

Weighing Epistemic and Practical Reasons for Belief

Abstract

This paper is about how epistemic and practical reasons for belief can be compared against each other when they conflict. It provides a model for determining what one ought to believe, all-things-considered, when there are conflicting epistemic and practical reasons. The model is meant to supplement a form of pluralism about doxastic normativity that I call ‘Inclusivism’. According to Inclusivism, both epistemic and practical considerations can provide genuine normative reasons for belief, and both types of consideration can contribute to (metaphysically) determining what beliefs one ought, all-things-considered, to have.

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1. Introduction

Considering the contemporary debate concerning what kinds of considerations can provide normative reasons for belief, we find two extremes. At one extreme lies *Alethism*, according to which the only kinds of considerations that can provide reasons for (or against) belief are *epistemic*: considerations that are in some way relevant to getting at the truth and avoiding error (Shah 2006, Thomson 2008, Parfit 2011, Way 2016).¹ At the other extreme lies *Robust Pragmatism*, according to which only practical, broadly benefit-related, considerations can provide genuine reasons for believing (Papineau 2013, Rinard 2015, Stich 1990).²

I believe that both these views are wrong and that, as is often the case with extremes, the truth lies in between. Normative reasons for a belief are considerations that are relevant to determining whether one ought to have that belief, all-things-considered. And both epistemic *and* practical considerations seem entirely relevant to determining what beliefs one ought, all-things-considered, to have. It’s an attractive normative hypothesis that one ought normally to have only those beliefs that are adequately supported by one’s epistemic reasons. But in situations in which one’s having an epistemically unsupported belief is necessary to bring about some great good (or to prevent some great evil) it seems that, all-things-considered, one ought to have that belief, despite its being epistemically defective.

This isn’t to say that a normative view on which both epistemic and practical considerations can provide reasons for belief is, or even should be, incontestable. The current popularity of the opposing positions mentioned above clearly suggests otherwise. Still, this more moderate “third way” in the debate concerning what kinds of considerations can provide reasons for belief no doubt deserves a name. Let’s call it *Inclusivism*. To state the view

¹ I borrow the name ‘Alethism’ and this way of characterizing the view from Leary (2017). Many Alethists are *Evidentialists*—they hold that all reasons for belief are epistemic, and also that all epistemic reasons are evidence-based. But Alethism doesn’t require this commitment.

² I borrow the name ‘Robust Pragmatism’ from Rinard (2015). Rinard counts moral considerations among practical reasons for belief, since the benefit indicated or (partly) grounded by a practical consideration might be a benefit to another, as opposed to oneself. I follow Rinard in this here.

succinctly: Inclusivism claims that both epistemic and practical considerations can provide genuine reasons for belief, and that both types of consideration can contribute to (metaphysically) determining what beliefs one ought, all-things-considered, to have.³

This paper answers a challenge for Inclusivism. The challenge is to provide a plausible model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons for belief against one another when the two types of reasons conflict. Some suggest this can't be done (Steglich-Peterson 2011, Chappell 2012, Papineau 2013, Berker MS). They suspect that there can be no plausible model for determining what one ought to believe *all-things-considered* when there are conflicting epistemic and practical reasons.⁴ I disagree. The present paper provides such a model.

The contemporary ethics of belief literature doesn't provide much precedent when it comes to models for comparing epistemic and practical reasons. The only exception of which I'm aware is a model suggested in a paper by Andrew Reisner (2008). But I'll argue that my model is preferable to Reisner's—that it has all the latter's advantages, but none of its costs.⁵

Let me be clear about my aims. First, I have no ambition to offer a full defense of Inclusivism in this paper. For one, that would require defending the still-minority view that practical considerations can provide reasons for belief. I've undertaken this task elsewhere, but won't continue the fight here (Author Paper 1, 2).⁶ In what follows I will simply be assuming, without argument, that practical reasons for belief exist. Nonetheless, this paper constitutes a contribution to the debate concerning what kinds of considerations can provide reasons for belief, inasmuch as it succeeds in partially clearing the way for Inclusivism—in particular, by answering what's perhaps *the* central challenge for the view.

Second, I won't discuss in detail the possible (indeed, actual) view that both epistemic and practical considerations can provide reasons for belief, but that these two types of consideration don't contribute to determining a single, all-things-considered ought and instead determine, respectively, an *epistemic ought* and a *practical ought*, which can't be

³ With the exception of Pascal (1670) and James (1897), and perhaps Foley (1993, 2003), this view is rarely, if ever, explicitly endorsed in print. On one reading, Marušić (2016) can be interpreted as accepting the view, though he denies this in conversation. Reisner (2008) goes some way toward defending Inclusivism (what he calls “The Mixed View”) but never officially endorses it. Markovits (2010, 2014) also makes some apparently sympathetic remarks, but, again, never makes it official.

⁴ All but one of these authors provide no argument that epistemic and practical reasons can't be compared against each other—they merely report the intuitive difficulty of seeing how such comparisons could be possible (one tends to encounter this in informal discussion of the matter, too). Berker (MS) is the exception. He surveys some existing and possible models and argues that none are satisfactory. Berker's work will feature prominently in what follows.

⁵ In the historical literature, a possible model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons for belief is suggested by some remarks made by William James (1897). However, as I explain below, there are good (epistemic) reasons to think that James's model is unsatisfactory (see note 17).

