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Received: 9 December 2021 | Revised: 3 June 2023 | Accepted: 13 June 2023

DOI: 10.1111/phib.12312

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY WILEY

Can we combine practical and epistemic reason?

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Funding information
John Templeton Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 62603

Abstract

This paper offers a theory of how epistemic and practical reasons for belief can be combined into all-things-considered reason. Unlike alternative theories, it does not involve any sharp cut-offs or lexical priorities among types of reason. The theory allows that the relative strengths of the practical and epistemic reasons matter, as does the distance between the epistemically rational credence and the practically rational credence. Although there are important differences between the structure of epistemic and practical reason, they can still be combined in a satisfactory way. The central idea is that epistemic reason determines an epistemically rational doxastic state, and practical reason can push it around.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Suppose there is strong evidence that God does not exist, but if he does then disbelievers will be sent to hell. We can describe the situation as one in which there is a conflict between epistemic and practical reasons for belief.[1] If there are both epistemic and practical reasons for belief, it seems that there should be a way to combine them.[2] But it is far from obvious how epistemic and

[1]Some hold that there are only practical reasons for belief (Cowie, 2014; Maguire & Woods, 2020; Rinard, 2018); others hold that there are only epistemic reasons for belief (Feldman & Conee, 1985; Shah, 2006). I assume in this paper that there are both.

[2]But I remain neutral on whether we *should* combine epistemic and practical reasons. Feldman (2000) argues that we cannot. Following Berker, 2018, we can call Feldman's view 'separatist pragmatism' and the view I offer a model for 'interactionist pragmatism'.

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practical reasons can be combined. I will offer a theory which combines epistemic and practical reasons into all-things-considered reason.[3]

Berker (2018) has argued in detail that epistemic and practical reasons cannot be combined, while Reisner (2008) and Howard (2020) have offered positive suggestions for how they can be combined. Howard's theory can be thought of as a more nuanced version of Reisner's, and the extra nuance allows him to avoid Berker's objections. But I will argue that there are two features which are relevant to all-things-considered reason which Howard's theory predicts are not relevant—the strength of epistemic reason, and the distance between the epistemically rational credence and practically rational credence. I will offer a theory according to which they are relevant. [4]

Section 2 explains some assumptions and distinctions, section 3 discusses Reisner's and Howard's views, section 4 explains my theory in the full belief model, section 5 extends the theory to the credence model, section 6 completes the theory by showing how the strength of epistemic and practical reason can be quantified, section 7 considers objections and section 8 concludes.

2 | PRELIMINARIES

In this section, I will make explicit some assumptions, make some distinctions and clarify terminology.

2.1 | Motivating assumptions

I will assume that there are practical reasons for belief. The classic case is Pascal's wager, according to which you are rewarded for believing in God (if God exists[5]).[6] I will also assume that there are epistemic reasons for belief which we can distinguish from practical reasons for belief.[7] Epistemic reasons to believe p are reasons that are related to the truth, or likely truth, of p. There are various options for filling out the nature of epistemic reasons. One choice-point concerns the epistemic goal[8]; another choice-point is the relation between reasons and the epistemic goal[9]; another choice point is whether there can be epistemic reasons to suspend belief.[10] I remain neutral on these details.

[3]I offer a different—indeed, incompatible—response to the problem in Bradley (forthcoming). So I'm not sure this theory is needed, but I offer it to those who think it is.

[4]My model also seems to respond to Baker's (2018) objections to ought simpliciter but I don't develop this here.

[5]I will leave this implicit in future.

[6]See Foley (1987,ch. 5), Stroud, 2006, Reisner (2009), Rinard (2018), Schroeder (2018), Basu and Schroeder (2019), Howard (2020), Worsnip (2021).

[7]For rejection of epistemic reasons, which Berker calls 'austere pragmatism', see (Cowie, 2014; Maguire & Woods, 2020; Rinard, 2018).

[8]See Chignell (2018).

[9]See Snedegar (2014).

[10]See McGrath (2021).

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2.2 | Distinction: Full belief versus credences

Berker, Reisner and Howard all focus on a simple model with three doxastic states: full belief, full disbelief and suspension of belief. A more fine-grained model allows a probabilistic version of belief, credence, which can take any value between 0 and 1, and is discussed in the Bayesian and decision theory literatures.[11] I will first explain my theory in terms of full belief (section 4) then in terms of credences (section 5). I remain neutral on the pros and cons of each model, and on whether both should be used.

2.3 | Distinction: Epistemic reasons (count noun) versus total epistemic reason (mass noun)

Epistemic reason*s* correspond to pieces of evidence, while epistemic reaso*n* is determined by the total epistemic reasons. Epistemic reason could be called '*total* epistemic reason'. I will also assume that total epistemic reason determines an epistemically rational doxastic state.[12]

2.4 | Distinction: Evidence versus total epistemic reason

Sometimes people talk about evidence favouring a proposition, and sometimes people talk about evidence favouring an attitude towards a proposition. While either locution may be used, it is important not to mix these up.[13] I will say that evidence confirms a proposition, whereas epistemic reason favours an attitude. More precisely, evidence confirms, disconfirms or is neutral regarding some proposition, whereas epistemic reason favours, disfavours or is neutral regarding some attitude.

