

Why Only Evidential Considerations Can Justify Belief

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Abstract

At least when we restrict our attention to the epistemic domain, it seems clear that only considerations which bear on whether p can render a subject's belief that p epistemically justified, by constituting the reasons on the basis of which she believes that p . And we ought to expect any account of epistemic normativity to explain why this is so. Extant accounts generally appeal to the idea that belief aims at truth, in an effort to explain why there is a kind of evidential constraint on the sorts of considerations that can be epistemic reasons. However, there are grounds for doubting that belief, in fact, aims at truth in the way that these accounts propose. I develop here an alternative explanation of why it is that non-evidential considerations cannot be epistemic reasons by taking seriously the idea that the constitutive aim of belief is fundamentally action-oriented.

Key Words: Epistemic Normativity; Epistemic Reasons; Epistemic Justification; Evidentialism; Belief; Aim of Belief

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1. Introduction

Imagine Bella knows that she can secure a great sum of money merely by believing that there are an even number of stars in galaxy (perhaps an eccentric billionaire has promised the payout as a prize for anyone who manages to believe this particular evidentially-unsupported proposition). Or, if you prefer a less contrived case, imagine Jay is a job candidate who knows she will give a more compelling interview if she believes she is the best candidate for the position, even though she has no evidence that she is, in fact, especially well qualified for the position (perhaps she even has evidence to the effect that she is equally or slightly less well qualified for the position than her competitors). In such cases, the subject is guaranteed a substantial practical benefit if she adopts a particular doxastic state with respect to a certain proposition. Crucially, however, that the subject is guaranteed a substantial practical benefit if she holds the belief that p in these cases in no way turns on the truth of p . That a subject S fairs better here by believing that p is entirely independent of whether S has any evidence that p is, in fact, the case.

Intuitively, at least—and especially when cases of this sort are in the spotlight—it seems that considerations that have no bearing on the question of whether p —i.e. non-evidential considerations—can and sometimes do *count in favor* (at least in some sense of the phrase) of believing certain propositions and not others.¹ Thus, it seems that non-

¹ Considerations that are evidential in character with respect to whether p need not be evidence for or against p 's being the case. A consideration, c , counting in favor of or against believing that p is an evidential consideration just in case (i) c constitutes first-order evidence (e.g. c is a reliable indicator that p is the case),

evidential considerations can and sometimes do bear on the question of whether, from a practical or all-things-considered perspective, S ought to believe that *p*.

When we take up the epistemic perspective, we think that non-evidential considerations cannot help to justify a subject's belief by serving as the grounds on the basis of which the subject believes as she does. Non-evidential considerations are simply incapable of serving as *epistemic justifiers*: even when a non-evidential consideration, *c*, counts in favor of a subject believing that *p* in the circumstances with which she is faced, *c* cannot help render a subject's belief that *p* epistemically justified by serving as the subject's grounds for belief. In fact, it seems that the subject's believing that *p* on the basis of a non-evidential consideration, *c*, essentially guarantees that the subject's belief that *p* is epistemically *unjustified*.

An *epistemic reason* is a potential epistemic justifier. It is a consideration that will help to make a subject's belief that *p* epistemically justified if it serves as a ground on the basis of which the subject believes. But only certain sorts of considerations—namely evidential considerations—can play the role of conferring a kind of positive epistemic status (i.e. epistemic justification) on a belief by virtue of serving as the grounds on the basis of which the belief in question is held.² If a consideration, *c*, is non-evidential in character with respect to *p*, then, regardless of whether *c* counts in favor of the subject believing that *p* in the circumstances with which she is faced, *c* cannot help to epistemically justify the subject's belief that *p* by serving as the reason for which she so believes. So, *c* cannot be an epistemic reason for S to believe that *p* unless *c* is evidential in character.

The thesis that all epistemic reasons are evidential in character is intuitively plausible, and almost universally accepted in contemporary philosophical discussion.³ And, at least for the purposes of this paper, I treat this thesis a datum that any satisfactory account of epistemic normativity must accommodate and explain. And the explanatory burden here is non-trivial. After all, it seems that any consideration that counts in favor of a particular course of action has what it takes to (help) do the job of justifying S's performance of the course of action in question from the practical perspective. And it is far from obvious what makes the epistemic perspective so different. An account of epistemic normativity, then, must explain why is it that considerations which are non-evidential in character can never serve as epistemic justifiers, even when they seem to count in favor of

or (ii) *c* constitutes higher-order evidence (e.g. *c* is a bit of first-order evidence that one's normal ability to discern whether *p* has been compromised).

² The point here is not psychological: the point is not about when and whether it is psychologically possible for us to believe on the basis of certain sorts of considerations. Recognizing that epistemic reasons are necessarily evidential in character does not settle the question of whether believers like us are psychologically capable of believing and/or recognizing ourselves as believing for or on the basis of considerations that we take to be non-evidential in character.

³ Almost all epistemologists, myself included, accept this thesis without defense, as a kind of fixed point in epistemological theorizing. For a compelling defense of the thesis that non-evidential consideration can never confer positive epistemic status on a subject's belief by constituting the grounds for which she believes, see Kelly 2002. For views which deny this thesis, see Stich 1993 and Talbot 2014 (although against Talbot, see Littlejohn 2013). It is worth noting that this thesis is compatible with a view according to which practical features of a subject's situation (e.g. stakes) can make a difference to the epistemic status of the subject's belief. This thesis is also compatible with the view that there are practical or pragmatic reasons for belief (in addition to epistemic reasons for belief) and so that epistemic reasons aren't the only (and perhaps aren't even—see Papineau 2013) genuinely normative reasons for belief.