⁶ It's worth noting that, while still a minority view, vigorous efforts have been made to defend the view that there are practical reasons for belief—see, *inter alia*, Booth (2008); Leary (2017); McCormick (2015); Papineau (2013); Reisner (2009); Rinard (2015, 2017); and Stich (1990).

compared (Feldman 2000).⁷ I omit discussion of this view for the following reason. There are, as far as I can see, just two possible rationales for such a view. The first is global skepticism about the notion of an all-things-considered ought (Copp 1997, Tiffany 2007, Baker FC). Philosophers who are globally skeptical about the notion of an all-things-considered ought don't just deny that there could be an all-things-considered ought that takes into account both epistemic and practical reasons; instead, they take the notion of an all-things-considered ought to be incoherent across the board. So such authors deny, for example, that it can make sense to ask what one ought to do, all-things-considered, when there are conflicting moral and prudential reasons. I don't aim to address this sort of skepticism here. I assume that the notion of an all-things-considered ought is coherent.⁸

The second possible rationale for the kind of view under consideration is a local skepticism about the possibility of an all-things-considered ought which takes into account both epistemic and practical reasons. The source of this sort of skepticism is, presumably, doubt about the possibility of making principled and meaningful comparisons among the two types of reasons. But this brand of skepticism is precisely the target of the current paper.

Here's a roadmap. In the next section I explain why epistemic and practical reasons for belief can't plausibly be compared by a simple weighing procedure. The discussion reveals two desiderata that any model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons should satisfy. In section 3, I explain the virtues of Reisner's model for comparing the two types of reasons, and also why his model ultimately fails. I then present my model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons (in section 4). In section 5, I conclude by considering an objection.

2. Why Simple Weighing Won't Work

Epistemic and practical reasons can't plausibly be compared by a simple weighing procedure. We can't simply combine the epistemic and practical reasons for and against a given doxastic alternative⁹ in order to determine the total reason (*simpliciter*) in favor of that alternative, and then compare the total reason in favor of each alternative in order to determine which doxastic option there is decisive (or sufficient) all-things-considered reason to take.¹⁰

⁷ Strictly speaking, I think it's a (fairly common) mistake to talk about comparing *oughts*, as opposed to comparing the *reasons* underlying each respective ought. Here, I've stated the position under consideration in the former way, since this is how those who endorse it tend to state it.

⁸ For defense of the all-things-considered ought, see esp. McLeod (2001); Thomson (2008).

⁹ I'll assume throughout that there are three alternative positive doxastic attitudes that one might take toward a given proposition: belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. I realize that it's still somewhat (though not very) controversial that suspension of judgment constitutes a positive doxastic attitude. But for a powerful and rigorous defense of this claim, see Friedman (2013).

¹⁰ Exactly how to combine the reasons at the first step of this procedure is a difficult and controversial question; for some insightful discussion, see Nair (2016). The question of how to compare the total reason in favor of each alternative at the second step is also controversial. One might opt to make such comparisons in a maximizing way, such that one has decisive all-things-considered reason for a given doxastic attitude just in case there's more total reason *simpliciter* in favor of the attitude than there is in favor of any of its alternatives, has sufficient all-things-considered reason for the attitude

Such a procedure may seem a natural choice for making comparisons among other types of reasons—for example, moral and prudential reasons for action. But for the purpose of comparing epistemic and practical reasons for belief, a simple weighing procedure simply doesn't suffice. There are two principal reasons for this, both of which are instructive.

First, a simple weighing procedure doesn't respect the different weighing behaviors exhibited by epistemic and practical reasons. If one has strong, equally-balanced epistemic reasons to believe P and to disbelieve P, and there are no other reasons (either epistemic or practical) in play, then, plausibly, one has decisive all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment on P. For example, suppose that a (trustworthy) weatherperson says that it'll be sunny, another says that it won't be, you have no other relevant epistemic reasons, and there are no practical reasons in play. Then, plausibly, you lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe that it'll be sunny, lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve this proposition, and have decisive all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment. To generalize: if one has strong, equally-balanced epistemic reasons to believe P and to disbelieve P, and there are no other reasons on the scene, then one lacks sufficient all-things-considered reason to hold either attitude, and has decisive all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment.¹¹

But if one has strong, equally-balanced practical reasons to believe P and to disbelieve P, and there are no other reasons in play, it's not at all plausible that one has decisive all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment on P. For example, suppose that I offer you \$1 million to believe that the number of dust specks on my desk is even and, also, \$1 million to disbelieve this. And suppose too that, aside from my pecuniary offers, you have no other reasons (either epistemic or practical) that bear on the matter. In this case, it would seem implausible to say that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment about whether the number of dust specks on my desk is even. Instead, it seems much more plausible to hold that you have sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe this proposition, have sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve it, and lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment. To generalize: if one has strong, equally-balanced practical reasons to believe P and to disbelieve P, and there are no other reasons on the scene, then one has sufficient all-things-considered reason to hold either of these attitudes, and lacks sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment.¹²

just in case there's at least as much total reason *simpliciter* in favor of the attitude as there is in favor of any of its alternatives, and otherwise lacks sufficient all-things-considered reason for the attitude. But one might also make the relevant comparisons in a satisficing way such that one has sufficient all-things-considered reason for a given doxastic attitude just in case the total reason *simpliciter* in favor of the attitude is above some (possibly contextually variable) threshold. I switch from talk of what attitude one "ought all-things-considered" to hold to talk of what attitude there is "decisive (or sufficient) all-things-considered reason" to hold for the purpose of achieving greater precision with respect to certain of the issues under discussion. Thanks to [redacted] for helpful conversation.