2.5 | Distinction: Weight of evidence versus balance of evidence

The distinction between the *weight* of evidence and *balance* of evidence can be traced to Keynes:

> As the relevant evidence [for a hypothesis] at our disposal increases, the magnitude of [its] probability may either decrease or increase, according as the new knowledge strengthens the unfavorable or favorable evidence; but something seems to have

[11]The usual motivation for positing full belief is that full belief simplifies the reasoning of agents, and it does this because fully believing p entails relying on p in practical reasoning. See Jackson (2019) and Worsnip (2021) for recent discussions.

[12]Here, I assume *Uniqueness*: Given any set of evidence and any hypothesis, there is a unique rational credence (see White (2005)). Earlier drafts had a section which dropped Uniqueness. The effect is to spread out the point on the credence scale to an interval (see section 5). The change is straightforward and not very interesting. Notice that Berker's claim that epistemic reasons exhibit prohibitive balancing seems to require Uniqueness; without Uniqueness, one might be permitted to believe P and also permitted not to believe P. But I do not think this gets to the heart of the matter, as we still want to know how epistemic and practical reasons interact.

[13]For discussion see Worsnip (2019).

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> increased in either case—we have a more substantial basis on which to rest our conclusion... New evidence will sometimes decrease the probability of [the hypothesis] but will always increase its 'weight'.
>
> (Keynes, 1921, p. 71)

For example, suppose Lazy Les has credence of 0.2 that God exists—he has little evidence either way but just finds the idea implausible.[14] Earnest Eric has conducted numerous philosophical and empirical studies and also has credence of 0.2 that God exists. They have the same *balance* of evidence, but Eric has much *weightier* evidence. Weighty evidence provides strong epistemic reason. We can think of the weight of evidence as connected to how much additional evidence would be needed to push the epistemically rational credence some distance. If a lot of extra evidence is needed then the agent has weighty evidence; if only a little extra evidence is needed then the agent has less weighty evidence.[15]

2.6 | Distinction: Epistemic reason versus strength of epistemic reason

We need to compare the strength of epistemic reason with the strength of practical reason (we will reserve 'strength' to apply to reason rather than evidence). We can suppose that the strength of epistemic reason depends on the *weight* of the evidence. So Lazy Les and Earnest Eric might both have decisive epistemic reason to have credence of 0.2 that God exists, while Eric has *stronger* epistemic reason.[16]

2.7 | Distinction: Epistemic reason to believe p versus epistemic reason to have credence x in p

We can talk about epistemic reason to believe and we can also talk about epistemic reason to have a particular credence. Whether an agent has epistemic reason to believe p depends on whether the total epistemic reasons provide sufficient support for p. Whether an agent has epistemic reason to have credence x in p depends on whether the total epistemic reasons combine to support a credence of x.

3 | REISNER'S AND HOWARD'S THEORIES

Let us start by briefly reviewing two extant theories for weighing practical and epistemic reason. This will be useful because, by my lights, they both over-simplify and leave out important features that my theory will take into account. That is, I will argue that both Reisner's (2008) and Howard's (2020) theories leave out of the determinations of all-things-considered reason factors that are relevant to all-things-considered reason.

[14]Lazy Les is rational despite his laziness.

[15]Compare Skyrms' (1977) *resilience*.

[16]I am inclined to add another, external, parameter, but I leave this until the end of section 6.

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Reisner's proposal

> The evidential reasons are the only ones that count when the [practical] reasons are below a certain [strength], but they do not count at all once the [strength] of the [practical] reasons is sufficient.
>
> (p. 23)

So, for example, if there is evidence against God's existence, being sent to hell for not believing in God might provide decisive all-things-considered reason to believe in God, but being sent to Siberia for not believing in God might generate a practical reason weak enough that one is left with all-things-considered reason to disbelieve.

I will briefly raise two worries. First, as Berker (2018) points out, this account runs into problems in cases where strength of practical reason exceeds the threshold, but more than one option remains to which epistemic reason seems relevant. For example, if there is sufficiently high practical reason not to disbelieve in God, the options to believe and to suspend judgment are still available, and Reisner's theory says that epistemic reason is irrelevant, leaving us all-things-considered permitted to either believe or suspend judgment. But we might have strong evidence that God exists, in which case we would surely have all-things-considered decisive reason to believe in God.