(or against) believing that p . Put in more concrete terms, the epistemologist who hopes to offer a complete account of the nature and source of epistemic norms and standards owes an explanation of why it is that the fact that someone will pay Bella a large sum to believe that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy cannot (even help to) make Bella epistemically justified in believing that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy, but the relevant statement in a cutting-edge astronomy text can.⁴

Many extant attempts to explain the evidential constraint on epistemic justifiers appeal, crucially, to there being a constitutive normative relationship between belief and truth (e.g. belief aims at truth, belief is correct or successful if and only if true, belief that p is an attitude that settles the question of whether p is true in a way that makes the believer answerable) in order to illuminate how it is that, in the good case, a consideration manages to confer positive epistemic status on the belief for which it constitutes the subject's rational ground.⁵ According to these accounts, a certain substantive normative relationship linking belief and truth lies at the heart of the domain of epistemic normativity. And it is this normative connection between belief and truth that gives rise to and explains both the source and the evidential character of the constraint on what kinds of considerations are capable of serving as epistemic justifiers.

Recently, however, a number of theorists have argued that we have grounds for doubting that the normative connection between belief and truth is, in fact, as these accounts take it to be.⁶ Thus, I pursue here an alternative explanatory strategy—one that appeals to the distinctive role that our beliefs play in guiding our actions toward the successful achievement of our ends, rather than any sort of normative relationship between belief and truth, in an effort to demystify the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons.⁷

⁴ It is worth noting that an explanation of why it is that all epistemic reasons (i.e. considerations that can serve to justify a belief by serving as the grounds on which the belief is based) are evidential in character might (and, in fact, I think should) leave open whether epistemic reasons to believe that p are genuine normative reasons to believe that p . Put differently, an explanation of why non-evidential considerations cannot confer positive epistemic status on belief in the way that evidential considerations can and do need not (and, in fact, I think ought not) also be an explanation of why it is that we should care at all about the epistemic status of our beliefs. An account of why non-evidential considerations cannot confer positive epistemic status on belief in the way that evidential considerations can and do is an account that fills in the content and structure of (one part of) our evaluative practice in the epistemic domain (it does the same kind of work as would an account that explains why, e.g., the rules of etiquette have the content that they do). In contrast, an account of how we ought, all things considered, to believe—i.e. of what (if any) normative reasons we have to believe—is an account of why our evaluative practice in the epistemic domain matters to us, has normative force, or carries real weight. I accept that a complete account of epistemic normativity must answer this further question: when and why (if at all) ought we care about and be moved by the epistemic status of our beliefs? As I see things, the philosophical work of developing an adequate answer to this question is far from trivial. I have tried to develop such an answer on behalf of the action-oriented epistemologist elsewhere, but I do not attempt to address this question here.

⁵ Different versions of this line of thinking run through Adler 2002, Hieronymi 2005, Raz 2011, Shah 2006, and Wedgwood 2013, among others.

⁶ See, e.g., Gibbons 2013, Hazlett 2013, Nolfi 2015.

⁷ There is a third, distinct strategy one might adopt in an effort to explain the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons that merits mention. Adopting a knowledge-first approach, one might suggest that any evidential constraint on epistemic reasons is to be explained by appeal to belief's aiming (in some or other sense of the phrase) at knowledge (see, e.g., Bird 2007 and Smithies 2012). A full treatment of this explanatory strategy is simply beyond the scope of this paper. However, if the arguments that I offer below

My aim is to develop an explanation of the nature and source of the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons that does not depend on there being any sort of explanatorily indispensable, metaphysically and/or conceptually constitutive normative link connecting belief to truth. And if the explanation I develop below is adequate, then epistemologists have yet another reason to take seriously the kind of action-oriented account of epistemic normativity on which it rests.

2. Formulating a Plausible Constraint

Of course, since my aim is to explain the source of this evidential constraint on epistemic reasons, it will be helpful to have a more precise characterization of the evidential constraint on hand—one that relies somewhat less on our intuitive reactions to cases. Here is a first pass:

Strong Evidential Constraint (SEC): S's belief that p can only be epistemically justified if S's belief that p is based on evidence that p is the case.

SEC is plausible, especially if we focus on the kinds of cases with which our discussion began. After all, when a subject's belief that p fails to be based on evidential considerations, this is often sufficient to guarantee that the subject's belief is unjustified. Paradigmatically, if Bella's belief that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy were based on or grounded in her recognition that she stands to receive a large monetary reward if she so believes—i.e. if this were to be Bella's reason for believing—then Bella's belief would, by virtue of this fact, be unjustified. Similarly, and perhaps less controversially, the wishful thinker's belief is unjustified precisely, it seems, because the wishful thinker's belief is based on considerations that are straightforwardly non-evidential in character.

Still, *SEC* is strictly weaker than evidentialism construed in terms of supervenience, and so weaker than some epistemologists will want. A commitment to evidentialism is sometimes defined as a commitment to the thesis that whether S's belief that p is epistemically justified supervenes on the quality/quantity of the evidence for p on which S's belief that p is based.⁸ But, although *SEC* constitutes a kind of evidential constraint on epistemic reasons, *SEC* allows that non-evidential considerations might, nevertheless, impact or influence the justificatory status of a subject's belief. For example, *SEC* leaves open that certain non-evidential considerations might play a role in determining how much evidence is required in order to render a belief based on the available evidence justified in a certain situation. What *SEC* rules out is the possibility of non-evidential considerations conferring positive epistemic status on a subject's belief *by serving as justifiers* (i.e. as the grounds or reasons on the basis of which the subject believes). And, at least in this respect, *SEC* tracks our evaluative practice in the epistemic domain more closely than the evidentialist's supervenience thesis does. After all, as Jason Stanley and others have pointed out, we often take the evidential standard for epistemic justification to be sensitive

are sound, then I take it that the kind of knowledge-first approach that Bird and Smithies favor has a heretofore unrecognized or underappreciated competitor: the sort of action-oriented approach that I develop below.

⁸ See, e.g., Conee and Feldman 2004.

to the practical features of a subject's circumstances.⁹ That said, we do not think that practical features of a subject's circumstances can help to render a subject's belief epistemically justified by themselves serving as reasons for which subject believes. Rather, our evaluative practice suggests that we think practical features of a subject's circumstances exert their influence on the epistemic status of the subject's belief, when they do, via some other route. And *SEC* leaves open this possibility, while the evidentialist's supervenience thesis rules it out. My goal here is to formulate (and, later, to supply a vindicating explanation of) the evidential constraint that plausibly underwrites our evaluative practice in the epistemic domain. An evidential supervenience thesis, then, is too strong: *SEC* more closely captures the presumption operative in our everyday evaluative practice.

