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The possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief and the wrong kind of reasons problem

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Abstract In this paper I argue against the stronger of the two views concerning the right and wrong kind of reasons for belief, i.e. the view that the only genuine normative reasons for belief are evidential. The project in this paper is primarily negative, but with an ultimately positive aim. That aim is to leave room for the possibility that there are genuine pragmatic reasons for belief. Work is required to make room for this view, because evidentialism of a strict variety remains the default view in much of the debate concerning normative reasons for belief. Strict versions of evidentialism are inconsistent with the view that there are genuine pragmatic reasons for belief.

Keywords Wrong kind of reasons · Reasons for belief · Evidentialism · Theoretical reason · Normativity · Reasons · Pragmatism

1 Introduction

With the recent growth of research in the field of reasons and normativity, there has been a decided trend towards making a distinction between what are commonly called the 'right kind of reasons' and the 'wrong kind of reasons' for propositional attitudes.[1] The distinction is commonly understood as paralleling what are sometimes called 'state-given' reasons or 'attitude-given' reasons on the one hand

[1] The literature on this topic has grown quite rapidly, but some particularly influential papers include: Danielsson and Olson (2007); Hieronymi (2005); Olson (2004); Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004); and Stratton-Lake (2005).

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(the wrong kind of reasons), and 'object-given reasons' on the other (the right kind of reasons).[2]

There is a division amongst those who hold the view that there are right and wrong kinds of reasons about the upshot of their view. One group takes the upshot to be that both the right and wrong kind of reasons are genuine normative reasons, but that there is a distinction between them that is important to our understanding of differing kinds of value.[3] The second group holds that the wrong kind of reasons are, in fact, not genuine reasons at all.[4]

Both groups accept the distinction between the two putative types of normative reasons, object-given reasons and state-given reasons. Object-given reasons are reasons that an agent has in virtue of some kind of appropriate conceptual relation between the reason and the object or content of the attitude. State-given reasons are reasons that an agent has in virtue of a relation between the reasons and, to put it somewhat imprecisely, the attitude itself.

In this paper, I shall be focusing on beliefs, and whether there are genuine state-given reasons for them. The standard object-given reason for belief is evidence for the belief's contents. The standard kind of state-given reason for belief for an agent is that her having the belief would be good for her, regardless of whether there is evidence for the belief's contents. In particular, I shall argue against the stronger of the two views concerning the right and wrong kind of reasons for belief, i.e. the view that the only genuine normative reasons for belief are evidential. I shall call this view 'strict evidentialism'.

The argument in this paper is primarily negative, but it is an important step along the way to establishing that there are at least some pragmatic reasons for belief,[5] as strict evidentialism is incompatible with the possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief. Because strict evidentialism remains the default view in much of the debate concerning normative reasons for belief,[6] it must be addressed in order to make a plausible case that there are genuine pragmatic reasons for belief. Undermining strict evidentialism does not preclude accepting that there are evidential reasons for belief, or even that evidential reasons play the central (but not singular) role in determining what one ought to believe; it is good enough for my purposes to show that there are non-evidential reasons in addition to evidential reasons. The conclusions of this paper are consistent with the views of philosophers who might be classed as ecumenical evidentialists, i.e. those who think there is something especially important or central about evidential reasons for belief, but that there are

[2] The terms 'state-given' and 'attitude-given' were developed by Derek Parfit and Christian Piller, respectively.

[3] Danielsson and Olson (2007); Hieronymi (2005) and Olson (2004) argue that there is a distinction between the right and wrong kind of reasons that is important for the analysis of value, but that the wrong kind of reasons are still genuine normative reasons for the relevant propositional attitudes.

[4] Parfit (2001); Shah (2006); and Skorupski (forthcoming) are important exponents of this second view.

[5] See Reisner (2007, 2008) in which I set out some additional groundwork for a positive argument.

[6] Evidentialism is the most common view among normativity theorists concerning reasons for belief. The list of those who support evidentialism, either explicitly or implicitly, is too long to present exhaustively. A representative sampling of places where this view is espoused or assumed includes Adler (2002); Kelly (2002); Parfit (2001); Railton (1994); Shah (2006), and Skorupski (forthcoming).

also non-evidential, perhaps even pragmatic, reasons for belief.[7] For the rest of the paper, when I speak of 'evidentialism,' I am discussing the non-ecumenical or strict variety only.[8]

Of course, the question of whether there are pragmatic or other non-evidential reasons for belief is a special case of the question posed by the wrong kind of reasons problem. The conclusions of this paper, therefore, bear directly on the wrong kind of reasons problem debate in its more general form. If I am successful at casting doubt on the correctness of strict evidentialism, then I will also have cast doubt on the correctness of the stronger of the two wrong kind of reasons theses: that there are no genuine state-given reasons for belief. What I argue for here is consistent, however, with the weaker view about the wrong kind of reasons: that there are both object and state-given reasons, but that object-given reasons play a special role in the analysis of value.