Second, according to Reisner's proposal, we swing between practical reason being irrelevant and epistemic reason being irrelevant. This is unexpected and feels ad hoc to me. Usually reasons weigh against each other rather than each making the other irrelevant. There *are* cases where it is plausible that one type of reason silences another. For example, the reason to create a state in which Dr. Evil is happy would plausibly be silenced by the fact that Dr. Evil's happiness is due to his torturing someone.[17] But practical reasons do not seem to silence epistemic reasons in this way.

To be clear, neither objection refutes Reisner's theory, but I think they do enough to motivate looking elsewhere.

Howard's model can be understood as solving both problems by relaxing the claim that a sufficiently strong practical reason makes epistemic reason *irrelevant*. Instead, a sufficiently strong practical reason makes epistemic reason of *secondary* importance:

Howard's proposal

> [I]f the [strength] 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.
>
> (p. 2237)

But this account ignores two factors which I will argue are important (Reisner's account also ignores these two factors). First, the distance between the epistemically rational credence and practically

[17]See Dancy (1993, p. 56).

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rational credence, and second, the strength of the epistemic reason.[18] Again, typical cases of weighing up types of reason usually take into account both the distance the reasons ask us to go and their relative strengths.[19]

To see why the distance matters, suppose an agent, Charlie, believes that God would punish all who fail to believe in him with a year in purgatory. However, Charlie has decisive evidence that God does not exist—specifically, the large amounts of suffering that exist in the world. Suppose the practical reason of a year in purgatory is just below Howard's very high threshold. According to Howards' theory, the practical reason is irrelevant and Charlie should believe that God does not exist. But now suppose that Charlie gets new evidence—he learns that there is far less suffering than he thought. Perhaps he learns that animals do not feel pain, or that the least well off people have deeply meaningful and worthwhile lives. Suppose this new evidence means Charlie now has decisive epistemic reason to suspend belief. According to Howard's theory, the practical reason it still irrelevant while it is below the threshold, so Charlie should suspend belief. The practical reason remains irrelevant unless it becomes a bit stronger.

But this account ignores the fact that, after acquiring the new evidence, believing in God requires a much smaller change to Charlie's beliefs than before acquiring the new evidence. A shift from atheism to theism is a bigger change than a shift from agnosticism to theism. Yet on Howard's account, no stronger (practical) reasons are needed to switch from being an atheist to a theist than are needed to switch from being an agnostic to being a theist.

As it will be central to my account, let me say a bit more about this talk of distance and big/small changes.[20] Talk of distance is very natural when we put things in terms of credences, for example, a credence of 0.9 is a greater distance from 0.1 than it is from 0.8. And it is natural to say that believing p is closer to suspending than to believing –p. More directly, we could put things in terms of similarity. Believing p is more *similar* to suspending than to believing –p. We can then fill out similarity in terms of whatever you take beliefs to be. For example, functionalists will say that the functional role of believing p is more similar to the functional role of suspending than it is to the functional role of believing –p. For example, the functional role of believing in God often causes praying, the functional role of agnosticism sometimes causes praying and the functional role of atheism never causes praying. Still, what is the connection between similarity and reasons? The idea is that changing to a *highly* dissimilar state requires stronger reasons than changing to only a *slightly* dissimilar state. For example, I would need a stronger reason to shift my location 3 miles than to shift my location 3 metres. And I would

[18]The strength of the epistemic reason also disappears on what Berker (2018, p. 445) calls Reisner's 'double-weighing view'. On this view, the epistemic reasons are weighed at the first stage, and then contribute a fixed and high strength reason to the second stage, where they are added to the practical reasons. But if epistemic reasons contribute a fixed strength reason at the second stage then the actual strength of epistemic reason becomes irrelevant.

[19]Example: Whether we should take a quick or a scenic route depends on the relative strength of the reason for taking a scenic route and taking a quick route. There is no strength threshold such that a reason for taking a scenic route that is above that threshold makes it lexically prior to the reason to take a quick route. If there were a threshold, then given a reason for taking a scenic route above that threshold, then, however, strong the reason to take a quick route becomes, it would be lexically posterior to the reason to take a scenic route. But it seems like the reason to take a quick route could always be strengthened until it outweighed the reason to take a scenic route. Chang (2013, p. 9) gives a related example, claiming that the reason to choose a cheap unhealthy meal over an expensive healthy meal is sensitive to how much money we have. (I remain neutral on Chang's conclusion that "all things considered" is, in effect, a placeholder for a more comprehensive value p. 2)

[20]Thanks to a referee for pressing this.

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need a stronger reason to move from atheism to believing than I would need to shift from agnosticism to believing.

Moving on to the second factor which Howard's theory ignores—the *strength* of epistemic reason should also matter when combining practical and epistemic reason. Suppose God's punishment for nonbelievers is just above Howard's very high threshold. Recall Lazy Les and Earnest Eric both have decisive epistemic reason to have credence of 0.2 that God exists, but Earnest Eric has much stronger epistemic reason to have that credence. According to Howard, they should both believe in God, and for exactly the same reason—that the practical reason is above the threshold. But it is plausible that more is needed for Earnest Eric to believe in God than Lazy Les, as Earnest Eric has stronger epistemic reason to disbelieve. The problem is that Howard's theory ignores the fact that stronger practical reason is needed to change from a belief/credence for which there is strong epistemic reason than to change from a belief/credence for which there is weak epistemic reason.