Still, *SEC* is, itself, probably too restrictive. One reason is that certain of our beliefs may be epistemically uncriticizable—these beliefs may be epistemically justified and epistemically rational—even though they are not based on any substantive grounds at all. Put differently, there may be cases in which S's belief that *p* could enjoy the relevant sorts of positive epistemic status, without there being *any* particular consideration that serves as the (subjective or objective) epistemic reason for which S believes that *p*. Depending on one's philosophical tastes, one might be inclined to accept that, e.g., simple mathematical beliefs, basic perceptual beliefs, or beliefs about one's own occurrent mental states are like this.¹⁰ Regardless, however, it would be better to formulate the evidential constraint in a way that doesn't pre-judge the issue of whether there are any beliefs that enjoy their positive epistemic status without being based on or held for positive reasons. Thus, it makes sense to recast the evidential constraint as follows.

Weak Evidential Constraint (WEC): If *c* is an epistemic reason for S to believe that *p*, then *c* must be evidential in character.

WEC effectively excludes non-evidential considerations from the domain of considerations that render a belief justified by serving as grounds on the basis of which the belief is held.

3. Explaining the Weak Evidential Constraint, Take 1

The evidential constraint on epistemic justifiers is not without analogue. After all, Kavka's toxin puzzle suggests that some kind of analogous constraint restricts the domain of potentially justification-conferring reasons for intention.¹¹ Imagine that someone offers me a large sum of money to intend to drink a particular vile of poison. Of course, I need not actually drink the poison to get the money—I just have to form the intention to drink. The promise of a monetary reward certainly counts in favor of my intending to drink the poison. Nevertheless, it seems that the promise of a monetary reward is not the sort of consideration that could (help to) make my intention to drink the vile of poison justified (at least *qua intention*) by serving as the reason for, or on the basis of which, I intend.¹²

⁹ See, e.g., Stanley 2005.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Wright 2004 or Pryor 2000.

¹¹ Kavka 1983.

¹² I leave open the possibility that this consideration might justify my intention from an all-things-considered perspective.

Thus, it appears that certain considerations that count in favor of intending to Φ just don't have what it takes to (help) do the job of justifying, at least *qua intention*, an intention to Φ . Certain considerations that count in favor of intending to Φ count in favor of intending to Φ in the *wrong way* to render an intention to Φ justified by virtue of serving as the basis for the intention.

But the fact that there seems to be some sort of constraint on the kinds of considerations that can serve as justifiers for intention, but not on the kinds of considerations that can justify action, doesn't, by itself, help to demystify the evidential restriction on epistemic justifiers.¹³ Perhaps, however, the analogy here does suggest that it is the nature of belief, as the particular kind of mental attitude that it is, which generates an evidential constraint on sorts of considerations that can serve as epistemic justifiers. After all, the restriction on the sorts of considerations that can justify an intention, *qua intention*, has different content; it is not an *evidential* restriction. And, presumably, this is because belief and intention are different sorts of mental attitudes. So, perhaps we ought to look to the nature of belief to explain why the domain of epistemic justifiers is restricted to evidential considerations.

In particular, if the way in which c manages to render S's belief that p epistemically justified by serving as the reason on the basis of which S believes that p entails that c can only perform its justifying role if c actually bears on whether p , then the fact that non-evidential considerations are excluded from the domain of potential epistemic justifiers would be entirely unsurprising.¹⁴ Thus, the epistemologist who aspires to explain *WEC*, might adopt the following strategy: look to the nature of belief to ground an account of how (i.e. in virtue of what) a consideration, c , manages to epistemically justify S's belief that p (by serving as the grounds for S's belief) according to which non-evidential considerations just don't have what it takes to do this job.

Extant attempts to pursue this sort of strategy in an effort to explain *WEC* typically appeal to some sort of necessary, explanatorily indispensable, often constitutive, normative relationship between belief and truth—a normative relationship which entails that false beliefs necessarily fall short, at least along one important, explanatorily significant, dimension of epistemic evaluation—in order to illuminate how the reasons for which S

¹³ Instead, it gives us reason to hope for a *generalizable* explanation of the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons. The problem of supplying *generalizable* explanation of the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons at least overlaps with (and perhaps just is) what has come to be known as the wrong kind of reason problem (see, e.g., Hieronymi 2005, Schroeder 2010 and 2012) The literature on the wrong kind of reason problem strongly suggests that we should expect that an explanation of why there is an evidential constraint on those considerations that can serve as epistemic reasons will help us see how to understand why not all considerations counting in favor of a subject intending to Φ have what it takes to (help) do the job of justifying, at least *qua intention*, the subject's intention to Φ . Although I will not pursue the project here, I am optimistic that the explanatory strategy I adopt below can be extended to yield a fully general explanation, and so a solution, to the wrong kind of reason problem.