¹¹ Note that it's also very plausible that we get the same result even in circumstances in which the epistemic reasons for believing P and for disbelieving P are only *approximately* equal in strength.

¹² This difference in the weighing behavior of epistemic and practical reasons for belief mirrors the well-known asymmetry in the weighing behavior of epistemic reasons for belief and practical reasons for action (see, e.g., Feldman [2000], Harman [2004], and Cohen [2016]). If one has equally

But a simple weighing procedure can't respect this asymmetry in the weighing behavior of epistemic and practical reasons. This is because once the total reason *simpliciter* in favor of each doxastic alternative has been calculated, a simple weighing procedure will view as identical situations in which the only reasons in play are equally balanced in favor of believing P and disbelieving P, irrespective of whether the relevant reasons are epistemic or practical. In both kinds of situation, such a procedure will yield the result that one has equally strong reason *simpliciter* to believe P and to disbelieve P. So a simple weighing procedure is committed to delivering the same all-things-considered verdicts in both kinds of situation. But, as we've just seen, we should get *different* verdicts, depending on whether the reasons in play are epistemic or practical. So a simple weighing procedure doesn't respect the differing weighing behaviors of epistemic and practical reasons for belief.¹³

Second, as a mechanism for comparing epistemic and practical reasons, simple weighing is too sensitive. Suppose Sam will survive her illness only if she believes she will but that Sam's epistemic reasons for believing she won't survive are far weightier than those in favor of believing she will, such that Sam has decisive epistemic reason to believe she won't survive. And for the sake of argument, suppose Sam's practical reasons for believing she will survive just barely outweigh her epistemic reasons for believing she won't survive, such that, by a thin margin, Sam has decisive all-things-considered reason to believe she'll survive. Now suppose there's a change in Sam's situation that generates a new, relatively weak epistemic reason to believe she won't survive. Then the balance of reasons could easily tip toward its being the case that Sam has decisive all-things-considered reason to have this belief. But this is implausible. Given what's at stake, the addition of a (weak) epistemic reason to believe she won't survive can't plausibly make the difference in determining what Sam has decisive all-things-considered reason to believe. In fact, something stronger seems true: that in this case, *no* amount of epistemic reason could oust the practical winner.¹⁴ The moral is that, in high-stakes cases, simple weighing is too sensitive to the total weight of epistemic reason.¹⁵

strong practical reasons for two or more alternative actions, and there are no other reasons for action in play, then one has sufficient reason to perform any of those actions, and lacks sufficient reason to perform any other. Likewise for practical reasons for belief. But not so with epistemic reasons for belief. As far as I'm aware, Berker (MS) is the only author to date to point this out.

¹³ Berker (MS) raises a similar objection to the idea that what I'm calling a "simple weighing procedure" could be used to make comparisons among epistemic and practical reasons.

¹⁴ We can bring this out by making some changes to the example. Suppose Sam's resting at home and a not-so-tactful friend shows up with a copy of a reputable study that shows that people with Sam's illness have only a 20% chance of survival. And suppose shortly thereafter another friend shows up with two further reliable studies that also claim that the survival rate for Sam's illness is 20%. And suppose just after that a third friend shows up with several more studies that claim the same thing, and reports that a professor of his who happens to be engaged in cutting-edge research on Sam's illness has confirmed the claims of the studies. All this new evidence seems irrelevant in determining what Sam has decisive all-things-considered reason to believe given the extremely weighty practical reasons grounded in the benefits of her survival. She should believe she'll survive.

¹⁵ Reisner uses a similar case to demonstrate what is essentially the same point (2008, pp. 21-2).

Each of these difficulties is on its own sufficient to show that a simple weighing procedure is inadequate for the purpose of comparing epistemic and practical reasons for belief. So each of these difficulties is instructive, in that it reveals a key desideratum that any satisfactory model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons needs to satisfy: (1) such a model must respect the differing weighing behaviors of the two types of reasons; and (2) such a model should not be overly sensitive, in high-stakes cases, to the total weight of epistemic reason.¹⁶

3. Reisner's Proposal

In an article that offers the only existing contemporary account of how the two types of reasons might be compared, Andrew Reisner (2008) suggests a model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons that meets both these desiderata.¹⁷ According to Reisner's proposal, if the weight of the practical reasons for or against some doxastic alternative is above some high threshold, then the epistemic reasons are irrelevant to determining what you have decisive or sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe, and the practical reasons alone determine the all-things-considered verdicts. Otherwise, the practical reasons are irrelevant, and the epistemic reasons alone determine the all-things-considered verdicts. In Reisner's lexicon: "when pragmatic reasons for belief are strong enough,

¹⁶ It's worth noting a third potential difficulty for the idea that epistemic and practical reasons for belief could be compared by a simple weighing procedure. A simple weighing procedure requires the assumption that the weights of the reasons being compared are commensurable, i.e., that there is some common unit in terms of which the weights of the relevant reasons can be measured (Chang 1997). This assumption is needed for the first step of the procedure in which the weights of the reasons for and against a given alternative are combined in order to determine the total amount of reason (*simpliciter*) in favor of that alternative. But the assumption that the weights of epistemic and practical reasons are commensurable is on its face implausible. For example, suppose we think the weight of an epistemic reason for believing P is determined by the degree to which the relevant reason indicates that believing P would promote (or somehow show respect for) the Jamesian goals of getting at the truth and avoiding error. And suppose we think the weight of a practical reason for believing P is determined by the degree of benefit the relevant reason indicates that believing P would bring about. Then, plausibly, there will be no common unit in terms of which the weights of the two types of reasons can be measured. And if this is so, then simple weighing is a non-starter. I omit discussion of this issue in the main text since there are several ways one might skirt it. For example, one might try to give a unified account of the weights of epistemic and practical reasons (though this seems a tall order), or take facts about the weights of reasons to be absolutely basic (and simply assume that the weights of epistemic and practical reasons are commensurable in the relevant sense). No matter: either sort of view would face the difficulties raised in the main text.