Again, I do not think these considerations amount to a *refutation* of Howard's theory any more than Berker's objections amount to a refutation of Reisner's theory. Howard could argue that the size of the shift in belief/credence and the strength of epistemic reason are irrelevant for combining practical and epistemic reason. But no such argument has been given.[21]

Berker (2018) has argued that there is *no* satisfactory way to combine epistemic and practical reasons. Berker's main objection is that purported practical reasons for belief exhibit *permissive* balancing, whereas epistemic reasons for belief exhibit *prohibitive* balancing. That is, when there is strong practical reason to A and equally strong practical reason to not A, one is permitted to either A or not A; but when there are equally strong epistemic reasons to believe P and not to believe P, one is prohibited from believing either. Berker goes on to argue that this means that epistemic and practical reasons cannot be combined. Interestingly, Berker does not really use this point when it comes to arguing against theories which combine epistemic and practical reason. Instead, he gives examples and argues that the combining accounts give problematic verdicts. This means there is not really a unified way to respond to Berker. So my strategy is simply to show by example how epistemic and practical reason can be combined and argue that it does not give problematic verdicts.

4 | THE PUSHING VIEW—FULL BELIEF

I will explain the intuition behind my view (4.1) then develop it in the full belief model (4.2).

4.1 | The guiding intuition

Total epistemic reason determines an epistemically rational doxastic state, and practical reason can push it around. Whether it does depends on:

[21]A referee notes that Howard allows that the height of the very high threshold might be contextually variable. If the context includes the strength of the epistemic reason and the distance between the epistemically rational credence and the practically rational credence then my theory is a version of Howard's. I take this to be a shockingly liberal view of what 'contextualism' means. Still, if you endorse this reading of 'contextualism' then feel free to take this paper to be a development of Howard's theory. (But I think contextualism should be backed by a plausible semantic mechanism, e.g., Schaffer & Szabó, 2014).

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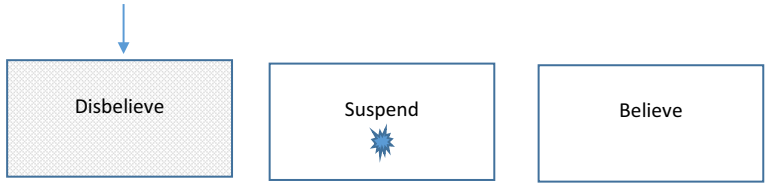
1. the distance between the epistemically rational doxastic state and the practically rational doxastic state and
2. the relative strengths of the practical and epistemic reason.

4.2 | The pushing view—Full belief

On the full belief model there are three types of exhaustive and mutually exclusive doxastic states—disbelief, suspension and belief. Suppose the epistemically rational state is to disbelieve that God exists. Now add that there is a weak practical reason not to disbelieve that God exists, in the style of Pascal's Wager. If the practical reason not to disbelieve is strong enough to outweigh the epistemic reason then the all-things-considered rational doxastic state is pushed from disbelief to suspension. It is not pushed any higher because the practical reason only rules out disbelief, and the epistemic reason is still pulling the all-things-considered rational doxastic state towards disbelief. So the all-things-considered rational doxastic state settles at suspension. The vertical arrow represents epistemic reason, the shaded area represents practical reason against those doxastic states, and the star represents the all-things-considered rational credence:



Let us now consider a practical reason to *believe* (rather than just not disbelieve).[22] Belief would require the all-things-considered rational doxastic state being pushed from disbelief to belief. As this is a greater distance than from disbelief to suspension, a stronger practical reason is required than before. If the practical reason is not strong enough, the all-things-considered rational state remains at disbelief:

This is one place where my account differs from Howard's and Reisner's. The distance between the epistemically rational doxastic state and the practically rational doxastic state plays no role in their accounts.

A second difference is that on my account the relative strength of practical and epistemic reasons matters to the all-things-considered rational state. Thus, a stronger practical reason could push the all-things-considered rational doxastic state to belief (the strength of the practical reason is represented by the darkness of the shading):

[22]I assume a practical reason to believe is equivalent to a practical reason not to withhold or disbelieve.