¹⁴ There are certain theorists who would view this explanatory strategy as wrongheaded from the start. John Gibbons's work, for example, suggests, instead, that it is a brute fact, and part of what makes beliefs the distinctive kind of mental attitude that they are, that only perceived/actual evidential considerations can rationalize/justify belief. Unfortunately, I do not have space here to give this alternative the kind of treatment that it deserves. For the moment, at least, I can only register that I find the sort explanation that this alternative supplies distinctly unsatisfying (some of what I say in the first section helps to explain why). I hope the explanation I offer below is at least cause for optimism that we can do better.

believes confer justificatory status on S's belief.¹⁵ The usual story, in very rough outline, goes like this: belief aims at the truth.¹⁶ Moreover, standards of epistemic justification both derive from and function to somehow promote, advance, or respect belief's truth aim (however this aim is construed). As a result, only considerations that, in fact, bear on whether p could make it the case that S's believing that p constitutes an instance of epistemically justified belief by serving as the considerations on the basis of which S believes. Those considerations that bear on whether or not p is the case are just those considerations that constitute evidence for or against p .¹⁷ So, a consideration, c , must be evidential in character in order to be capable of conferring the relevant sort of positive epistemic status on S's belief by serving as the reason for which S believes.¹⁸

A bit of reflection on the cases with which the discussion began can make this sort of explanation seem attractive. The promise of a monetary reward cannot help to epistemically justify my belief that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy by serving as the reason-for-which I believe. After all, whether I have been offered a monetary

¹⁵ Certain theorists who adopt this kind of explanatory strategy take the normative relationship linking belief and truth to be explanatorily fundamental (perhaps most explicitly, Shah 2006, and Wedgwood 2013). For these theorists, the question "why does belief aim at truth?" had only the following trivial answer: that beliefs aim at truth is just part of what makes beliefs the distinctive kind of mental attitude that they are. Others who would accept that belief aims at truth and that this fact helps to explain the evidentialist constraint on epistemic reasons see the normative relationship between belief and truth as straightforwardly derivative (again, perhaps most explicitly, Kornblith 2002 or Lycan 1988). These theorists might say that belief aims at truth because, e.g., (i) belief aims, in the first instance, at knowledge (and knowledge requires truth) or (ii) belief is connected to action in such a way as to impose the aim of truth on belief.

¹⁶ The slogan that belief aims at truth (and so that false beliefs are necessarily epistemically faulty) has been unpacked in a variety of different ways (e.g. beliefs ought to be true, belief is correct or successful if and only if true, or belief that p amounts to settling the question of whether p in a way that makes one answerable for settling this question accurately). These differences may well be significant when it comes to evaluating whether any particular attempt to develop the truth-oriented explanatory strategy under consideration here—i.e. any attempt to show that belief's aiming at truth entails WEC—is successful. However, the concern which motivates taking seriously the alternative to this truth-oriented strategy which I develop below is not that belief's aiming at truth fails to entail WEC, but rather that, put roughly, belief does not aim at truth in the first place. Thus, the issue of how the proponent of this truth-oriented explanatory strategy ought to understand belief's truth aim falls beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ The story here must, of course, be complicated to explain both why and how higher-order evidence can serve as an epistemic reason, but the general idea is that, since the norms of epistemic justification derive from belief's truth aim, considerations that are relevant in some way or other to assessing the truth of p can confer positive justification on S's belief that p by serving as the grounds on the basis of which S believes.

¹⁸ Those theorists cited in note 5 all articulate versions of this story more or less explicitly in their work. Shah 2006, for instance, explains that "[r]easons for ϕ ing are considerations which indicate whether ϕ ing would be correct according to the norms for ϕ ing." If this is right, then justifiers do their work by indicating an attitude's correctness. So, epistemic reasons count in favor of S believing that p in a specific way: namely, by indicating that believing that p is, in fact, correct in the circumstances at hand. Moreover, according to Shah, "[t]he sole norm for belief is this: believing that p is correct if and only if p is true." So, then, the epistemic reason for which S believes that p renders this belief epistemically justified by indicating that S's belief that p is true. And so, evidential considerations (and only evidential considerations) are capable of conferring epistemic justification on a belief by constituting the grounds on which this belief is based because they are precisely the sorts of considerations that can indicate whether the belief in question is correct. Non-evidential considerations that count in favor of S's belief that p are, by their very nature, the sorts of considerations that do not and cannot do this job; they do not count in favor of S's belief that p in this particular way.

reward to believe that there are an even number of stars in the galaxy has nothing to do with—it does not indicate one way or the other—whether there really are an even number of stars in our galaxy. And if belief aims at the truth, then a consideration that has no bearing on whether or not the content of a particular belief is or would be true, is similarly silent on the question of whether or not the belief meets or would meet its aim. Such a consideration, is, then, by its very nature, incapable of indicating whether belief meets its truth aim.

This kind of attempt to explain *WEC* purports to expose *WEC* as an upshot of a certain necessary normative connection between belief and truth: beliefs are, by their very nature, the sorts of mental attitudes that aim at (in some sense of this phrase) the truth. And if beliefs did aim at the truth, then perhaps this kind of attempt to explain *WEC* would adequately demystify the fact that non-evidential considerations cannot rationalize or justify belief. Perhaps, that is, *WEC* is a straightforward corollary to the thesis that there is a necessary normative connection between belief and truth.

In recent years, however, the thesis that there is a necessary normative connection between belief and truth has come under attack: there are a number of different arguments on offer in the contemporary literature aimed at undermining accounts of epistemic normativity according to which there is a necessary normative connection between belief and truth.¹⁹ If the proponents of these arguments are right, then the kind of account of the normative relationship between belief and truth that is often pressed into service to explain *WEC* is, despite its intuitive appeal, ultimately untenable. At the very least, then, epistemologists have reason to search for another explanation of *WEC*, one that does not rely on belief aiming at the truth in any sort of normatively substantive and explanatorily significant way.

4. Setting the Stage for an Alternative Explanation of the Weak Evidential Constraint

Adopting an account of epistemic normativity according to which belief does not aim at truth requires either that one supply an alternative explanation of *WEC*, or, since *WEC* captures a central feature of our evaluative practice in the epistemic domain, that one accept a radically revisionary account of epistemic normativity according to which *WEC* is false. One way to construe my ambition in the remainder of this piece is as aimed at showing that the first course is genuinely available. That is, giving up on there being any sort of normative relationship between belief and truth does not thereby require that one adopt the kind of radically revisionary epistemology which denies *WEC*. I have suggested that we ought to treat having the resources to supply an explanation of why *WEC* obtains as a criterion of adequacy for an account of epistemic normativity. But if this is right, then the question of whether it is possible to explain *WEC* without appeal to there being any sort of normatively substantive connection between belief and truth is just the question of whether any account of epistemic normativity which denies that there is such a connection merits philosophical attention. Thus, a second way to construe my ambition in the remainder of this piece is as aimed at showing that at least one sort of account of epistemic normativity which denies that belief aims at truth (in any sort of constitutive, normatively

¹⁹ For arguments against the thesis that belief aims at the truth in the way that these attempts at explanation presuppose, see Gibbons 2013, Hazlett 2013, or Nolfi 2015.

substantive way) can explain *WEC*, and so accounts of epistemic normativity according to which there is a normatively substantive, fundamental, and constitutive link between belief and truth aren't the only accounts of epistemic normativity worth taking seriously.

