control. According to my proposal, having (indirect) voluntary control over an attitude is not a necessary condition for blame if we have the broader concept of blame in mind, and do not think about such responses as indignation, resentment, and guilt. Our mistake was to assume that being blameworthy for our irrationality would require that we are, in some way, in control of our attitudes.

My diagnosis is that we made this assumption because we still thought of blame as involving the passionate emotions that are essential for moral blame, like indignation, etc. It was a mistake to think of blame only in this narrow way. Without justification, we took this narrow concept of blame out of the conceptual space where it is at home – the domain of voluntariness and control – and tried to force it to live in a hostile environment – the domain of reasons and rationality. Yet being subject to the will and under our control is one thing, while being part of the space of reasons is another.[[39]](#endnote-39) Our attitudes are within the space of reasons without always being under our control. Consequently, the way we blame one another for non-compliance with the norms of rationality must also be different from the way we blame one another for violating requirements that presuppose voluntary control: mental blame is not moral blame.

My proposed solution is thus a *hybrid account of mental responsibility*: On the one hand, we are indirectly responsible for our attitudes, and this face of responsibility can make us fitting objects of passionate forms of moral blame for our attitudes. On the other hand, if our attitudes are well-supported by object-given reasons, we are rational, and if they are poorly supported by object-given reasons, we are irrational. These kinds of evaluation do not presuppose control in any substantial sense, and yet they have specific normative consequences for our relationships towards one another that can be rationally marked by forms of blame.

Let us finally return to the two intuitively plausible lines of thought mentioned in my introduction that pulled us towards two seemingly inconsistent accounts of mental responsibility (section 1). We can now say that the first line of thought is plausible if we assume a concept of responsibility that can be understood in terms of the passionate moral blaming-responses, while the second line of thought is plausible if we assume a concept of responsibility that allows for a broader understanding of blame in terms of the impairment of relationships. This solution allows us both to accept that we are, in the narrow sense, responsible for our attitudes as we are responsible for consequences of actions; and that we are, in the broad sense, responsible for anything that is within the space of reasons.

Here is a final objection. Some authors claim that responsibility for attitudes can only be explained by reference to a form of direct, non-voluntary control that we exercise in believing, desiring, feeling, or intending.[[40]](#endnote-40) I have not argued that we do not exercise such control. I even granted that attitudes are responsive to reasons. Why does this not imply that we exercise non-voluntary control in believing, desiring, feeling, or intending? I cannot, so the objection goes, just endorse the idea that being subject to the norms of rationality does not require control. I would have to argue separately that attitudes are not themselves exercises of control.

However, I do not claim that attitudes are not exercises of control in some sense. Rather, I claim *that we need not assume* that they are exercises of control in order to make it *intelligible* how we can be directly responsible for our attitudes. In order to understand how there can be such a thing as direct responsibility to the norms of rationality, we merely need to understand the nature of responsibility for our attitudes in terms of the blaming-responses that are made appropriate by non-compliance with rational norms. Our intuition that responsibility requires control fades as soon as we have the nature of these responses clearly in front of us: they are appropriate merely in virtue of the fact that another person *has* a certain character, no matter how the character came about. We might have to consider concepts of non-voluntary control is in order to solve other problems. But we need not do so in the context of understanding mental responsibility.[[41]](#endnote-41), [[42]](#endnote-42)

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1. First, take one of the central questions of normative ethics: what are the right-making features of an action (e.g., its consequences, motives, or properties of the action itself)? Secondly, take the debate about free will and determinism, where we ask whether we are free with respect to and thus responsible for our actions in a way that is compatible with the causal structure of the universe. Thinking about our responsibility for and control over *attitudes* (instead of actions and their consequences) might well give us a clue as to how to solve this traditional problem (cf. Hieronymi ms; Wagner 2015). However, I will not be concerned with the connection of my claims to these traditional discussions here. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I thus exclude other actions from the consequences of an action. Consequences in my sense are *mere* consequences which are caused by previous actions, but which are not themselves directly controlled. It is important that I include attitudes in the class of potential consequences of actions. I do this by saying that attitudes are no things *performed* for reasons (although one might say that they are *held*, *formed*, or even *done* for reasons). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I do not claim that we are responsible for all the consequences of our actions, of course. The point is rather that if we are responsible for consequences of our actions, then we are so in virtue of the fact that we are responsible for actions which caused them. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Fischer/Tognazzini (2009) on tracing. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Some refer to these reasons as “reasons of the right kind.” However, this label might be confusing because it has its origin in a specific debate about fitting-attitude accounts of value (Gertken/Kiesewetter 2017). It is disputable whether the “state-given”/”object-given” labels are much better. I assume here that, whatever the label, we can make sense of this distinction in some way. See Heuer (2018) for some recent criticism about the distinction when applied to intentions. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Some might prefer not to talk about the “rationality” of an emotion. If you do, then you can call the relevant normative category “appropriateness” or “fittingness.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The reason to drink the toxin in Kavka’s toxin puzzle (1983) is state-given in this sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kolodny (2005: 551) famously pointed out that facts about an attitude’s coherence would be state-given reasons for the attitude. This would be an example of a state-given reason that would be no practical reason. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pragmatists disagree among each other about *when* the value of a belief provides a practical reason for this belief. Moderate pragmatists, like McCormick (2015) argue that it is not a reason for this belief if all our evidence speaks against the existence of guarding angels. More radical pragmatists, like Rinard (2015; 2017), argue that every consideration indicating the value of an attitude is a practical reason for this attitude. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. esp. Shah (2006). This is what evidentialists claim. State-given considerations can of course be evidence and thus epistemic reasons *to believe that a certain mental state M is valuable*. But they are not thereby reasons *for M*, but rather for the belief that M is valuable. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Recent pragmatists dispute that believing at will is necessary for practical reasons for belief (McCormick 2015: 28-29; Reisner 2009: 68-70; Rinard 2015). My target in this paper is not pragmatism. Rather, my aim is to present the outlines of a viable account of mental responsibility without committing to pragmatism. For voices favourable of pragmatism, see the contributions by Crawford (ch. 5), Steglich-Petersen/Skipper (ch. 6), and Lord (ch. 7). See also Coates’ contribution (ch. 10) for a rejection of some worries that the fact that practical reasons are “the wrong kind of reasons” undermines the project of an ethics of mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On how “the deontological conception of epistemic justification” might become questionable, cf. Alston (1988). Owens (2000) views epistemic normativity to be threatened by the absence of doxastic control. More recently, McHugh (2014) has presented the problem as a problem about the very existence of reasons for attitudes. See also Gaultier’s contribution in this volume (ch. 4). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. In line with this, Owens (2003) argues that our aims in forming beliefs cannot interact with our other aims we have as agents. Importantly, the influential critique of Steglich-Petersen (2009) of Owens’ argument is not in conflict with what I say here, for Steglich-Petersen claims that certain activities, which conceptually aim at forming a true belief (like inquiry or reasoning), can interact with our wider aims. A belief-formation in the sense I use this term here cannot do so, as Steglich-Petersen accepts. To accept that a belief-formation (in the non-intentional sense of the term) can interact with our wider aims is to commit to *pragmatism* – a position I cannot discuss in detail here, but which is one of the options of making mental normativity intelligible. Steglich-Petersen now sympathizes with pragmatism (cf. his contribution with Skipper in ch. 6 of this volume). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. esp. Kavka (1983). On how we exercise agency in deciding, cf. Soteriou’s contribution in this volume (ch. 12). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I owe the idea of stating philosophical problems in such a way to Gerhard Ernst, cf. esp. Ernst (2008: 65–71). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Accounts that are affected by the latter problem include Chrisman (2008; 2018; ch. 3 in this volume), Meylan (2013; 2017), and Peels (2017). I do not claim that I have argued here that the problem cannot be met. Rather, given the intuitive significance of the norms of rationality, these accounts face an intuitive problem. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For an account along these lines, cf. Rinard (2015; 2017). More moderate versions of pragmatism, like the one of McCormick (2015) or Reisner (2008; 2009), argue that the rationality of belief is at least sometimes a matter of responding correctly to practical reasons for belief – i.e., reasons that show that state of believing to be valuable in some way (either prudentially or morally). These more moderate versions could still grant that we are sometimes blameworthy merely for being *epistemically* irrational. However, they would then not avoid the assumption that we are directly responsible for being epistemically (ir)rational. Only radical pragmatists (like Rinard) and those who deny any form of direct responsibility (like Meylan and Peels) for attitudes can straightforwardly avoid this assumption. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Saying that certain norms are constitutive for attitudes also means that attitudes can be individuated by reference to the norms by which they are governed. Anscombe (1957, sect. 2) provides such an individuation with her “direction of fit”-distinction between beliefs and desires: “beliefs ought to fit the world,” but this is not true for desires. Rather, we “ought to fit the world to our desires.” The Ought in question here is the Ought of rationality – if one realizes that it is false that p, then it is not rational to, instead of giving up the belief, continue believing it and to rather adjust the world to one’s belief. Also the debate about belief’s “aim of truth,” (Chan 2013) – an aim that must be different from the aim of, for example, intending, but also different from the aim of guessing or suspecting, which arguably also aim at coming to a true guess or a true suspicion in some sense (Owens 2003: 290) – is concerned with the constitutive norms of belief. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. I take the label from Kiesewetter (ms) who mainly discusses (and rejects) the weaker claim that reasons for belief are not *normative* reasons. On recent sympathies with nihilism or the weaker claim, see Papineau (2013), Rinard (2015), Glüer/Wikforss (2018), Maguire/Woods (forthcoming; ms), Mantel (2019); for a critical discussion, see Paakkunainen (2018). Maguire (2018) argues that there are no reasons for affective attitudes. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. I choose this label because, as I mentioned in section 3.3, I take the norms of rationality, which I understand as norms to comply with one’s object-given reasons, to be constitutive norms. See also note 18 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. One might doubt that I do not believe the disjunctive proposition. For if I was asked whether I believe it, and I understand the content of the proposition, I will reply that I do believe it. However, even if one thinks that we believe all those disjunctive propositions, one will agree that we do not believe all the implications of our current belief-stock, like certain mathematical or logical implications that are just too hard to figure out. That we do not believe those implications does not make us blameworthy or criticizable in any sense. Furthermore, we *can* imagine a case where I fail to believe such weird disjunctive propositions. Why on earth, we might ask, should any reasonable person care about this so much as to regard me as blameworthy for not believing them? [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. In a recent paper, Kiesewetter (ms) acknowledges that there is another, probably more difficult, problem for the normativity of epistemic rationality than Harman’s clutter objection. This further problem arises from the question whether we have a *reason to care* about being rational. While Harman’s clutter-objection can be met, according to Kiesewetter, with the attending-condition for requirements of theoretical rationality, this condition cannot explain why we have a reason to care about being epistemically rational. Steglich-Petersen’s dust-speck case, which I present below, might be understood as exactly raising this question of why we should care about being rational. Kiesewetter’s solution to this new problem about reasons to care builds on Wedgwood’s (2017) idea that rationality is a virtue. Since we always have a reason to care about being virtuous, we always have a reason to care about being rational. This fits well with my account of why and how we are blameworthy for failing to comply with our object-given reasons (cf. section 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. I here have in mind Scanlon’s (2008) concept of blame, to which I return in section 5 below. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. It would thus not be appropriate to reduce epistemic trust in the person. Reducing epistemic trust is the essence of epistemic blame, according Antti Kauppinen (2018). I return to this idea at the end of section 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. One could argue that S is blameworthy from a practical perspective if one thinks that believing what is not sufficiently supported by one’s evidence is always *morally* blameworthy (Clifford 1877). However, this is not only highly questionable (Schmidt 2017; Lindner in this volume, ch. 2), it also does not avoid that non-compliance to epistemic reasons does not make you blameworthy. Rather, it would be your non-compliance with moral reasons that makes you blameworthy. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. A lesson one might draw from Harman’s clutter objection is epistemic permissivism: we are permitted to draw conclusions from our belief-stock as soon as they are sufficiently supported by our evidence, but never required to do so. (More generally, permissivism states that our total set of evidence permits more than one set of doxastic attitudes to take towards each (or at least some) proposition(s). The denial of permissivism is often discussed as the *Uniqueness Thesis* (as introduced by Feldman 2007). On epistemic permissivism and some of its problems, cf. White (2005).) if we are permitted to believe only what is sufficiently supported by our evidence, then this implies the following requirement: (ER\*) One ought not [to believe what is not sufficiently supported by one’s evidence.] The normative force of this “ought” is as mysterious as the normative force of the “ought” in (ER) when it comes to trivial propositions. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. I here follow the terminology employed by Kiesewetter (ms). Kiesewetter distinguishes between anti-normativism, which claims that object-given reasons are no *normative* reasons for attitudes, and nihilism, which claims that object-given reasons are no reasons for attitudes at all. The distinction does not matter for my purposes. I think that denying the normative force of reasons is to deny their status as reasons. I agree with Kiesewetter that there is no plausible account of object-given reasons as non-normative reasons for attitudes. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. The reading in brackets is necessary for the nihilist or the (radical) pragmatist when they want to argue that evidence does not provide us with reasons to believe. For according to them, evidence alone never decisively supports a proposition. It merely *seems* as if it does. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Two such recent accounts of epistemic blame which I think are clearly motivated in this way are Brown (2018) and Kauppinen (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. On objectivism and subjectivism, cf. the discussions in Kiesewetter (2017, ch. 8) and Lord (2018, ch. 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. I spell out the case for nihilism in more detail in part II of Schmidt (ms). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. As a response to the problem of mental responsibility, pragmatism can most straightforwardly understood as presenting an alternative account of the rationality of attitudes (in terms of practical reasons rather than object-given reasons), thus endorsing (1) and, most commonly, also (2), but denying (3). However, pragmatists are not *per se* committed to either (2) or (3). My point is merely that pragmatist accounts of reasons for attitudes could motivate, or make more plausible, specific solutions to the problem by being accounts about to what kind of norms we are supposed to be held accountable. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. This is motivated by Wedgwood’s (2017) account of rationality as a virtue as well as Kiesewetter’s (ms) proposal to make our reasons to care about rationality intelligible by acknowledging rationality as a virtue. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. It is important to note that I do not argue for some kind of *elitism* of those who are rational. Saying that relationships with the irrational are impaired does not imply that we are never allowed to enter such relationships, or that we should not enter into other types of relationships with people who are irrational. Arguably, we are all irrational in certain ways. Rather, my claim is much weaker: that someone is irrational is a *pro tanto* reason not enter certain *types* of relationship with the person. The types of relationship will depend on the kind of irrationality at issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Wallace defends this narrow concept of blame when he argues that “it would indeed be strange to suppose that one might blame another person without feeling an attitude of indignation or resentment toward the person, or that one might blame oneself without feeling guilt” (1994: 75). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Here Smith follows especially Scanlon (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. The kind of effect such vices can have on our interpersonal relationships is nicely captured by Scanlon’s (2008) account of blame, which is taken up and refined by Hieronymi (2004; 2019) and Smith (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See esp. sect. 4.1 above. Next to Steglich-Petersen (2011), cf. Steglich-Petersen/Skipper (this volume, ch. 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. This is the central point of Owens (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Cf. esp. Boyle (2013); Hieronymi (2006; 2008; 2014; ms); Smith (2005). For some objections against these views, cf. Chrisman (this volume, ch. 3, sect. 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. One such context might be the problem of understanding how there can be agency in a world that is dominated by natural law – i.e., the traditional problem of free will (cf. Hieronymi ms). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. I am grateful to Dorothee Bleisch, Matthew Chrisman, Gerhard Ernst, Pamela Hieronymi, Christian Kietzmann, Martina Lindner, Steffen Lesle, and Konstantin Weber for comments on previous versions of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)