So far I have discussed the problem in an abstract way. To make the position that I am arguing against a bit more concrete, consider the following case. Here is a wager:[9] If you believe Augustus's tomb is in Stockholm, then an eccentric millionaire will give you half of his fortune. As it stands, you have recently visited Rome and seen Augustus's tomb there. You have no evidence suggesting that the tomb has been moved since your visit. Ought you to believe that Augustus's tomb is in Stockholm? If you believe that it is, you will get a large reward. Of course, it is very likely that you will be wrong, but the ill of being wrong about the location of Augustus's tomb seems like a small price to pay for great riches. Being right about the location of Augustus's tomb, at least under normal circumstances, seems like a poor trade-off against having enough money to do as you please.

Yet, the fact that in this example there are many benefits and few harms to believing that Augustus's tomb is in Stockholm would not be regarded by most normativity theorists as a reason to believe that the tomb is in Stockholm. This is because most normativity theorists think that the only considerations that can count as normative reasons for belief are evidential considerations. It is this view on which I wish to cast doubt.

My strategy in attacking evidentialism is twofold. The first part of it is to look closely at the concept of a reason and see if there is any basis for concluding that the concept of a reason for belief implies, or even strongly suggests, evidentialism. I argue that it does not. The second part is to take on a combination of considerations concerning doxastic involuntarism and the principle that 'ought' or 'reason' implies 'can', and to show that these considerations, too, do not count in favour of

[7] Richard Feldman and Hieronymi are both ecumenical evidentialists. Feldman in particular holds that evidence provides the only epistemic reasons for belief, but that there are genuine non-epistemic (e.g. practical) reasons for belief.

[8] While what I argue in this paper is consistent with the ecumenical evidentialism expressed by Feldman and Hieornymi, I have argued that pragmatic reasons should be accorded a more significant role in determining what an agent ought to believe than that given to them by either Feldman or Hieronymi. See Reisner (2008).

[9] Pascal's wager provides a more traditional example. I have avoided using it here, however, as Pascal's wager is flawed; even if we accept all of its premises, it still does not count in favour of theistic beliefs. For a clear account of why, see Hájek (2003).

evidentialism. In having addressed, and, if successful, undermined the two central supports for evidentialism, I at least will have made room for the possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief.

2 Evidential and non-evidential reasons

In this section I shall distinguish more precisely between evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief. My aim in making this distinction is to show that evidentialism does not follow directly from the logical structure of reasons for belief and that anti-evidentialism, the view that evidential reasons are not the only genuine normative reasons for belief, is consistent with the logical structure of reasons for belief. What should be emphasised is that evidentialism, too, is consistent with the account of reasons given here, but as evidentialism does not follow directly from this account, evidentialists must provide some separate support for evidentialism. In Sect. 2, I shall argue that at least one of the important separate arguments for evidentialism fails.[10]

Reason sentences assert that particular multi-place relations hold. I shall treat these relations here as having three places: fact *f* is a reason for agent *A* to φ. [11] On this view, being a reason is a property of a fact, and it is the property of that fact's standing in the reason relation to an agent and an action, belief, feeling, or anything else for which there can be a reason.[12]

Facts can have the property of being reasons to act, the property of being reasons to believe, or the property of being reasons for anything else (e.g. reasons to admire, fear, desire, etc.), although from here onwards only reasons for beliefs and actions will be mentioned for the sake of economy. To see how the same fact can have the property of being both a reason to believe and a reason to act, consider the following example.

You are on safari in Africa and are in rhino country. While idly lounging in the sun, you suddenly look up and see a rhino charging right at you. The fact that you see a rhino charging right at you is a reason for you to believe that the rhino is angry and means you harm. That you see a rhino charging at you is also a reason to act: namely it is a reason to dive behind your nearby Land Rover. This fact, that you see a charging rhino, is both a reason to believe that the rhino is angry and means you

[10] One class of arguments for evidentialism that is both common and, in my view, deeply suspect is transparency arguments. These arguments aim to show that there is something in the concept of belief that entails evidentialism. Arguments of this sort are closely related to certain arguments concerning the normativity of content. I have not addressed these arguments here, as they have been much discussed elsewhere and I believe cast into serious doubt. The most thorough and persuasive criticism of transparency arguments in the case of reasons for belief is Steglich-Petersen (2006).

[11] It is not hard to imagine expanding the number of places in the relation: … under circumstances *c* at time *t* …. The questions of whether to add additional *relata* and which to add are not important to the argument here, so they will not be discussed. The account of the logical structure of reasons here is based loosely on positions set out by John Skorupski (forthcoming) and in Skorupski (1997).