Recall that we are looking for an account of that in virtue of what a particular consideration, *c*, rationalizes or justifies S's belief that *p* by constituting the subjective or objective reason for which S believes that *p*—one which entails that non-evidential considerations just don't have what it takes, so to speak, to do the job. I want to suggest that we can make significant progress in developing such an account by conceiving of the relationship between epistemic norms and epistemic reasons in a certain way.²⁰

I have argued elsewhere that we ought to think of epistemic norms as norms of ideal—ideal, that is, for creatures like us operating in the kind of environment in which we operate—cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation. Structurally speaking, they are like norms of proper functioning with respect to, e.g., circulation, digestion, etc. Just as norms of proper functioning with respect to circulation specify what ideal operation of the circulatory system entails, epistemic norms specify how ideal cognition with respect to belief regulation will proceed. Epistemic norms, then, characterize particular ways in which our cognitive systems ought to regulate our doxastic attitudes. They map the way in which ideal cognitive functioning translates any particular input (e.g. perceptual experience that *p*) to doxastic output (e.g. belief that *p*). Thus, we can represent epistemic norms, on this picture, as functions (in the mathematical sense) that describe certain classes of cognitive transitions which process a specified set of mental states and then yield the formation, continued maintenance, or revision of a certain doxastic attitude toward a particular proposition. And as such, epistemic norms can be described by ordered pairs, which map a set of input conditions (e.g. perceptual experience as of *p*) onto a target doxastic output (e.g. the belief that *p*). It is, however, only epistemically proper to move from, e.g., a perceptual experience as of *p* to the belief that *p* when one is reasonably confident that one is not hallucinating, that one is not subject to a visual illusion which generates the appearance that *p*, etc. So, any plausible norm of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation described as a function from input to doxastic output must qualify a finite set of inputs with a *ceteris paribus* clause. So, epistemic norms specify a finite set of mental states that, when they figure as inputs to ideal cognitive processing, will, *ceteris paribus*, generate or sustain a particular doxastic output. When a perceptual experience as of *p* figures as input, then, *ceteris paribus*, ideal cognition will generate or sustain a belief that *p*.

This way of thinking about what epistemic norms are affords a natural strategy for characterizing those considerations that constitute epistemic reasons for S to believe that *p*. Specifically, I propose that a consideration, *c*, is an objective epistemic reason for S to believe that *p* only if norms of ideal cognitive functioning, in fact, map *c* (taken as input) to the belief that *p* (as output). On this proposal, then, a consideration, *c*, is capable of serving as a justifier for S's belief that *p* (i.e. as the epistemic reason on the basis of which S believes that *p* in virtue of which S's belief is epistemically justified) only if *c* is the kind

²⁰ I take it that the explanatory power of this way of conceiving of the relationship between epistemic norms and epistemic reasons is at least *prima facie* reason to take the resulting picture on board. And I leave the task of supplying independent motivation for conceiving of the relationship between epistemic norms and epistemic reasons as I suggest that we should here for another time.

of input to cognition that norms of ideal cognitive functioning map to the belief that p as output.²¹

It is, perhaps, worth highlighting that this way of conceiving of the relationship between epistemic norms and epistemic reasons fits naturally with a certain sort of virtue theoretic account of epistemic normativity, according to which epistemic reasons are those considerations on the basis of which the virtuous believer would believe. On this sort of account, norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation merely serve to articulate, characterize, or describe (perhaps only partially or approximately, since an attempt to spell out such norms will inevitably include an ineliminable *ceteris paribus* clause) virtuous belief regulation. The considerations that figure as input to ideal cognitive processing which serves to generate or sustain the belief that p as output are precisely those considerations on the basis of which the virtuous believer would believe that p .

Crucially, this picture puts us in a position to reconceive of *WEC* as (or as a close corollary to) a constraint on the kinds of considerations that serve as input to ideal cognitive functioning which yields the belief that p . So reconceived, *WEC* tells us that ideal cognitive functioning only outputs the belief that p when it takes evidential considerations for p as input. Thus, *WEC* can be recast as follows:

WEC recast: Epistemic norms always and only map evidential considerations (taken as input to cognitive processing) for p onto the belief that p (as the output of cognitive processing)

And in order explain *WEC*, then, we need to explain why it is that the norms of ideal cognitive functioning never map non-evidential considerations that count in favor of S believing that p (taken as input) onto the belief that p (as output).

5. Explaining the Weak Evidential Constraint, Take 2

Can we give an explanation of *WEC recast* that does not rely on belief aiming at the truth in the kind of normatively substantive way described above? I think we can. How? By exploiting an old idea about what beliefs *are*. The old idea is this: beliefs are mental states that play a map-like role in guiding action. And my proposal is that, instead of appealing to a necessary normative connection between belief and truth, we can appeal to a constitutive normative connection between belief and action in order to explain *WEC*.²²

It is plausible that belief, by its very nature, has a certain proper function—a job or purpose that beliefs are meant to perform or fulfill in the believer’s mental economy. Moreover, that beliefs have their particular proper function (rather than some other proper function), it seems, is part of what makes belief the distinctive mental attitude that it is. Put

²¹ Notice that this characterization entails only that the set of epistemic reasons for believing that p is a *subset* of the set of input considerations that norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation map onto the belief that p . Thus, this characterization allows that certain cases of ideal cognitive functioning output beliefs that are not appropriately understood to be based on reasons at all (see note 10).

