

ARE EPISTEMIC REASONS EVER REASONS TO PROMOTE?

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ABSTRACT: In trying to distinguish the right kinds of reasons from the wrong, epistemologists often appeal to the connection to truth to explain why practical considerations cannot constitute reasons. The view they typically opt for is one on which only evidence can constitute a reason to believe. Brian Talbot has shown that these approaches don't exclude the possibility that there are non-evidential reasons for belief that can justify a belief without being evidence for that belief. He thinks that there are indeed such reasons and that they are the right kind of reasons to justify belief. The existence of such truth promoting non-epistemic reasons is said to follow from the fact that we have an epistemic end that involves the attainment of true belief. I shall argue that there are no such reasons precisely because there is an epistemic end that has normative authority.

KEYWORDS: epistemic consequentialism, epistemic reasons, evidence, epistemic norms, epistemic ought, wrong kind of reason problem, Brian Talbot

There is a commonly held view that says that all epistemic reasons are pieces of evidence.¹ This view is mistaken and Talbot² (forthcoming) is right to reject it.³ Unfortunately, he rejects the view for the wrong reasons because the non-evidential reasons he discusses are the wrong kind of reasons to justify belief.

1.

Everyone seems to agree that there are evidential reasons (i.e., things that constitute evidence) that can justify belief. Talbot argues that a second kind of

¹ See Joseph Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36.

² Brian Talbot, "Truth-promoting non-evidential reasons for belief," *Philosophical Studies*, forthcoming.

³ The right reason to reject this identification has to do with reasons associated with norms (e.g., a norm that enjoins one to believe only on sufficient evidence). As David Owens (*Reason Without Freedom* (London: Routledge, 2000)) reminds us, the fact that one lacks sufficient evidence to believe *p* is a decisive reason to refrain and is not itself a further piece of evidence. John Gibbons (*The Norm of Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)) offers a similar point having to do with undercutting defeaters. Thus, Raz might be right that any reason *to* believe is a piece of evidence, but mistaken to think that any reason *against* believing *p* is thereby a reason *to* believe the negation.

reason that can justify belief, *truth promoting non-evidential reasons* (“TPRs” henceforth). A TPR will (objectively) support believing p if it believing p promotes having (other) true beliefs. It will support believing p even if it is not itself evidence that indicates that p is true. The central thesis of his paper is that the fact that one’s belief that p would promote having (other) true beliefs can constitute a reason to believe p that either epistemically justifies one in believing p or epistemically obliges one to do so. It is this thesis that I shall argue is false.

To show that there are TPRs, Talbot appeals to three widely accepted claims about epistemic normativity. These theses are supposed to show that there are TPRs:

- T1: Epistemic oughts have a source.
- T2: The source of epistemic oughts is an end in which true belief plays a necessary role.
- T3: Epistemic oughts are normative.

The thought behind T1 is that epistemic oughts cannot be brute, so they have to be grounded in something more basic. Talbot suggests (not implausibly) that this source will be an end or a goal. As various authors have argued, it is because belief is governed by the aim of truth, say, that considerations that have to do with the desirability of believing p cannot constitute a genuine reason to believe p.⁴ While these authors have concluded that practical considerations wholly unconnected to the truth or the pursuit of it cannot constitute a genuine reason to believe, Talbot thinks (rightly) that their arguments do not rule out TPRs. TPRs are, after all, connected to the truth and the pursuit of it. Insofar as we have an end or aim that involves having true beliefs and believing on TPRs is one perfectly good way of promoting that end or aim, it seems that these reasons should have genuine normative significance so long as the end-grounded or aim-generated oughts are normative. That is precisely what T3 tells us. So, it seems there are genuine normative reasons that bear on whether we ought to believe that are constituted by TPRs.

If there are indeed TPRs, Talbot thinks that it should be possible for one’s beliefs to be justified even if one does not have sufficient evidence for this belief. For example, circumstances should arise in which the epistemic benefits (understood in terms of, say, truths one would believe if one believed p but would

⁴ See Jonathan Adler, *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), Pamela Hieronymi, “Believing at Will,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume* 35 (2009): 149-87, Owens, *Reason Without Freedom*, Nishi Shah, “A New Argument for Evidentialism,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 481-98, and Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility*.

not believe otherwise) of believing *p* justify that belief even if it isn't itself terribly well supported by the evidence.⁵ Some of us would be tempted to cite this implication as a reason for rejecting his proposal. Intuitively, this seems like the wrong kind of reason to justify belief. Unfortunately, we often appeal to (T2) to try to show that some putative reason is the wrong kind of reason to justify a belief, so this dismissive response will not do.

2.

In this section, I shall try to do two things. I shall try to show that (T1)-(T3) do not lend support to Talbot's thesis that there are TPRs. I shall also point to considerations that seem to show that there are no TPRs.