[12] It may be preferable to regard the third place in the relation as being occupied by propositions concerning actions, belief, feelings, and so on, as this would allow normal logical operations to be performed on the *relata* that occupy the third place of the reason relation.

harm and a reason to dash for cover in your safari vehicle. In this example, the same fact is both a reason for belief and a reason for action.[13]

In saying that the fact that you see a charging rhino is a reason for action and a reason for belief, we have assigned to that fact two properties: the properties of being two different *types* of reasons. The notion of a reason type requires some more explanation. To begin with, reason types, i.e. reasons for believing, acting, feeling, and so on are not distinguished by the particular facts that have the property of being reasons. In other words, being a particular type of reason is not an intrinsic property of the fact, but a relational property. In the rhino example, the same fact has the property of being two different types of reason: a reason to act and a reason to believe. The type of reason that a fact is, or has the property of being, is given by the sort of thing for which the fact is a reason: beliefs, actions, feelings, and so on. For example, a fact is a reason to act when it stands in the reason relation to an action; a fact is a reason for belief when it stands in the reason relation to a belief.

In addition to discussing types of reasons, which distinguish what sort of thing a fact is a reason for, one can discuss the grounds for a reason, i.e. on account of what the reason relation obtains. We can now identify both the type of a reason (e.g. reasons for action, reasons for belief) and in what way the reason is grounded. The distinction between evidential reasons for belief and non-evidential reasons for belief is a distinction concerning grounds, not types. Before going further, it may be helpful to briefly elaborate on the evidential/non-evidential reasons distinction.

Evidential reasons for belief are facts that stand in an evidential relation to the contents of a belief. A non-evidential reason for belief is one in which the fact stands in any other reason relation to a belief.[14] The fact that you will be awarded a prize for believing something is a reason for you to believe it, but that fact stands in a non-evidential relation to the belief: that you will win a prize for believing something is not evidence that the contents of the belief are true. One cannot distinguish whether a fact is an evidential reason or a non-evidential reason by looking at the fact alone. In the example above, the fact that you see a charging rhino is an evidential reason to believe that a rhino is angry and means you harm. It is also a non-evidential reason to do something, namely seek shelter in your safari vehicle.[15]

It is important to see that what determines whether a reason is evidential or non-evidential is the nature of the relation between the fact that is the reason and what it is a reason for. A fact is an evidential reason for a belief because it stands in an evidential relation to the contents of that belief, and a fact is a non-evidential reason for belief because it stands in some non-evidential relation to the belief. The danger

[13] It may be objected that it is not the fact that one *sees* the rhino that gives one a reason to act, but rather it is the fact that *there is a charging rhino* that gives one a reason to act. An example that presumably would not raise this worry is the following. Suppose that you have been asked by your guide to tell him immediately when you see a rhino, so that he can tell the other people on the safari to look in that direction. In that case, the fact that you see a rhino is a reason for you to tell the guide that you have seen a rhino.

[14] For example, a pragmatic reason for belief is a fact that stands in relation to a belief such that the fact makes it so that having the belief is prudentially or morally good.

[15] It is not clear that there could be an evidential reason for action.

in losing track of the relational criteria for identifying whether a reason is evidential or non-evidential is that there may be facts that themselves can loosely be described as being of an evidential or non-evidential nature, but only in the limited sense that it is true that some facts are facts about evidence. For example, it is a fact that your seeing the sunrise is evidence for its being before noon. One might want to call this fact an evidential fact just insofar as it is a fact about evidence. Likewise, it is a fact that this paper was at no point written out longhand. One might want to call this fact a non-evidential fact, as it is not about evidence. Whether or not a fact is evidential or non-evidential in this casual manner does not determine whether that fact can be or is an evidential or non-evidential reason.

At this point, it is possible to say more about what structural features of reasons evidentialism is committed to. The claim that evidentialists make is that only evidential reasons can count as reasons for belief, where evidential reasons are construed, roughly, as evidence for the contents of the belief. Evidentialism is a claim about the legitimate *grounds* for a particular *type* of reason. To put it another way, in a reason relation in which fact f is a reason for agent A to ψ, where ψ can be either an act or a belief, whether f is an evidential or non-evidential reason is not determined by any features intrinsic to f or to ψ, but rather by virtue of the relation between f and ψ.[16] Evidentialists will need an argument to explain why only one ground, evidence, is suitable for reasons of a particular type (reasons for belief).

Giving a precise account of *evidential reasons* poses a challenge. Gilbert Harman, who is not an evidentialist, offers an account of the difference between evidential and non-evidential reasons for belief:

> R is an [evidential] reason to believe P only if the probability of P given R is greater than the probability of P given not-R.[17]

And of non-evidential reasons for belief he writes:

> R is a [non-evidential] reason to believe P if R is a reason to believe P over and above the extent to which the probability of P given R is greater than the probability of P given not-R.[18]

If read literally, these definitions are not complete as definitions of evidential and non-evidential reasons, however. Consider the case of tautologies. A priori, the probability that x is x is 1. I may also have some empirical evidence that x is x. An expert logician tells me that x is x is true. So, I now have her testimony, which here counts as a reason for me to believe that x is x. However, the probability that x is x conditional on being told that x is x by a logician is no different from the probability that x is x conditional on its not being the case that I was told that by a logician. A complete definition of evidential reasons would need to account for this sort of case.