²² Whiting 2014 adopts a superficially similar explanatory strategy, but ultimately suggests that truth is a necessary condition for a belief’s being well-suited to play the role that Whiting takes belief to play in generating action. The explanation of *WEC* that I develop here leaves open the possibility that belief need not be true in order to be well-suited to fulfill belief’s proper function, and, as I suggest below, this is as it should be.

differently, it seems that having a particular proper function is constitutive of being the mental attitude of belief. It makes sense, then, that simply by virtue of being the kind of mental attitude that they are, beliefs *aim at* being well-suited to perform their particular proper function. And so the norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation are just those norms conformity with which most effectively results in believers like us (i.e. believers equipped with the kind of equipment that we have, operating in the kind of environment in which we operate) having beliefs that achieve this aim.²³

Although determining the proper function of belief is, at least in part, an empirical endeavor, there is, I suggest, good reason to think that a certain hypothesis about the role beliefs are meant to fulfill in believers' mental economies is at least roughly correct: beliefs are meant to inform our actions by serving as a kind of "map" of the facts, one that equips us to anticipate and evaluate the outcomes of our actions in order to facilitate action selection that results in the successful achievement of our different ends across different situations.²⁴ Beliefs are well-suited to fulfill their proper function when they are well-suited to play this specific role—i.e. a "map-like" role—in the cognitive production of successful actions. The proper function of belief, then, is fundamentally action-oriented. Moreover, since our ends, as well as our circumstances, are varied and evolve over time, the beliefs that most successfully fulfill belief's particular action-oriented function will, like useful maps, be versatile: they will be well-suited to facilitate successful action regardless of the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves, and independently of the particular end(s) that we aim to achieve. Accordingly, evaluation of how well-suited a particular belief is to fulfill belief's action-oriented proper function—i.e. evaluations of a belief's correctness—will prioritize or privilege being well-suited to play belief's "map-like" role within mental economies that have the distinctive structure and character that ours have, in the sorts of circumstances in which human beings normally find ourselves, and in pursuit of the sorts of ends that human beings normally pursue.²⁵

On this picture, norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation are just norms conformity with which most effectively equips believers who have the kind of cognitive equipment that we have and operate in the kind of environment in which we operate with beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief's particular action-oriented proper function. So, norms of ideal cognitive functioning represent those patterns of cognitive processing which most reliably yield beliefs (as output) that are well-suited to guide our actions across a variety of different circumstances and in the service of a variety of different ends by supplying a kind of "map" of the facts.²⁶

²³ This way of thinking about the nature of belief is not new (see, e.g. Burge 2010, Kornblith 2002, Lycan 1988, Millikan 1993). However, almost all epistemologists who endorse this way of thinking take it that the proper function of belief is or ultimately requires accurate representation—i.e. truth.

²⁴ This idea has deep historical roots and is perhaps most elegantly given voice by F.P. Ramsey's often-quoted statement that "beliefs are the maps by which we steer."

²⁵ On this picture, then, epistemic norms are norms which govern (at least in the first instance) *human* belief and *human* believers in normal worlds. I do not have space to attempt a full defense of this commitment here. However, I take this commitment to be well-motivated by considerations regarding the general fruitfulness of characterizing norms of biological proper functioning at the species-level. Moreover, it seems to me that the kind of priority accorded to *human* belief, understood in relation to *human* action, here fits the character of our everyday evaluative practice in the epistemic domain especially well.

²⁶ I supply independent arguments for this picture in Nolfi 2015.

It might appear, at least at first pass, that our beliefs must be true in order to be well-suited to play the particular “map-like” role in action-production that beliefs are meant to play. Put differently, truth can appear to be a necessary feature of beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief’s particular action-oriented proper function.²⁷ But closer inspection suggests otherwise. Recent work in psychology indicates that certain sorts of systematic distortions in the way in which our beliefs represent the world might better equip creatures with the kind of cognitive equipment that we have to act successfully. Research on the optimism bias, for example, supplies compelling evidence that we are, as a general rule, more successful in achieving our various ends when our beliefs about ourselves and about our relationship to the world around us are systematically distorted in particular ways.²⁸ If my belief corpus includes slightly overly optimistic or inflated representations of the degree to which I am, as well as the degree to which others think of me as, intelligent, hard-working, resilient in the face of adversity, kind, caring etc.—if, that is, my beliefs about myself and about the way in which others view me generally code a mild but systematic distortion of the relevant facts—then, e.g., I may have an easier time making friends, I may perform better in job interviews, and I may be more successful in efforts to convince investors to invest in my business venture. And if my belief corpus slightly overestimates the degree to which I am responsible for the good things that happen to me and slightly underestimates the degree to which I am responsible for the bad, then it is plausible that I will be more resilient in the face of tragedy and hardship. In short, this research suggests that sometimes I will be more successful in achieving various of my ends across a wide range of different circumstances if my beliefs in a certain domain systematically distort the facts in a specific way, than I would be were my beliefs in this domain to accurately represent the facts as they are. I take one lesson of this body of psychological research to be that we have good reason to doubt that being true is a prerequisite for beliefs to be well-suited to fulfill belief’s particular action-oriented proper function. Perhaps true beliefs about whether *p* are often or typically best-suited to fulfill belief’s particular action-oriented proper function. But at least in some domains, it seems that beliefs which are somewhat inaccurate, skewed, or distorted, and so, strictly-speaking, false (e.g. beliefs that manifest the optimism bias) are better-suited than their true, perfectly accurate counterparts to play the action-oriented “map-like” role that beliefs are meant to play in our mental economies.