¹⁷ In the historical literature, a model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons is suggested by some remarks made by James (1897). James is often interpreted as having held that practical reasons can be relevant to determining what one ought all-things-considered to believe only when the epistemic reasons are equally (or roughly equally) balanced in favor of belief and disbelief. In such cases, one's practical reasons are supposed to "break the tie." But while James's model might satisfy the first of our desiderata, it certainly doesn't satisfy the second. For example, in the case where Sam will survive her illness only if she believes she will, but Sam's epistemic reasons decisively favor believing she won't survive, James's model yields the (implausible) result that Sam ought all-things-considered to believe she won't survive. So James's model is too sensitive in high-stakes cases to the total weight of epistemic reason. So the model doesn't satisfy our second desideratum.

[epistemic] reasons for belief are silent ... otherwise, pragmatic reasons for belief are silent in determining what one ought to believe, all-things-considered (2008, p. 24).

Two points of clarification. First, Reisner is explicitly neutral about whether the threshold that figures in his model is to be understood as having a fixed or variable value, and so he's open to a possible version of the proposal on which the relevant threshold is contextually determined (2008, pp. 25-6). On the (orthogonal) matter of whether the threshold is vague or sharp, Reisner says nothing. But whichever way(s) we might want to go with regard to these cross-cutting distinctions, Reisner does think that on the most plausible version of his proposal, the threshold value will (tend to) be quite high, such that the epistemic reasons won't be easily overridden in all cases by the practical ones (*ibid.*). More on why below.

Second, Reisner assumes that the weight of a practical reason for belief is a monotonically increasing function of the benefit that having the relevant belief would bring about (perhaps along with other variables).¹⁸ So, roughly, a practical reason in favor of a belief is stronger, the better (i.e., more beneficial) having the belief would be (other things being equal). This is contentious, but I'll share with Reisner this assumption going forward.¹⁹

Reisner's model meets our desiderata. It's straightforward to see that, unlike a simple weighing procedure, Reisner's model isn't committed to yielding identical all-things-considered verdicts in situations in which the only reasons in play are equally balanced in favor of believing P and disbelieving P, irrespective of whether the relevant reasons are epistemic or practical. So Reisner's model can respect the differing weighing behaviors of epistemic and practical reasons. So the model easily satisfies our first desideratum.

Moreover, Reisner's model avoids the "oversensitivity" worry that we had with a simple weighing procedure. On Reisner's model, once the strength of the practical reasons is sufficiently high, the epistemic reasons are irrelevant, and the practical reasons alone determine what you have decisive (or sufficient) all-things-considered reason to believe. So, once the practical reasons start to matter, no amount of epistemic reason can oust a practical winner. So Reisner's model readily satisfies our second desideratum, too.²⁰

So Reisner's model succeeds where a simple weighing procedure fails. And besides this, the model has a further virtue. Suppose you're waiting in line to see a newly-released film and

¹⁸ Reisner's suggested account of the weights of practical reasons for *belief* thus resembles a value-based account of reasons for *action*. See Maguire (2016) for discussion and defense of the latter.

¹⁹ I say that this is contentious only because one might think that there are some practical reasons for belief (e.g., certain moral ones) that aren't benefit related. Were this so, the above assumption concerning the weights of practical reasons would need to be rejected. However for the purpose of this paper, we can assume that all such apparently non-benefit-related practical reasons can be "consequentialized". This is only for simplicity's sake and won't affect the arguments to follow.

²⁰ Note also that Reisner's proposal doesn't require the assumption that the weights of epistemic and practical reasons are commensurable, and so it avoids the difficulty mentioned in note 16.

you overhear someone who's just seen the film reveal a major plot twist.²¹ You've got excellent reason to believe the testifier is oblivious and inconsiderate, but none to think he's a liar. So your epistemic reasons strongly favor believing that the plot twist occurs. But clearly it would be better (i.e., more beneficial) to disbelieve this proposition—believing it will ruin the film. So in this case, your practical reasons support believing that the plot twist doesn't occur. But intuitively, it's not the case that you have decisive (or sufficient) all-things-considered reason to have this belief. Instead, it seems that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to believe what your evidence suggests—that the plot twist occurs.

You might disagree. But I suspect this is just a matter of detail. The important point is that there are possible low-stakes cases in which it would be more beneficial overall to have an epistemically unsupported belief, but we think that, nonetheless, you ought to have the attitude that's best supported by the balance of your epistemic reasons. The further virtue of Reisner's model is that it has the resources to accommodate and explain this kind of judgment: assuming that the threshold value is set suitably high, the weight of the practical reasons in the relevant sorts of cases won't be strong enough to silence the epistemic ones. So, in such cases, the practical reasons will be irrelevant, and your epistemic reasons will alone determine what you have decisive or sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe.