[16] Doings and believings are, of course, not propositions. If one wants reasons to count in favour of propositions or states of affairs, it is possible to read 'to ψ' propositionally. Thus in 'The fact that it is raining is a reason for Bob to bring an umbrella', we may parse 'to bring an umbrella' as 'that Bob brings an umbrella'.

[17] Harman (1999, p. 17).

[18] Ibid.

The definition of non-evidential reasons for belief may be right. If we take 'over and above' to modify 'extent', then Harman appears to be saying that any fact that is a reason to believe other than *because of* the probabilistic relationship between the fact and the truth of the belief is a non-evidential reason. Given his definition of evidential reason, this would amount to saying that any reason that is not an evidential reason is a non-evidential reason, a point on which I would concur. Defining non-evidential reasons in this way allows for the possibility that the same fact will be both an evidential and non-evidential reason for the same belief. That your reliable friend has told you that *b* is the case is an evidential reason for you to believe *b*, as your friend is generally correct. That your friend has told you that *b* is the case is also a non-evidential reason for you to believe *b*, as your believing *b* on the basis of his having told you so will please your friend.[19]

Harman's account of an evidential reason is incomplete, and completing it may prove difficult. The rough account employed earlier in this paper must suffice: a fact is an evidential reason for a belief when that fact is evidence for the contents of that belief.[20] A non-evidential reason for belief will be understood as any reason that is not an evidential one: a fact is a non-evidential reason for belief when that fact stands in some other reason relation to the belief (even if it also stands in an evidential relation to the belief). For example, one possible type of non-evidential reason is a prudential reason. A fact *f* is a prudential reason for agent *A* to believe *x*, if it is a reason for *A* to believe *x* and *f* either makes it the case that it is good for *A* that she believe *x*, or *f* just is the fact that it is good for *A* that she believe *x*.

It is also important to note that evidentialists reject certain possible understandings of what evidential reasons are. As Peter Railton observes,[21] there are reasons that could be considered evidential in virtue of their role in maximising the difference of 'true minus false' beliefs.[22] He gives the example of its being the case that one could have a reason to believe some false theorem, because believing that false theorem leads to productive work and a commensurate increase in knowledge that would not have occurred without one's having that false belief. This sort of reason, although perhaps characterisable as an evidential one, is not what evidentialists have in mind.

[19] Most examples concerning pragmatic reasons for belief are consequentialist in nature and rely on the good or bad effects of believing something. An interesting exception is Stroud (2006). She argues that on a plausible interpretation of the norms generated by friendship, believing according to the evidence (and according to other traditional epistemic norms) will in fact conflict with the norms generated by friendship. Although Stroud does not attempt to resolve the tension, it is tempting to suggest in the context of this paper that friendship could in principle provide us with pragmatic reasons for belief.

[20] Skorupski (forthcoming) observes that there are some further restrictions that must be placed on what evidence can count as an evidential reason. Skorupski argues that the epistemic accessibility of the evidence to the agent determines whether or not a piece of evidence can be a reason. Because I do not want to take up more detailed questions of the metaphysics of evidential reasons here, I have left the definition general, recognising that it needs refinement.

[21] Railton (1994) cites this as an example of something that might be wrongly taken to be a reason for belief, but in fact is a reason to be a 'believer of'. It is not clear what the force of the distinction is.

[22] It is not entirely certain that we would regard increasing our ratio of 'true minus false' beliefs to be an epistemological *desideratum*. One way to accomplish that feat would be to spend most of one's time reading lists of tautologies. I am not sure that there is a reason to do that.

They are only concerned with those evidential reasons in which the fact stands in an evidential relation to the belief for which it is a reason.

The distinction between the type of reason and its grounds is important, because it reveals why evidentialism cannot appeal directly to the structure of a reason for belief as a support for evidentialism. The question of whether or not something is a reason for belief is distinct from whether or not a reason is an evidential or non-evidential reason. The basic account of a reason for belief is that of a fact that stands in a reason relation to a belief. It would be a further property of that fact that it stood in an evidential or a non-evidential reason relation to the content of the belief. Because there is a perfectly good criterion for identifying what type of reason a fact is that does not invoke evidence or directly imply that reasons for belief are evidential reasons, the evidentialist cannot establish that all reasons to believe must be evidential reasons simply on the ground that this is essential to the concept of being a reason to believe. Thus, she cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that there are non-evidential reasons, including pragmatic reasons, for belief.

3 Does doxastic involuntarism support evidentialism?

One approach to showing that all reasons for belief must be evidential reasons is to argue that some features of belief are such that only evidence could stand in a reason relation with belief. Amongst the more important purported differences between belief and action is that belief is commonly thought to be involuntary, at least under normal circumstances, whereas action is thought to be voluntary. Here I argue that the non-voluntary nature of belief does not tell in favour of evidentialism.