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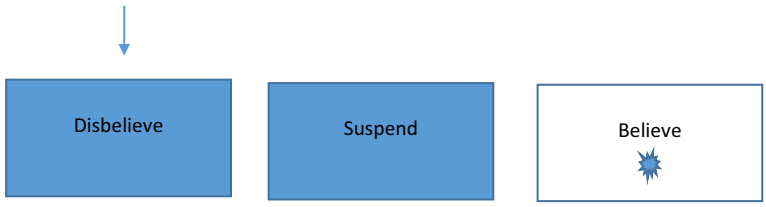
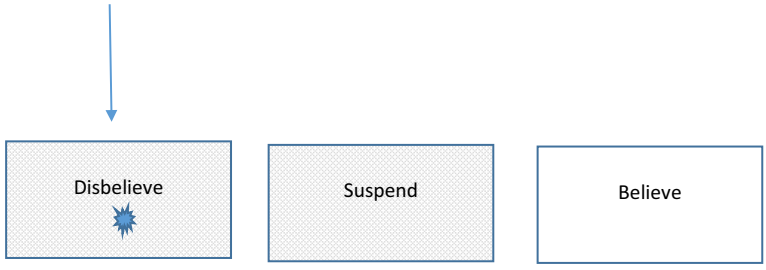
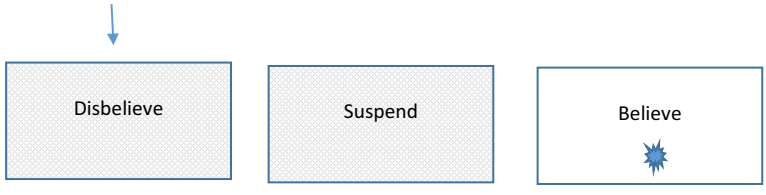


Let us now vary the strength of the epistemic reason. An epistemically rational disbelief can be a result of a relatively strong or relatively weak epistemic reason. If the disbelief is based on a relatively strong epistemic reason (long arrow), it is plausible that it would also take relatively strong practical reason to shift to belief:

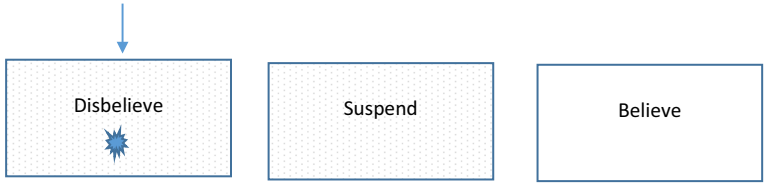


In contrast, if the epistemically rational disbelief is based on relatively weak epistemic reason (short arrow), it is plausible that it would take a relatively weak practical reason to shift to belief.



It should be clear how, on this account, whether practical reason has any effect on the all-things-considered rational doxastic state depends on (a) the distance between the epistemically rational state and the practically rational state and (b) the relative strengths of the practical and epistemic reason. The bigger the distance and the stronger the epistemic reason, the stronger the practical reason needs to be in order to shift all-things-considered rational doxastic state.[23]

We can now see how this model deals better with the case of Charlie the atheist turned agnostic. Charlie starts with decisive epistemic reason to disbelieve that God exists, and practical reason to believe in God too weak to make a difference:



[23]Although this theory counts both relative strengths and distance as relevant, one could accept a theory in which only one is relevant, that is, the relative strengths are relevant, but the distance is not, or the distance is relevant, but the relative strengths are not. I take it these could be straight-forwardly modelled by removing part of the machinery above.

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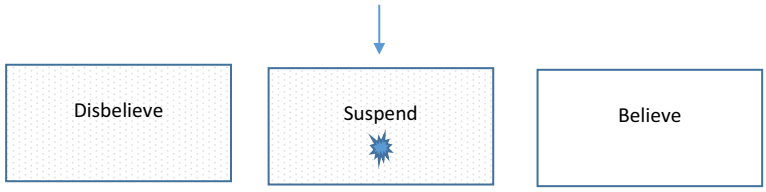
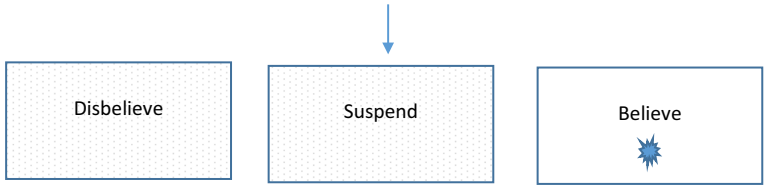
According to Howard, if the evidence shifts to favouring suspension, the practical reason remains too weak to make a difference (assume for simplicity that the strength of epistemic reason does not increase):



But our model takes into account that the shift from agnosticism to believing is smaller than the shift from atheism to believing. So once Charlie becomes an agnostic, the practical reason might push Charlie into being a believer:

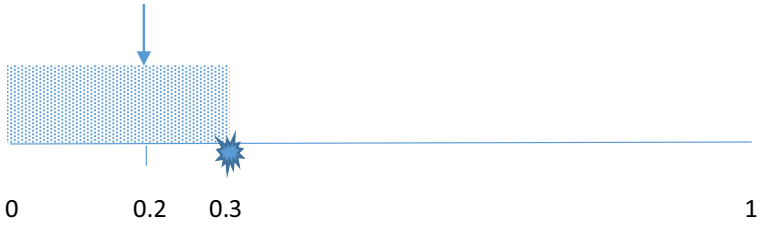


Similarly, according to Howard, the strength of Lazy Les' and Earnest Eric's epistemic reason to believe that God does not exist is irrelevant to whether the practical reason is strong enough to shift his belief. On our model, the practical reason might be strong enough for Les, with his relatively weak epistemic reason, but not strong enough for Eric with his relatively strong epistemic reason. And this seems like the right verdict. After all, in believing God exists, Eric would be required to shift from what he has strong epistemic reason to believe, while Les would only be required to shift from what he has weak epistemic reason to believe.