So Reisner's model can accommodate the attractive idea that when the practical stakes are *not* particularly high, the practical reasons seem irrelevant to determining what you have decisive or sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe. Or to put the same point slightly differently: Reisner's model can make it the typical case that only one's epistemic reasons are relevant to determining all-things-considered doxastic verdicts. This is why Reisner thinks that whatever we might want to say about the nature of the threshold that his model posits (i.e., that it's fixed or contextually variable, vague or sharp), substantively speaking, it seems very plausible to think that the threshold should be set quite high.²²

So Reisner's model has a lot going for it. But the proposal is ultimately inadequate. This is because Reisner's model faces a structural problem due to Selim Berker (MS). The problem is that, in certain circumstances in which the weight of your practical reasons is above the threshold but your practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic

²¹ I borrow this case from Kelly (2002).

²² This discussion reveals an important advantage of Inclusivism over Robust Pragmatism. On the most natural way of developing the latter view, it will deliver the result that, in every case, you ought to hold the attitude the having of which would bring about the most benefit. But, as we've just seen, this is intuitively implausible. And even if we supplement Robust Pragmatism with the further (admittedly plausible) thesis that it's in general beneficial to hold epistemically supported beliefs, there will still be *possible* low-stakes cases in which it would be slightly more beneficial overall to hold an epistemically unsupported belief, but we think that, despite this, you ought to have the attitude that's best supported by the balance of your epistemic reasons. And at least without some fancy footwork, it's hard to see how Robust Pragmatism could accommodate judgments of this kind. But, when paired with the right kind of model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons, Inclusivism clearly can accommodate such judgments, as the above discussion demonstrates.

alternatives, Reisner's model yields unacceptable results. For example, suppose you have strong practical reasons against believing there's a terrible dragon in your midst at this very moment; call this proposition 'Q'. You have excellent epistemic reasons to disbelieve Q (I hope), but let's stipulate that the weight of your practical reasons against believing Q is above the threshold, such that (according to Reisner's model) your epistemic reasons are irrelevant to determining the all-things-considered verdicts. Now, since all that your practical reasons tell you is "Don't believe Q!", they leave it open whether you should disbelieve this proposition or suspend judgment on it. So Reisner's model yields the following all-things-considered verdict: you have sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve Q, have sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment on Q, and lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe Q. But this verdict is implausible. It's not at all plausible that in this situation you have sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment about whether there's a terrible dragon in your midst. Instead, it's much more plausible to hold that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to *disbelieve* this proposition. But Reisner's proposal can't accommodate this judgment. And so the proposal is inadequate.

And the problem—Berker's—is perfectly general: In any situation in which (1) the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, (2) the practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic alternatives, and (3) the balance of epistemic reasons favors one of those alternatives over the other(s), Reisner's model yields unacceptable results.

But perhaps there's a way to revise Reisner's model so that it avoids these results. Berker suggests there is. Toward the end of his paper, Reisner offers an alternative interpretation of his proposal which he takes to be extensionally equivalent to the interpretation that we've been considering so far (2008, pp. 26-27). But in fact, as Berker points out, the two interpretations are not equivalent. On the second interpretation of Reisner's proposal, we can determine all-things-considered verdicts as follows. First, we weigh the epistemic reasons for and against each alternative in order to determine which doxastic attitude we have decisive (or sufficient) epistemic reason to hold. Then, we weigh the practical reasons for and against each alternative, but add into the mix in this second weighing process a practical reason with a fixed and high weight in favor of the attitude that's favored by the balance of epistemic reasons. Berker calls this the "double-weighing view". The double-weighing view delivers all-things-considered verdicts identical to those yielded by Reisner's original proposal in all cases except those of the kind that generate Berker's problem. In the case of the terrible dragon, for instance, the double-weighing view delivers the verdict that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to disbelieve that there's a dragon in your midst (since, in the second weighing process, your strong reasons against believing this proposition are weighed against a weighty reason to disbelieve it that resulted from the first weighing process, and also against no reasons for or against suspending judgment on it).²³

²³ It's worth noting, as Berker does, that shifting to this proposal would require Reisner to jettison the idea that epistemic reasons are silenced when practical reasons are relevant to determining all-things-considered verdicts (and vice versa) since, in cases of the kind that generate Berker's problem, both practical reasons *and* the reason that derives from the first (epistemic) weighing process are needed to determine the all-things-considered verdicts generated by the second weighing process.

But the double-weighting view faces problems of its own. In particular, the proposal requires the assumption that whenever you have decisive epistemic reason to hold a given doxastic attitude, there is a (weighty) practical reason in that attitude's favor. So, assuming that the weight of a practical reason for an attitude is determined by (or corresponds to) the degree of benefit the relevant reason indicates that holding the attitude would bring about, the double-weighting view entails that, necessarily, if you have decisive epistemic reason to hold a given attitude, then your holding that attitude would be to some degree beneficial. But this is an implausible result. Perhaps it's in general beneficial to hold attitudes decisively supported by your epistemic reasons, but not as a matter of necessity. If I have decisive epistemic reason to believe there are eight specks of dust on my desk, it doesn't follow that my holding this belief would be beneficial (to any degree). For there's plausibly no value at all in my having even a true and warranted belief about the number of dust specks on my desk: worlds in which I have such a belief are no better than those in which I don't. Indeed, even most Robust Pragmatists are willing to admit as much (see, e.g., Rinard 2015, p. 220).