Doxastic involuntarists believe that under normal circumstances we cannot believe something by an act of the will. There is a common thought that this involuntarism ties in with evidentialism. A common loose line of reasoning is offered by Christopher Hookway:

> Since beliefs are not actions, and since it is common to deny that belief formation can itself be subject to the will, it is natural to conclude that if such [evidential] evaluations are the primary focus of epistemic evaluations, the systems of norms that guide them are rather different from those that guide our practical reasoning and action.[23]

In other words, because beliefs are involuntary and actions voluntary, we should expect an important difference in the nature of the norms of belief and the norms of action. Evidentialists often think this difference is that only evidence can be a reason for belief, whereas non-evidential considerations serve as reasons for action. Thomas Kelly gives voice to the thought in this way:

> … The mere realization that my believing some proposition would issue in good consequences does not result in my believing that proposition. On the other hand, the realization that I have strong evidence that some proposition is

[23] Hookway (2000, p. 60).

> true typically does result in my believing that proposition. With respect to beliefs, practical considerations seem to be psychologically impotent in a way that epistemic considerations are not. And it is tempting to conclude from this that practical considerations are irrelevant to a belief's rationality.
> Compare the situation with respect to height. One can, of course, make judgements about the expected consequences of being a certain height. For example, I am confident that I am considerably better off, on the whole, being as tall as I actually am as opposed to being two feet shorter. Still, no one would think that it is more rational for me to be some heights rather than others. Moreover, it's plausible to suppose that the *reason why the expected consequences of my being a certain height make no difference to whether or not it is rational for me to be that height derives from my utter lack of control over my height. (Perhaps if I could control my height, then it would be more rational for me to be some heights rather than others.*)[24] [italics added]

Kelly brings up two distinct points. One is that there is typically a connection between my judgement that there is evidence for *b* and my believing *b*, while there is no such connection between my judgement that it would be best for me to believe *b* and my believing *b*. The other is that this connection has an impact on the rationality of the belief because ought (or reason) implies can—because I cannot voluntarily form beliefs based on judging that it would be good for me to do so. There is a more general issue, one not discussed by Kelly, of whether belief formation is never or nearly never subject to the will or whether belief formation is not subject to the will only or primarily in cases of goodness based judgements.

Other proponents of evidentialism do tackle this last issue and accept a very broad version of involuntarism, one that denies that any beliefs may be subject to the will. Jonathan Adler devotes an entire chapter of his book to the matter,[25] and more generally in philosophy, involuntarism is largely, although by no means universally, the norm.[26] Whether involuntarism is the correct view is a complex debate in its own right, and one that cannot be settled here. Let us assume for the sake of argument that we cannot will our beliefs and then see what follows. If involuntarism is true, then as Hookway suggests, it would not be surprising if there were an important difference between reasons for belief and reasons for action. We *can* will our actions and some mental states, but we *cannot* will beliefs. This difference in willing *feels* important; yet, I do not think that involuntarism about beliefs eliminates the possibility that there are non-evidential reasons for belief. In fact, I shall argue that the argument from involuntarism either shows that there are too few reasons for belief, even too few evidential ones, while there are adequate reasons for action, or that the argument from involuntarism fails to tell against the possibility that there are non-evidential reasons for belief.

[24] Kelly (2002, p. 6).

[25] Adler (2002, p. 2).

[26] The beginning of any modern discussion of doxastic involuntarism is Williams (1973). It has had a broad influence in establishing doxastic involuntarism as the dominant view in current debates.

One view about normative reasons is that they have to be the sort of reasons that we can make good on,[27] that 'ought' (or 'reason') implies 'can'. That normative reasons must be the sort of reasons that we can make good on immediately seems to create an important distinction between reasons for action and reasons for belief. There is a reason for me to eat a healthy lunch today. When I grasp that reason, I can choose to act on it (and succeed in acting on it, if it is within my powers to do so), because my actions, or at least many of my actions, are under my direct control.

On the standard picture, the process for belief works quite differently. Although grasping a reason to believe something may cause me in some way to believe what there is a reason to believe, it is not a matter of choosing to believe it. In some cases, recognising that there is a reason for me to believe something is unlikely to lead directly to my believing it. For example, I might realise that there is a reason for me to believe that I am 6'0" tall, because I would have more self-confidence if I believed that. However, because all the evidence available to me suggests otherwise, I cannot choose to believe that I am 6'0" tall. I see that there is a reason for me to believe it, but it is not a reason that I can make good on. My beliefs are not, at least in general, subject to my direct control; they instead respond spontaneously to (what I take to be) evidence. Taking 'ought' to imply 'can', at least initially, appears to affect my reasons for belief in a way that does affect my actions. The thought is that because I cannot choose to have beliefs for certain reasons, then it is not the case that I ought to have them.