Nevertheless, it is not at all plausible that one’s beliefs could be well-suited to guide action in the way that beliefs are meant to if the cognitive processing that generates and sustains one’s belief corpus were to allow one’s beliefs to float free, so to speak, from reality. After all, if one’s beliefs were wildly, radically, and systematically out of touch

²⁷ In fact, I suspect that a (sometimes suppressed—see Millikan 1993, sometimes explicit—see Kornblith 2002) assumption that accurate representation is just what is required for beliefs to be well-suited to play the relevant map-like role in guiding action underwrites a certain version of the truth-oriented explanatory strategy described in section 3 above. Thus, the arguments that I offer below against the thesis that beliefs constitutively aim to accurately represent the facts *by virtue of* aiming to be well-suited to guide action-production in the way the beliefs paradigmatically do are offered in the same spirit of, and as a supplement to, those arguments cited in note 19.

²⁸ For an overview of the relevant psychological results, see, e.g., Taylor & Brown 1988 and 1994, Johnson & Fowler 2011, or Sharot 2011. See Hazlett 2013 for a philosophical discussion of some of the relevant psychological research.

with the facts, then, to the extent that one managed to act successfully at all, the success of one's actions would be merely lucky; a happy fluke.²⁹

More precisely: given the nature of the particular world in which we live (e.g. our world is not a Cartesian demon world), our ability to reliably and consistently act so as to successfully achieve our ends depends on our ability to act in a way that is responsive to the facts at they stand. Moreover, our ability to act in ways that are responsive to the facts at they stand is underwritten by our capacity for belief (a capacity which I've suggested is, in the first instance, a capacity to represent reality in the service of action-production). When all goes well, our beliefs equip us to respond effectively (in pursuit of our ends) to the obstacles and the opportunities afforded to us by various different features of reality. If all this is right, then our capacity to reliably act successfully in the pursuit of our ends requires that our beliefs be tethered to the facts. Much as the cartographer must work from the facts to create a map of the New York Subway which consistently and reliably allows travelers to navigate the subway system, ideal cognition will have to work from the facts in order to generate the kind of belief corpus which equips us with a "map" that makes successful action feasible across a wide variety of different circumstances. And so, any instance of cognitive processing which counts as ideal cognition with respect to belief regulation must serve to connect the belief(s) it generates or sustains to the facts as they stand. Put differently, ideal cognition with respect to belief regulation must be cognition that renders our beliefs responsive to (although perhaps not accurate representations of) the facts.³⁰

I have argued that certain sorts of mild misrepresentation, introduced via distorting cognitive processing, into our "map" of the facts in specific domains may reliably facilitate successful action. But I have also argued that radical misrepresentation—the kind of misrepresentation that admits of no tractable, systematic link back to the facts themselves—will, absent some sort of happy accident, frustrate our efforts to achieve our ends. Thus, ideal belief regulation—i.e. belief regulation that conforms with epistemic norms—is belief regulation that effectively ties my beliefs to reality, even if it sometimes also ensures that my beliefs are likely inaccurate by virtue of being distorted in systematic and predictable ways. And this is because the norms of cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation conformity with which most effectively results in believers like us having beliefs that achieve their action-oriented aim are norms which map considerations that serve as input to cognition to beliefs in a way that tethers these beliefs to reality.

²⁹ Imagine I take a drug which causes me to believe that I can fly and, as a result, I leap out of a second story window. It is hard to imagine a situation in which my leap will not have the effect of frustrating a great many of my various ends. Since my belief is the causal upshot of my having taken a drug, the cognitive processing which underwrites my belief is isolated from, and so floats free of, the facts. And this makes it a happy accident if, whenever I act on the basis of my belief that I can fly, things turn out such that I don't end up frustrating my aims.

³⁰ Thus, although the action-oriented alternative I develop here departs significantly from the kind of familiar truth-oriented approach according to which false beliefs necessarily fall short of belief's aim and are thereby faulty or criticizable along one (and perhaps the most fundamental) dimension of epistemic evaluation, it retains a kind of commitment to the more general idea that, put roughly, our beliefs ought to be tethered to reality (and so that any belief corpus which wildly and radically misrepresents reality is thereby epistemically faulty). For this reason, the action-oriented approach does not constitute quite as radical a departure from mainstream epistemology as one might initially think, even if, contra epistemological orthodoxy, it does entail that certain false beliefs might be epistemically flawless and so epistemically uncriticizable.

How does ideal cognitive functioning effectively ensure that our beliefs (and so our actions) are appropriately responsive to the facts, even while sometimes introducing mild distortions into our belief corpus? Let me sketch out what I think is the most plausible answer to this question.³¹ If the cartographer's goal is to create a map of the New York City Subway that facilitates human beings' successful navigation of the city by way of the subway, it makes sense that she will begin with information about the geography of the city, the city's subway routes, the locations of subway stops, which exceptionally common destination points or widely-recognized landmarks are easily accessible from particular stops, points where transfers are possible, etc. The cartographer will then construct her map on the basis of this information, introducing distortions as necessary in order to ensure that the map will be a useful tool for human navigators. Similarly, I suggest that ideal cognition with respect to belief regulation will begin with information about reality and construct our belief corpus on the basis of this information. More precisely, ideal cognitive processing that generates and sustains the belief about whether p will start from and operate on (i.e. take as input) all available information that is evidential in character with respect to p . If this is right, then ideal cognition ensures that our beliefs are tethered to reality, and so well-suited to inform successful action in the pursuit of our varied ends across a range of circumstances, by ensuring that the only considerations which the norms of ideal cognitive functioning map to the belief that p are evidential in character.