So, although double-weighting avoids Berker's problem for Reisner's original proposal, it requires commitment to an implausibly strong claim concerning the connection between an attitude's being best supported by the balance of epistemic reasons and that attitude's being beneficial. Perhaps some would be willing to incur this commitment, but I think Inclusivists shouldn't settle—we can do better. I therefore set aside the double-weighting view. From now on, when I talk of Reisner's "proposal", I intend his original proposal.²⁴

²⁴ Berker raises a different worry for the double-weighting view, which I don't discuss in the main text, since I'm unconvinced that it poses a genuine problem. Berker (MS, p. 17) asks us to consider a (temporal or modal) sequence of cases in which our evidence for P steadily improves as we move through the sequence, while all other facts about our reasons remain fixed. We begin in a case in which we have an "extremely strong" practical reason against believing P and a "fairly strong" epistemic reason in favor of disbelieving P (where this latter reason is evidenced-based). As our evidence for P improves, we transition to a case where our epistemic reasons to believe P are equally balanced with our epistemic reasons to disbelieve P, and then finally to a case where our epistemic reasons to believe P are much stronger than our epistemic reasons to disbelieve P. Berker finds objectionable the double-weighting view's predictions concerning the all-things-considered status of disbelief in P during this process as we move through the sequence. At first, the double-weighting view predicts that we have decisive all-things-considered reason to disbelieve P; then, as we gain epistemic reasons to believe P, we come to lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve P; but then, as we gain yet further epistemic reasons to believe P, we go back to having sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve P. Berker finds this bizarre, particularly the last transition: "How can disbelief in P go from being forbidden (all things considered) to permitted (all things considered) merely in virtue of [our] *gaining* [epistemic] reasons to believe P? Such a result seems intolerable" (ibid.). But contrary to Berker, I don't find this result problematic (let alone intolerable). After all, it's not the case that, in the final transition, disbelief in P goes from being permitted to forbidden (all things considered) *merely* in virtue of our gaining epistemic reasons to believe P. For when we gain epistemic reasons to believe P, in the final transition, two things happen: First, we find ourselves in a situation in which the attitude favored by the balance of epistemic reasons (belief in P) is ruled out by our "extremely strong" practical reason against believing P. Second, we come to lack sufficient epistemic reason for either of that attitude's alternatives (disbelief in P and suspension of judgment). In virtue of *these* facts, the double-weighting view predicts that we lack

4. A New Model

What Berker's problem for Reisner's proposal reveals is that in high-stakes cases in which the practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic alternatives, the epistemic reasons can still seem somehow relevant to determining the all-things-considered verdicts. So, contrary to Reisner's proposal, while epistemic reasons can't plausibly oust practical winners in high-stakes cases, these reasons do not, in such cases, become irrelevant. So what we need is a model that can accommodate this fact, but which also satisfies our initial two desiderata.

By introducing some additional machinery—in particular, the notion of lexical priority—I believe we can produce such a model.²⁵ According to the model that I suggest, if the weight of the practical reasons for or against some doxastic alternative is above some very high threshold, then the practical reasons become lexically prior to the epistemic ones, such that the attitude you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold is the one that's best supported by the balance of epistemic reasons, among those that satisfy the prescription of the practical reasons. Otherwise, epistemic reasons are lexically prior to practical ones.²⁶

This model yields all-things-considered verdicts identical to those yielded by Reisner's model in all circumstances except those in which the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, the practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic alternatives, and the balance of epistemic reasons favors one of those alternatives over the other(s). To see this, suppose first that the threshold isn't met. Then my model predicts that the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold is the one that's best supported by the practical reasons among those that are compatible with the prescription of the epistemic reasons. But, since it's impossible for the balance of epistemic reasons to decisively (or sufficiently) favor two (or more) doxastic alternatives, there will be, in any given case, only *one* doxastic attitude that's compatible with the prescription of the epistemic reasons. So, in situations in which the threshold isn't met, this is the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold—and Reisner's model would agree.²⁷

sufficient all-things-considered reason to believe P, and have sufficient all-things considered reason either to disbelieve P or to suspend judgment on P. And these verdicts seem to me sensible.

²⁵ The notion of 'lexical priority' is sometimes intended to mean different things depending on the theorist deploying it, but I mean it in the way Rawls (its originator in moral philosophy) did.

²⁶ Like Reisner, I'm agnostic about whether the threshold that figures in my model is best understood as being fixed or contextually variable, vague or sharp—but some discussion to follow (in sect. 5).

²⁷ The discussion in this paragraph assumes that epistemic permissivism is false. If epistemic permissivism is true, then there are possible cases in which the balance of epistemic reasons sufficiently favors multiple doxastic alternatives. And if such cases are possible, then the verdicts yielded by Reisner's model and mine will diverge in one more kind of case (other than that which I've already indicated), viz., cases in which the weight of the practical reasons for (or against) any of the relevant doxastic alternatives isn't above the threshold, the balance of epistemic reasons sufficiently favors multiple alternatives, and the practical reasons favor one of those alternatives over the other(s). In such a case, my model predicts that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold the attitude that's best supported by the practical reasons among those that are compatible with the prescription of the epistemic reasons (i.e., the most beneficial attitude among those that are sufficiently favored by the balance of epistemic reasons). Reisner's model, on the

Next, suppose that the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, but that the practical reasons aren't equally balanced in favor of two or more doxastic alternatives—that the preponderance of practical reason favors one doxastic option, in particular. Then my model predicts that the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold is the one that's best supported by the balance of epistemic reasons among those that are compatible with the prescription of the practical reasons. But since, by hypothesis, the balance of practical reasons favors a *single* doxastic alternative, there's only *one* attitude that's compatible with the prescription of those reasons. So that's the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold. And again, Reisner's model would agree.²⁸