Whether the 'ought' (or 'reason') implies 'can' principle provides support for evidentialism requires a more careful look. In particular, it is necessary to be specific about what sort of possibility is suggested by 'can'. The two most plausible kinds of possibility invoked by 'can' are physical and psychological.

Looking at psychological possibility first, one way of reading involuntarism is that we are, so to speak, victims of belief. Beliefs force themselves on us. I see a car in front of me and believe that a car is in front of me, regardless of whether or not I wish to believe that. I can, in other words, psychologically only believe what I end up believing.[28] If the victim view about believing is correct, then we are each in an important respect very much at the mercy of how well our individual cognitive apparatus is set up. Consider a person, who, owing to certain limits in his cognitive faculties, cannot be made to understand correctly how a particular piece of evidence relates to a belief; instead, he always forms a belief that the evidence does not support. Such a person will be stuck with a belief that the evidence does not tell in favour of, a helpless victim of an unwarranted belief. An example brings this situation out more clearly.

[27] I use 'make good on' to mean something like 'act on' and 'believe in virtue of'. Note that it is necessary to employ the awkward expression 'make good on' here, because English lacks a universal verb. If 'do' were a universal verb, then it would be nicer to say that normative reasons must be reasons for things that we can do. But, at least in philosophical usage, 'do' suggests an action, whereas a universal verb would cover stative verbs (like believing), as well.

[28] Of course, even on this picture I do retain some control, by choosing where to direct my attention and what sort of inquiries to pursue. Nevertheless, given those choices, I am simply forced to believe whatever I end up believing as a result of those actions.

Jim is kidnapped by a cult. There he is indoctrinated to believe that all scientists are liars. He believes that if they say something is the case, that is evidence against its being the case. After ten years in the cult, Jim is brainwashed on this matter beyond recovery, although he is perfectly rational in other respects. Jim reads in the newspaper that a distinguished zoologist claims to have discovered a new species of mammal—the first such discovery in many years—and this discovery has been scientifically documented with the greatest care by other zoologists. The fact that a distinguished zoologist claims to have discovered a new species of mammal and has documented it carefully is taken by Jim to be a reason for him to believe that no such new species has been discovered. Furthermore, if he were to discover that several peer-reviewed journals had accepted the claim and that other zoologists also had subsequently claimed to have encountered the species, that would be all the more reason in Jim's mind to believe that such an animal has not been discovered. Jim cannot help but believe what he believes in this case; it has become psychologically impossible for him to believe otherwise. Jim is no longer psychologically capable of making good evidential evaluations about matters involving the claims of scientists.

In cases of belief, if we take 'ought' to imply 'can psychologically', then it looks like evidentialists have to bite the bullet and say that it is not the case that Jim ought to believe that a new species of mammal has been discovered. This is because Jim cannot make good on the reasons he would seem to have for believing that a new species of mammal has been discovered. The situation is really quite bad for evidentialists, if ought implies psychological possibility in cases of belief, because no matter how poorly our belief acquisition apparatus operates, it will never be the case that we ought not to have the beliefs it psychologically requires us to have. So in the above case with Jim, we cannot say that he ought to believe that a new species has been discovered, or even that he ought not to believe that the odds are that a new species has not been discovered.

If instead of psychological possibility, we retain the standard of possibility normally employed for reasons for action, then we will be using physical possibility. But taking 'ought' as implying 'can physically' does not help the evidentialist at all. It is physically possible to have any belief that can be encoded in your brain. Even if we find it implausible, given Jim's evidential views, that Jim could hold the belief that a new species of mammal has been discovered while also believing that scientists say this claim is true, it is certainly physically possible for Jim to hold both beliefs. In fact, it may not be so implausible to imagine Jim holding both beliefs, as Jim may not have noticed that he held both beliefs, and thus not noticed that they are in conflict.

The difficulty for the evidentialist is that physical possibility is too weak to do the work that they need it to do. An example brings out just how weak a restriction on one's beliefs physical possibility is. Consider some future neurologist who knows how to rewire people's brains to give them beliefs. The neurologist operates on Jim, giving him the belief that Japan is actually located next to Ghana. He also rewires Jim's brain such that when Jim tries to reason out why he believes that Japan is next to Ghana, he becomes distracted and fails to get anywhere with his introspection. So, even when Jim sees maps showing Japan as an East Asian island nation, he still believes that Japan is in Africa. Any effort to explain, rationalise, or justify his belief will not get off the ground with Jim.

Jim neither acquired his belief because of evidence nor does he maintain it because of evidence. Yet, it is physically possible that Jim could have this belief about Japan and maintain it, not because he has or ever had any evidence, but because he is in the unfortunate circumstance of being unable to introspect on his reasons for having this belief. If it is physical possibility that counts in terms of what we ought or have reason to believe, then it looks plausible that there could be non-evidential reasons for belief. The example with Jim shows that it is physically possible to have beliefs that are formed and maintained on non-evidential grounds, suggesting that normative reasons for belief cannot be excluded on 'ought' implies 'can' grounds, when we use the 'can' of physical possibility.