5 | THE PUSHING VIEW—CREDENCE

In this section, I will extend the theory to a fine-grained model which uses credences.[24]

Suppose the epistemically rational credence in some proposition is 0.2. Now add that there is practical reason to have credence of at least 0.3 which is strong enough to outweigh the epistemic reason. If so, all-things-considered rational credence is pushed from 0.2 to 0.3.



[24]I leave open that these ideas could be applied to less committal models of belief, for example, Dempster–Shafer theory. See Konstantin and Huber (2022) for an overview of various models.

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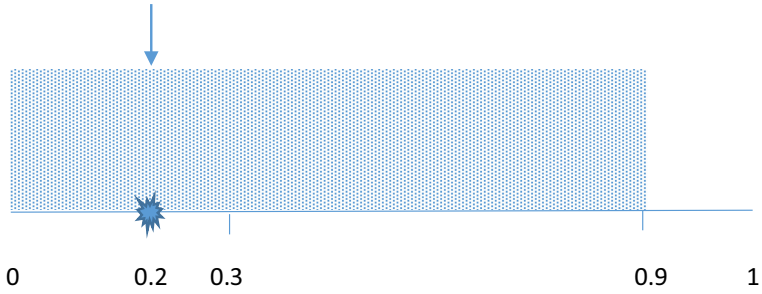
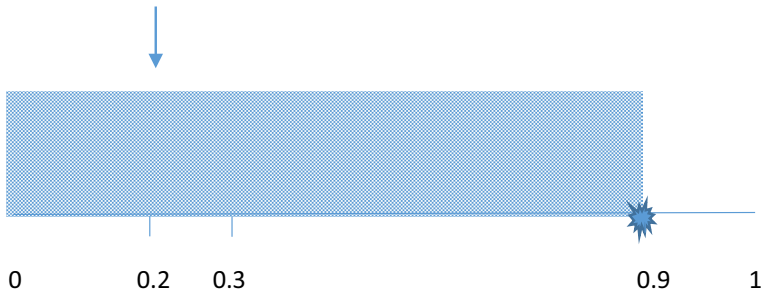
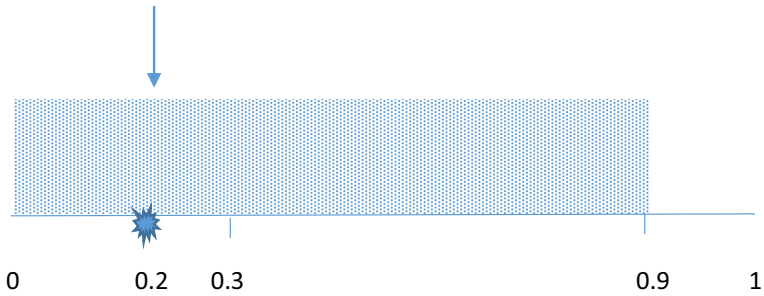
Let us now suppose that the practical reason is to have credence of at least 0.9. This would require the all-things-considered rational credence being pushed from 0.2 to 0.9. As this is a greater distance, a stronger practical reason is required than before. If the practical reason is not strong enough to rationalize a move to 0.9, then it does nothing, with all-things-considered rational credence staying at 0.2.



A stronger practical reason could push the all-things-considered rational credence to 0.9:



Let us now consider the strength of the epistemic reason. An epistemically rational credence of 0.2 can be a result of strong or weak epistemic reason. If the credence of 0.2 is based on strong epistemic reason then it would take strong practical reason to push the credence from 0.2 to 0.9. Practical reason of middling strength might not be enough:



In contrast, if the epistemically rational credence of 0.2 is based on weak epistemic reason then a practical reason of middling strength would be sufficient to push the credence from 0.2 to 0.9.