Finally, suppose that the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, the practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic alternatives, but the balance of epistemic reasons doesn't favor one of those alternatives over any other. (Incidentally, this is possible only when the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, there's exactly one attitude that's incompatible with the prescription of the practical reasons, and that same attitude is the one that's decisively or sufficiently favored by the balance of epistemic reasons.) Here, my model predicts that the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold is the one that's best supported by the balance of epistemic reasons among those that are compatible with the prescription of the practical reasons. But since, by hypothesis, the balance of epistemic reasons doesn't favor one of the alternatives compatible with the prescription of the practical reasons over any other, the doxastic attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold is one of *any* of those that are compatible with the prescription of the practical reasons. And Reisner's model agrees.

other hand, predicts that you have sufficient all-things-considered reason to hold either of the attitudes for which there is sufficient epistemic reason. Unsurprisingly I'm inclined to think that the verdict that my model delivers is preferable. Although I wish to remain officially neutral about whether epistemic permissivism is true, the remainder of the paper is written as if the view is false. Beyond what I've said in this footnote, however, nothing of importance turns on this.²⁸ Suppose that the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, the preponderance of practical reason favors believing P, but suspending judgment on P is a close practical second. And suppose also that I have decisive epistemic reason to suspend judgment on P. In this situation, Reisner's model and mine (as I've stated it above) yield the verdict that I have decisive all-things-considered reason to believe P. I find this verdict acceptable, but some people report finding it intuitive that in this case I have at least sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment on P. To accommodate this judgment, one could simply specify that practical reasons for belief are to be compared in a satisficing way, such that one has sufficient practical reason for a given doxastic attitude just in case the total weight of practical reason in favor of the attitude is above a certain threshold. If suspending judgment on P is a close practical second to believing P, then if the total weight of practical reason in favor of believing P meets the relevant threshold, then, presumably, so too will the total weight of practical reason in favor of suspending judgment on P. And if so, then my model will yield the verdict that I have sufficient all-things-considered reason to hold either of these attitudes, and lack sufficient all-things-considered reason to disbelieve P. Again, I don't feel that this gambit is necessary. But in case one does, it's worth noting that the option is available.

Now consider the situations that render Reisner's model inadequate—viz., those in which the weight of the practical reasons is above the threshold, the practical reasons are equally balanced in favor of multiple doxastic alternatives, and the balance of epistemic reasons favors one of those alternatives over the other(s). So far, we've seen that in all other situations, Reisner's model and mine deliver identical verdicts. But in situations of this last sort, the verdicts yielded by Reisner's model and mine diverge. Consider again the case of the terrible dragon. Recall that in this case Reisner's model yields the verdict that you have sufficient all-things-considered reason to suspend judgment about whether there's a terrible dragon in your midst. This seems wrong, given the details of the case. But my model does better. In the case of the dragon, the attitude that's best supported by the balance of your epistemic reasons, among those that satisfy the prescription of your practical reasons, is *disbelief* that there's a dragon in your midst. So on the model that I suggest, this is the attitude that you have decisive all-things-considered reason to hold. And my model yields similarly plausible results in all possible versions of situations of this sort.

So, unlike Reisner's model, my model avoids Berker's problem. Moreover, in much the same ways as Reisner's model, my model satisfies our initial two desiderata: it can respect the differing weighing behaviors of epistemic and practical reasons, and it predicts that, in high-stakes cases, no amount of epistemic reason can unseat a practical winner, thus avoiding the "oversensitivity" worry that we had with a simple weighing procedure. Finally, my model, too, can accommodate the highly attractive idea that when the practical stakes are *not* particularly high, the practical reasons seem entirely irrelevant to determining all-things-considered doxastic verdicts. Assuming that the threshold value is set suitably high, my model, like Reisner's, makes it the typical case that only your epistemic reasons will seem relevant to determining what you have decisive all-things-considered reason to believe.²⁹

5. Arbitrariness

This section addresses a possible objection to my proposal. The potential worry begins with the following, natural question: how *much* must be at stake before the practical reasons become lexically prior to the epistemic ones? That is: how strong must the practical reasons for (or against) some doxastic alternative be, in order to meet the threshold my model posits?

As we've already seen, it seems very plausible that the threshold should be set quite high. And in order to avoid extensional equivalence with Alethism, the threshold value of course needs to be finite. But this leaves an infinite range of possibilities. And wherever we might think the line should be drawn, one might ask: why *there*? Since the threshold could always be higher or lower, any particular location is likely to seem arbitrary. And this seems like a cost not only for my model, but also for the normative view for which it's designed—Inclusivism. After all, whatever else we might say about Alethism and Robust Pragmatism, these two views at least seem less arbitrary in their determinations of all-things-considered verdicts.³⁰

²⁹ My model achieves this result in a different way than Reisner's. The "seems" qualifier is important: the practical reasons aren't *irrelevant*, but only lexically posterior in the relevant cases.