For sake of completeness, it is worth noting that reading the 'can' in 'ought' implies 'can' as meaning 'can will' is not a viable option. Doxastic involuntarism excludes willing from the picture *ex hypothesi*, even in cases where one wants to will oneself to believe something on evidential grounds.

Where does this leave the evidentialist? She is left with an unappealing pair of interpretations of 'ought' implies 'can'. If she takes 'can' to require psychological possibility, then doxastic involuntarism rules out too much. There are a great many things that there is apparently even evidential reason to believe that individual people, on account of one consideration or another, cannot believe. So, a number of putatively good evidential reasons will be excluded. If physical possibility is the criterion, then doxastic involuntarism rules out very little. There are quite a number of things that it is physically possible to believe, without having evidence for one's beliefs and having acquired one's beliefs because of having had evidence for them.

4 Against the 'causing yourself' account

Doxastic involuntarist considerations have been influential in the development of another line of evidentialist argument. We can make a distinction between what there is reason for us to believe and what there is reason for us to cause ourselves to believe.[29] The former sort of reason is a purely evidential matter, while the latter admits of all sorts of non-evidential reasons, including moral and prudential reasons. As Kelly points out,[30] Pascal gives us an interesting example of how doxastic involuntarism might lead us to this conclusion. Pascal advises us that given our inability to will our beliefs, practical considerations like his wager should guide us to put ourselves in a position where we will then acquire the right belief. Putting ourselves in a position where we will acquire a belief is a kind of action, an instance of causing, or at least trying to cause, ourselves to believe something. Because we cannot choose to believe something that is good for us to believe, what there is really reason for us to do, on the causing-yourself account, is to perform actions such that we believe what it is good for us to believe.

Yet the causing-yourself account of pragmatic reasons for belief is not convincing. Consider Geoff, a wealthy eccentric. Geoff has offered Joe half of

[29] Parfit (2001), Shah (2006), and Skorupski (forthcoming) all advance a version of this view.

[30] Kelly (2002, p. 6).

his fortune if Joe believes next Tuesday that it is Wednesday. There now seems to be an excellent reason for Joe to believe something for which there is no evidential reason. At worst, he will miss a few appointments and endure a little embarrassment for getting the day wrong, but he stands to gain a considerable sum of money in exchange. Evidentialists argue that Geoff does not really have a reason to believe that it is Wednesday on the coming Tuesday; he just has a reason to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday.

There are two arguments that shift the burden to the evidentialists to show why it is that there is only a reason for Joe to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday and that there is not also a reason for Joe to believe that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday. The first argument is the argument from the unity of normativity.

Let us assume for sake of argument that by the evidentialists' lights, there is enough reason for Joe to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday that he ought to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday. And, let us also assume that there is sufficient evidential reason for Joe to believe that it is not Wednesday on next Tuesday. If we accept that Joe ought on next Tuesday to cause himself to believe that it is Wednesday (because it is good for him to do so), and if we also accept that he ought to believe that it is not Wednesday (because of the evidence), then normativity makes a demand of him that he cannot satisfy. Because causing x implies x, if Joe does what he ought to do and believes what he ought to believe, then he will believe that it is not Wednesday and also believe that it is Wednesday. Evidentialism cannot support a contradiction, because that there is sufficient evidence for believing p implies that there is sufficient evidence for not believing not p, so evidentialists will find themselves in an unacceptable situation, if they are willing to accept that practical and theoretical reason are in principle comparable.[31]

This objection has limited bite insofar as the unity of normativity can be denied. If one does not think that practical and theoretical reasons or oughts have a direct relation to each other, then Joe's inability to comply with both his theoretical and practical reasons will not be of much concern. However, for evidentialists who want to accept the unity of normativity, this argument presents a significant problem.

Here is a second objection. Evidentialists and non-evidentialists alike can agree that in the case of Geoff and Joe, whether or not Joe gets the prize depends entirely on what he believes, whether or not he causes himself to believe it; after all, Geoff is awarding the prize not for Joe's causing himself to believe something, but for his believing it. Consider a case with a similar form.

Jill has tickets to a concert. The venue has a rule that no latecomers will be admitted. The fact that no latecomers will be admitted is a reason for Jill to arrive at the concert hall on time. One might also think that there is a reason for Jill to cause herself to arrive on time, because if she arrives on time, she will not miss the

[31] An anonymous referee suggested that the evidentialist could avoid the objection from the unity of normativity by claiming that apparent pragmatic reasons for belief are reasons to *try* to believe something. Trying to ψ is compatible with not ψ-ing, and trying not to ψ is compatible with ψ-ing. This approach may successfully answer the unity of normativity objection, but it will run into trouble with the remaining objections in this section.

concert. Jill can cause herself to arrive on time by leaving for the concert at a suitably early hour, hurrying on her way, etc. As it happens, she can also be caused to arrive on time by someone else, perhaps a friend who will grab her, throw her into a car, drive her there, and carry her to the door before the concert starts.