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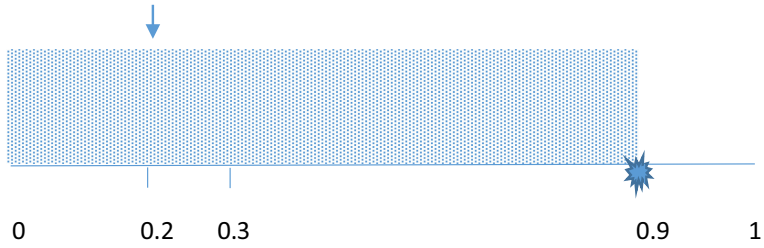

6 | QUANTIFYING THE STRENGTH OF REASON

We need a few more numbers to fill out an example. It is a familiar idea that utility is gained by satisfying the requirements of practical rationality. Let us add that utility is also gained by satisfying the requirements of epistemic rationality. When practical and epistemic rationality conflict, there is a trade-off. We can imagine that the utility gained from epistemic rationality is maximal when the agent has the epistemically rational credence, and falls as the distance from the epistemically rational credence increases, and as the relative strength of epistemic reason increases.

Suppose the epistemically rational credence that God exists is 0.2 and God punishes those who have a credence lower than 0.3 in her existence. The punishment inflicts −2 utility (from a baseline of 0).

The (minimal[25]) distance between practically rational credence (0.3) and epistemically rational credence (0.2) is 0.1. We need a number to represent the relative strength of epistemic reason (recall from section 2 that this depends on the weight of evidence).[26] For concreteness, suppose in this case that the weight of evidence determines that the number is 30.

We should take into account both distance and strength, that is, 0.1 and 30, and a natural model is that the distance of 0.1 is multiplied by 30 to give a penalty of −3 (other functions are possible). Think of this as the epistemic penalty for deviating by 0.1 from the epistemically rational credence.

Should the agent shift their credence from 0.2? No. If credence stays at 0.2, their utility is −2 due to God's punishment (and no epistemic penalty). If they move to credence 0.3 they get a score of 0 for avoiding punishment but lose 3 as an epistemic penalty, for a total utility of −3. They are best off staying at 0.2.

It is easy to see how varying the numbers provides different results. If God's punishment inflicts utility lower than −3 then the punishment outweighs the cost of deviating from the epistemically rational credence, and the agent should shift to credence of 0.3.

Alternatively, if God requires, say, 0.6 credence to avoid punishment then the epistemic penalty is (0.2–0.6) * 30 = −12. So God's punishment must inflict utility lower than −12 to justify moving to a credence of 0.6.

Finally, we could also add a further parameter to represent how much we care about epistemic reason relative to practical reason, or how much it objectively matters. For even if there is relatively strong epistemic reason to believe something, perhaps epistemic reason is just not very

[25]Any credence above 0.3 is practically rational, but there is no benefit in a credence higher than 0.3.

[26]I leave open that it might depend on other things.

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important. Compare: There are strong etiquette reasons to start with the cutlery placed on the outside; but etiquette reasons are not important. So we need something like *external weight* of reasons.[27] Internal to the rules of etiquette, there might be a weighty reason to start with the cutlery on the outside, but the external weight of etiquette reason is low (due to the facts about to what we care about, or what really matters). Similarly, strong evidence might provide a weighty internal epistemic reason but be powerless to provide a weighty external reason, if epistemic reasons aren't important.

So we can think of the number used above, 30, as representing the internal strength of epistemic reason on some occasion (determined by the evidence) and add a further parameter to represent the external *weight* of epistemic reason. We might then multiply 30 by this further parameter when calculating the epistemic penalty. At the extreme, someone who denies that there are epistemic reasons for belief might posit an external weight of 0. At the other extreme, someone who denies that there are practical reasons for belief might multiply the epistemic penalty by infinity. Intermediate weightings would correspond to an intermediate relative value of practical and epistemic reason.

7 | OBJECTIONS

In this section, I will discuss three objections and argue that none are a problem for my account.

7.1 | Arbitrary numbers

Lots of choices have been made in filling out the details, and someone might object that these choices cannot avoid arbitrariness. For example, as an infinite number of nonequivalent scoring systems are available, a choice of any one could be met with the sceptical enquiry: why that one? The objection is that there is no good answer.

The first thing to say is that Reisner and Howard face a similar problem. They both rely on a threshold where practical reasons are strong enough to trump epistemic reasons. For any threshold that may be chosen, the sceptic can ask: why there?

The second thing I want to say is what Howard says, following Kagan (1998). Howard concedes that he faces an arbitrariness objection and points out that:

> an apparent element of arbitrariness...is a necessary feature...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... 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.
>
> (p. 2241)

[27]We could also talk of internal and external reasons, but this terminology has already been taken.

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I have offered a model for making these trade-offs. While one may disagree about the details, rejecting trade-offs is not an option for any theory positing two or more intrinsically significant normative factors.

7.2 | Too sensitive?