³⁰ This point shouldn't be overstated. Both Alethists and Robust Pragmatists need to adequately specify plausible comparison functions for determining all-things-considered doxastic verdicts. And

I should note straight away that this worry can't easily be avoided by adopting a specific view about whether the threshold that my model posits is fixed or variable, vague or sharp. Perhaps the problem is at its most acute if we adopt a version of the proposal on which the threshold is fixed and sharp. But even on a version that says that the threshold is variable and vague, similar problems surface. Specifying an imprecise *range*, as opposed to a sharp cut-off, doesn't make the relevant range any less arbitrary. And holding that the threshold value is contextually determined, as opposed to fixed, doesn't help much either. For even if there were no fixed value for the threshold, its location in any given case instead being a function of the nature of the situation at hand, it seems far from obvious what the relevant "threshold function" should look like. In fact, it may be that no such function could be precisely specified. And if this is so, then determining the correct cut-off point (or range) for the threshold would seem an unprincipled matter, requiring case-by-case judgment.³¹

So the charge of arbitrariness can't easily be avoided by adopting a particular view about the nature of the threshold that my model posits. What to say, then? I think the best thing to do is come clean—to admit that any location for the threshold will seem arbitrary, given that it could always have been higher or lower. The important question is whether this poses a serious difficulty, and I don't think that it does. Instead, I view the apparent element of arbitrariness in my model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons as a necessary feature not just of the particular normative view for which it's designed, but of *any* normative theory that posits two or more intrinsically significant normative factors, which ultimately need to be balanced against one another in order to determine all-things-considered verdicts.³² If a normative theory posits multiple, intrinsically significant normative factors,

at least for Alethists, worries about arbitrariness loom. This is because many Alethists favor the view that whether you ought to believe something isn't a matter of whether there is more or most epistemic reason for you to believe it, but rather of whether there is *sufficient* epistemic reason for you to believe it (in other words, these theorists opt for a satisficing way of comparing of the total amount of epistemic reason in favor of each of the relevant doxastic alternatives in order to determine all-things-considered verdicts—see note 9). But precisely how much epistemic reason must there be in favor of a given doxastic option in order for the epistemic reason in its favor to be sufficient? Worries about arbitrariness seem as potent here as they do for my proposal. (Of course, Alethists who aren't also satisficers won't face this worry; see Schroeder [2015] for discussion.)

³¹ One suggestion that doesn't particularly help us here, but which is nonetheless worthy of note, is that the location of the threshold might vary according to the "epistemic importance" of the proposition under consideration. Roughly: the more epistemically important the proposition, the higher the threshold. This is analogous to the common view among moderate (threshold) deontologists that the location of the threshold that their theory posits is in part a function of the nature of the particular deontological constraint to be infringed upon. In principle, I'm sympathetic to this suggestion. My only apprehension is that I find it difficult to grasp a notion of "epistemic importance" that doesn't collapse into *practical* importance—in particular, the practical importance of having an epistemically supported attitude with respect to the relevant proposition. For a helpful discussion of this puzzle, and of what's needed to answer it, see Treanor (2014).

³² What is it for a normative factor to be intrinsically normatively significant? I suggest the following (first pass) account: For a normative factor, F, to be intrinsically normatively significant is for F to be normatively significant just in virtue being the kind of factor that it is, and not in virtue of any

and says that at least in certain circumstances those factors need to be compared against one another, then that theory will require some sort of trade-off schedule—this is an inevitable consequence of normative pluralism of any kind.³³ And for any trade-off schedule that a pluralistic normative theory might posit, one might always ask: why *that* schedule, as opposed to some other? But this is to raise an epistemological question—viz., what evidence is there for the selected schedule rather than some alternative? And the answer to this question is likely to turn on a variety of factors—e.g., the degree to which the selected schedule can accommodate our intuitions across cases. But I see no good reason to think that such evidence can't help us home in on the location of the threshold that my model, in particular, posits. Indeed, notice that we've been collecting intuitions that provide us with some indication of where the relevant threshold might lie over the course of this paper.

So it's hard to see how the kind of pluralism about doxastic normativity that my model is meant to supplement could be any worse off than any other form of normative pluralism, at least with respect to the charge of arbitrariness. So unless we think that we should, for reasons of arbitrariness, abandon the possibility of pluralism *in general*, we shouldn't think the objection that we're considering speaks decisively against the proposal of this paper.

Of course, that's not to say that their relative lack of apparent arbitrariness doesn't provide Alethism and Robust Pragmatism with *some* advantage over Inclusivism and the particular model for comparing epistemic and practical reasons I've proposed for it. The simplicity and elegance of the former normative theories, particularly with regard to their determinations of all-things-considered verdicts, are theoretical virtues—and certain of their proponents rightly tout them as such (Rinard 2017). But on this matter, I should like to echo the paradigmatic pluralist, W.D. Ross: “[I]t is more important that our theory fit the facts than that it be simple, and the account we have given above corresponds (it seems to me) better than either of the simpler theories with what we really think” (1930, p. 19).

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relation it might bear to a normative factor of any other kind. Epistemic considerations are thus intrinsically normatively significant for belief, inasmuch as they're normatively significant just in virtue of being considerations of epistemic relevance, and not in virtue of, e.g., their being of practical import (if they are). This notion—that of intrinsic normative significance—provides a useful way of distinguishing Inclusivism from its competitors. For example, Robust Pragmatists (e.g., Rinard [2015]) claim that practical considerations are intrinsically normatively significant for belief, but deny that epistemic considerations are. Instead, these theorists claim that epistemic considerations are normatively significant for belief only when (and because) believing in accordance with them would provide some benefit. The Inclusivist denies this. Her core commitment is that both epistemic *and* practical considerations are of intrinsic normative significance for belief.

³³ Kagan (1998) makes this point. Much of the above material is inspired by Kagan's commentary concerning thresholds in his discussion of the prospects for moderate deontology (pp. 78-84).

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