If this account is correct, then even in cases where ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation in a specific domain effectively operates so as to generate and maintain inaccurate beliefs (e.g. in the case of beliefs that manifest the optimism bias), distortion must latch onto features of reality, and then contort the information that serves as input to cognition in a systematic way to generate a distorted belief. Perhaps ideal cognitive functioning requires that the domain-specific cognitive mechanisms regulating my beliefs about the degree to which others think well of me effectively introduce a certain kind of positive-skew into my belief corpus. But if this is so, then the distorting cognitive mechanisms that systematically give rise to and sustain my positively-skewed self-beliefs must work from (or on) the facts as they stand. It is telling that psychologists and cognitive scientists who study the optimism bias and positive illusions posit that the optimism bias introduces distortion into our beliefs by effectively shifting the ways in which we weight the significance or relevance of different sorts of evidence when we draw certain sorts of conclusions (e.g. about our own chances of success, about the degree to which we control our futures, about the likelihood that we will experience great hardship, etc.) on the basis of this evidence.³² More precisely, the distorting mechanisms which underwrite our slightly overly optimistic self-beliefs effectively underweight certain sorts of disconfirming evidential input (e.g. experiences in which others act in a manner that

³¹ Although I believe it is the most plausible answer to this question—i.e. it provides the best explanation of how it is that ideal cognitive processing manages to render our beliefs responsive to reality—and especially well-motivated by a natural way of thinking about the process of constructing a useful map, the sketch that follows is not the only possible answer. I will not attempt a full defense of this answer against competitors here. My aim is far more conservative: I aim only to show that there is a coherent and plausible way of developing an action-oriented epistemology that can supply a vindicating explanation of *WEC*, and thus deserves to be taken seriously as an alternative to the kind of alethic explanation that has been popular in the literature.

³² For references, see note 28.

suggests they take me to be incompetent, lazy, unkind, etc.) and overweight confirming evidential input. As a result, just as the visual experiences of a subject wearing tinted glasses, although colored, nevertheless remain sensitive to features of her immediate surroundings, my beliefs about, e.g., the degree to which others think well of me, although optimistically skewed, nevertheless remain sensitive to reality.

If all this is right, then cognitive processing that maps non-evidential considerations counting in favor of S's believing that p to the belief that p is never *ideal* cognitive processing. Thus, epistemic norms will only map evidential considerations as input to the belief that p as output. And so the only considerations that are capable of serving as epistemic justifiers for S's belief that p —the only considerations that constitute epistemic reasons for S to believe that p —are evidential in character. The only considerations that are capable of serving as an epistemic justifier for S's belief that p will, in fact, be evidential in character. The domain of potential epistemic reasons is restricted in precisely the way that *WEC* suggests. Non-evidential considerations don't have what it takes to serve as epistemic reasons because they cannot serve as inputs to ideal cognition that generates or sustains the belief that p .

Let me now return briefly to the case with which I began this discussion. That Bella has been promised a monetary reward for believing that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy does not bear on the question of whether there are, in fact, an even number of stars in our galaxy. And so cognitive processing which takes the promise of a monetary reward as input and yields the belief that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy as output—i.e. cognitive processing that begins with the promise of a monetary reward and generates and/or sustains the belief that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy—cannot be the kind of cognitive processing which effectively roots our beliefs in the facts. As such, it cannot be the kind of cognitive processing which, in believers like us, most reliably generates and sustains beliefs that are well-suited to fulfill belief's particular action-oriented proper function. And this is why the promise of a monetary reward cannot serve as an epistemic reason for Bella to believe that there are an even number of stars in our galaxy.

Thus, an action-oriented account of epistemic normativity of the sort that I sketch here can explain why non-evidential considerations cannot impact the epistemic status of our beliefs by serving as the reasons or grounds on the basis of which we believe. On this account, epistemic reasons to believe that p —considerations that might epistemically justify a subject's belief that p by serving as the grounds on the basis of which the subject believes, are just those considerations that norms of ideal cognition with respect to belief regulation map onto or pair with the belief that p . Crucially, however, non-evidential considerations do not figure as input to ideal cognitive processing which yields belief as output because ideal cognition effectively renders our beliefs responsive to the facts by exclusively taking evidential considerations as input to belief-regulating processing.

Still, the account I've proposed here leaves open the possibility that non-evidential considerations sometimes make a difference to the epistemic status of our beliefs. Instead, non-evidential considerations might influence the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to determine which doxastic output epistemic norms pair with a specified set of inputs to cognitive processing. Or, non-evidential considerations might influence the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to determine whether the ineliminable *ceteris paribus* clause in epistemic norms is met. Put differently, non-evidential considerations might influence

the epistemic status of our beliefs by helping to determine the contents of epistemic norms, by helping to determine which sorts of cognitive transitions are sanctioned by epistemic norms; or by helping to determine which doxastic attitude a particular set of evidential considerations can justify.

6. Conclusion

If belief did aim at the truth, then a consideration that has no bearing on whether or not the content of a belief is true is thereby silent on the question of whether or not the belief meets its constitutive aim. And perhaps this result would explain why only evidential considerations—i.e. considerations that bear on whether p —can justify a subject's belief that p by serving as the reason for which the subject believes. But if belief's constitutive aim is not truth, then we need a different explanation of the fact that non-evidential considerations cannot serve as epistemic justifiers; the fact that epistemic reasons are always evidential in character. And in an effort to address this need, I've proposed an explanation of the evidential constraint on epistemic justifiers, one that does not require or entail that belief aim at truth. The starting point of this alternative is that the constitutive aim of belief is fundamentally action-oriented. Belief aims not at truth, but rather to be well-suited to play a certain kind of map-like role in guiding action. Particular beliefs meet belief's constitutive aim when they are well-suited to play the particular sort of "map-like" action-guiding role that beliefs are meant to play in our mental economies. And ideal belief-regulating cognitive processing is cognitive processing which reliably generates and sustains beliefs that are well-suited to play belief's "map-like" action-guiding role. So, ideal belief-regulating cognitive processing is cognitive processing of the sort which guarantees that the beliefs it generates and sustains are responsive to the facts. If my arguments are successful, then the action-oriented epistemologist who denies that belief aims at truth is at least as well-positioned to explain the *WEC* as her traditionally alethic counterpart. Thus, the fact that there is a kind of evidentialist constraint on epistemic reasons does not give us reason to favor the kind of truth-oriented alethic approach to epistemological theorizing that has dominated the western philosophical tradition over an action-oriented alternative of the sort that I develop above.³³

³³ I am grateful to my colleagues in the philosophy department at the University of Vermont, as well as to the editors of this volume and audiences at Cornell University, Williams College, the 2014 Meeting of the Canadian Society for Epistemology, and at the 2015 Bled Philosophy Conference for invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this piece.

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