Regardless of whether she causes herself to arrive on time or whether she is caused to arrive on time by someone else, she gets the prize for being there on time, not for causing herself to do so. The fact that she will not be admitted is a reason for Jill to arrive on time. There may also be a reason for her to cause herself to arrive on time, but that reason is dependent on there being a reason for Jill to arrive on time. This is an instance of the normativity of the end, Jill's arriving on time, being transmitted to the means, Jill's causing herself to arrive on time.

In the case of the offer from Geoff to Joe, there is also a transmission of normativity from the end to the means. Joe, we suppose, cannot directly form the belief that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday, but causing himself to believe that it is Wednesday on next Tuesday is a way for him to come to believe it. Without assuming to start with that there are no pragmatic reasons for belief, it is unclear why we would think that there is no reason to believe that it is Wednesday, but that there is a reason to cause oneself to believe it, when it looks exactly as if this is an instance where the normativity of an end, believing it is Wednesday, is transmitted to a means, causing oneself to believe that it is Wednesday. If the reason attaches to what one gets the prize for in the concert case, it is unclear, without begging the question against non-evidential reasons for belief, why the reason should not attach to what Joe receives the prize for in the Wednesday case.[32] It may be that the two cases are different in virtue of the fact that the Wednesday case involves a belief and an action, while the concert case involves only action, but the burden falls to the evidentialist to show why this difference is significant.

Another point bears mentioning here. In some cases an agent cannot believe what the non-evidential reasons tell her to believe without causing herself to believe it. The two examples above are such cases. There will be times, however, when an agent can believe what the non-evidential reasons tell her to believe. There are at least two sorts of cases in which one need not cause oneself to believe something that non-evidential reasons tell one to believe.

The first case occurs when there is also sufficient evidence for the same belief. Believing that you had an appearance in a play on Broadway would make you happy beyond your wildest dreams. As it happens, you are shown evidence that you did have an appearance in a play on Broadway, when you were too young to remember having done so. It seems implausible that in this circumstance there is a reason for you to cause yourself to believe that you are on Broadway, as it is unnecessary for you to do so, because you will believe that you were on Broadway as a result of the evidence.

The second case occurs when you already hold the belief for which there is a non-evidential reason. You believe that there is a lamp in your office. An eccentric millionaire offers you untold riches on the condition that you believe that there is a lamp in your office. There is a non-evidential reason for you to believe that there is a

[32] A similar point has been made recently in Danielsson and Olson (2007) and slightly less recently by Rabinowicz and Rannøw-Rasmussen (2004).

lamp in your office, and you have the belief. Here, it may not even be sensible to speak of your causing yourself to have this belief, as you already have it.

There is a third, quite independent objection, to the causing-yourself account of pragmatic reasons for belief. I call this 'the argument from blocked ascent'. The argument from blocked ascent goes like this. A large pragmatic inducement to believe something is not treated as a reason to believe it by the evidentialist. But, clearly, the evidentialist does not want to say that nothing follows from the fact that you could save the world or become independently wealthy by believing something for which there is no evidence. It would be quite bad if they had to say that nothing counts in favour of your ending up in a belief state such that the world is saved. Their explanation is that, while you lack reason to believe, there is a reason for you to cause yourself to believe (or on some versions, a reason for you to desire that you believe) what the putative pragmatic reasons for belief tell in favour of believing.

The trouble with this approach is that you can be offered a deal that will specify that you will lose the prize if you cause yourself to believe the proposition in question, or if you have any higher-order attitudes (in the case of those who argue that there is reason to desire to believe something) towards the first order belief. Ascent can be blocked as part of the pragmatic reason for belief. In the cases in which ascent is blocked, the evidentialist has to bite a very big bullet and accept that there is nothing that counts in favour of holding an evidentially dodgy belief that will prevent the end of the world or make you fabulously rich. Given that it is not clear what other independent considerations there might be that count in favour of accepting evidentialism, there is a considerable burden on the evidentialist to explain why there are no moral or prudential (pragmatic) reasons for belief.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that (strict) evidentialism has a difficult time getting off the ground. Evidentialism denies the possibility of moral or prudential reasons for belief, what I have called 'pragmatic reasons for belief' in this paper. If we cannot find sound reasons for believing evidentialism, then the possibility remains open that the fact that having a belief would lead to good results can be a genuine normative reason for that belief. The defender of pragmatism (or of a mixed view that allows both evidential and pragmatic reasons) must provide positive arguments for his position, but the case for strict evidentialism as the default view should not be regarded as sufficiently solid to earn it that position in the debate. Evidentialists must rally positive resources if they are to close the door on the possibility of pragmatic reasons for belief.

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