Reisner offers some arguments against the weighing of epistemic and practical reason. He describes a case in which Jones has epistemic reason to believe Grodno is in Belarus and practical reason to believe Grodno is not in Belarus.[28]

> [Suppose Jones] has compelling evidential reasons that...Grodno is in Belarus. And, while there is some [practical] reason for Jones to believe that Grodno is not in Belarus, he will only suffer mildly for believing that Grodno is in Belarus.
>
> Now consider another set of circumstances, D, in which the [practical] reasons are stronger... ...[A]ssume that in D, the [practical] reasons outweigh the evidential ones, *but just barely*. So, if some change in circumstances occurred that generated a new evidential reason for Jones to believe that Grodno was in Belarus...then the balance could easily tip back towards its being the case that Jones ought, all things considered, to believe that Grodno is in Belarus. Some new benefit [to not] having the belief that Grodno is in Belarus might then come up...and this new benefit would add enough to the weight of the [practical] reasons to tip the all-things-considered ought back to what the [practical] reasons weigh in favour of.
>
> This delicate tipping back and forth of the balance of reasons fails to capture the way in which evidential reasons and [practical] reasons interact. What one ought to believe, once [practical] reasons start to play a role, is overly sensitive on the weighing view to small changes in the amount of evidential reason. A less sensitive mechanism of comparison is required.
>
> (pp. 21–22 Italics added)

My account faces this sort of tipping back and forth. When the practical reason to believe in God is strong enough, credence should shift from 0.2 to 0.9; if the practical reason is a tiny bit weaker, credence should stay at 0.2.

In response, I do not see what is objectionable about this tipping back and forth. Whenever opposing reasons are comparable in strength we will see the same pattern. For example, suppose someone is faced with a moral reason to give at least $1 to charity and a prudential reason to save the $1 in case they lose their job. Suppose for simplicity that $1 is the minimum donation. Let us imagine that these reasons are perfectly balanced, so that either is permitted. Then any shift in circumstances will make one option better than the other. A slight increase in the efficacy of the charity will tip the balance towards giving to charity; a slight deterioration in the labour market will tip the balance towards saving the money.

You might still feel that this delicate tipping back and forth is odd. If so, I suggest that this is due to the oddity of weighing up practical and epistemic reason *at all*. (Reisner faces the same

[28] Howard (2020, p. 2231) online gives a similar argument.

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delicate tipping back and forth when it comes to practical reason.) And indeed weighing up practical and epistemic reason for belief is odd, an oddity that could be avoided by rejecting either practical or epistemic reason for belief. But I have not argued that there is practical reason for belief nor that there is epistemic reason for belief; I have assumed that both exist and shown how they could be combined. We should not let the oddity of weighing up practical and epistemic reason colour our assessment of this *particular* method for weighing practical and epistemic reason.

7.3 | Maximal reasons

Another objection suggested by Reisner is worth discussing:

> Evidential reasons have a fixed range of weights. Evidence that gives a probability of 1 to a proposition provides the maximum amount of evidential reason possible for believing something; evidence that gives a probability of 0 to a proposition provides the maximum amount of evidential reason not to believe it (or to disbelieve it)...This feature of evidential reasons for belief makes weighing them against [practical] reasons for belief a bit strange.
>
> (p. 23)

I take Reisner to be arguing that there can be maximal epistemic reason, but no maximal practical reason, making it difficult to weigh them.

I offer two responses. First, I do not accept that any possible evidence could give a probability of 1 or 0 to any proposition. This follows from the widely accepted thesis of *Regularity*: It ought to be that, if one has a credence in a logically consistent proposition, it is greater than 0. This is highly intuitive. However, much evidence you have for some proposition, you might always get some further evidence such as 'all your previous evidence came from an unreliable source'.

Second, even if evidential reason could be maximal/minimal in a way that practical reason cannot be, that does not prevent us from comparing them. Recall, we need a number to represent the strength of internal epistemic reason, which in the example above was 30. There might be an upper bound to the strength of internal epistemic reason, which would apply when the evidence was maximally strong. Any upper bound below infinity would allow us to compare practical reason with maximally strong epistemic reason.

Someone might object that imposing an upper bound is ad hoc. But it is needed anyway to maintain a distinction between internal strength and external weight of the reasons mentioned at the end of section 6. If the strength of an internal reason could go to infinity, it would overwhelm all (noninfinite) opposing reasons. But the reason to start with the cutlery on the outside should not overwhelm all other reasons, even if the rules of etiquette require it i.e. even if the etiquette reasons are maximally strong. To prevent one type of reason overwhelming others, we should posit an upper bound on the internal strength of each type of reason.

8 | CONCLUSION

I have offered a theory for combining practical and epistemic reasons. Unlike extant theories, it avoids any sharp cut-offs where one kind of reason becomes irrelevant, or lexically secondary. Of course, it does not follow that there really is an all-things-considered reason that results from

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combining practical and epistemic reason. My proposal just shows that, given that there are practical and epistemic reasons for belief, there is a coherent way to combine them.[29]

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest.

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[29]I am grateful to Chris Howard and several anonymous referees for helpful comments on drafts of this paper and to the John Templeton Foundation for financial support.

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How to cite this article: Bradley, D. (2024). Can we combine practical and epistemic reason? *Analytic Philosophy*, *65*, 53–69. https://doi.org/10.1111/phib.12312

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