To show that one cannot establish the existence of TPRs simply by appeal to (T1)-(T3), I shall describe a view that incorporates (T1)-(T3) that suggests that a belief would never be justified by a TPR. It is consistent with (T1)-(T3) that our epistemic aim is not simply to believe truths or avoid believing falsehoods, but to acquire knowledge. On such a view, if one ought not believe lottery propositions but is justified in believing that one has hands, there is a source for these oughts. These oughts are grounded by a knowledge norm. According to one view (which undoubtedly needs refinement, but for issues unrelated to those that matter here), one is justified in believing *p* if one's belief constitutes knowledge but most not believe *p* if one's belief does not constitute knowledge. Suppose one knows (never mind how) that by believing *p*, one will thereby acquire ten pieces of knowledge that one could not acquire otherwise. (Some eccentric character with a polygraph, a belief-in-*p*-inducing pill, an envelope containing ten secrets, and a lighter for burning this envelope makes an offer, say, that one can read the contents of the envelope and so acquire ten new truths but only if one takes the pill and passes a polygraph that confirms that one does indeed believe *p*.) Whether there are TPRs that support believing *p* in these circumstances is neither here nor there. The view says quite clearly that such reasons cannot possibly justify believing *p* because the only way to have a justified belief about *p* is to form a belief in such a way that one comes to know *p*. Whether there are objections to this view is neither here nor there. It cannot be that (T1)-(T3) shows that there are TPRs that can justify belief if there are consistent views that incorporate these theses and imply that TPRs can never justify a belief. Thus, any argument that purports to show that there are TPRs that can justify belief have to exclude the view just described and

⁵ Brian Talbot, "Truth-promoting non-evidential reasons," 6.

every similar view that would rule out TPRs. I have not argued that no such argument can be given (yet), but have shown that such an argument is needed.

Talbot argues that those who think that there is an end, aim, or goal of acquiring true beliefs are committed to TPRs because they are committed to the view that there are reasons to 'promote' the acquisition of true belief.⁶ Why should we think that there are epistemic reasons that justify belief by virtue of the fact that these beliefs promote the acquisition of true belief (or prevent one from acquiring false belief, perhaps)? Talbot seems to think that it doesn't take much more to show that they exist than to remind us that we think that epistemic oughts have a source that has normative authority. It cannot be *that* easy to argue for the existence of reasons to promote attaining an end. There are perfectly consistent normative frameworks that identify a source for, say, moral oughts that tell us that there are not reasons that promote attaining an end. Kantians think that moral oughts have a source. The categorical imperative will tell us what our obligations are and it has its grounding in the value of autonomous agents. At no point, however, do the Kantians think that there are reasons to promote conforming to the categorical imperative that would justify, say, telling lies or enslaving people. Kantians consistently reject the idea that the value that autonomous agents have calls for promotion. It might call for some response, such as honouring or respecting, but one can honour or respect without promoting.⁷

Now, someone might say in response that these views are implausible perhaps because they deny that reasons to promote will often determine overall obligation.⁸ This misses the point of the objection. I have not yet offered an alternative view, say, one inspired by Kant. If Talbot's point is that we're committed to TPRs simply by virtue of accepting (T1)-(T3), we can test *that* claim by asking whether there is any coherent view that accepts (T1)-(T3) whilst rejecting the possibility of TPRs. The possibility of such views shows that the case for TPRs cannot rest on these three theses alone but on some further unspecified thesis. The plausibility of the case for TPRs would have to rest on this unspecified

⁶ Talbot, "Truth-promoting non-evidential reasons," 6. There may well be people who are committed to such a view. Richard Foley (*When is True Belief Knowledge?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 128) links the rationality of a belief to the attainment of epistemic goals in such a way that he's not principally opposed to thinking that something can be a reason to believe *p* simply by virtue of the benefits of believing that proposition. I think that his position is unusual in this regard and not one forced upon us by accepting (T1)-(T3).

⁷ See Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) for helpful discussion.

⁸ A referee raised this worry.

thesis. Those sceptical of the suggestion that there are TPRs can then point to potential counterexamples to that view and invite defenders of TPRs to address them. Advocates of TPRs cannot avoid dealing with such counterexamples by saying that the existence of TPRs is indicated by (T1)-(T3).

As Talbot sees it, TPRs are reasons to promote attaining some epistemic end and Perhaps one has to think of the normativity of the end as having to do with that end serving as a source of reasons, but reasons to promote are only one sort of reason. There are also reasons to honour, respect, and to conform to a norm, and none of this involves promoting. Of course, these points are all perfectly consistent with Talbot's thesis. Nothing I have said thus far shows that there are not TPRs. I shall now argue for that point.

There are two perfectly good counterexamples to the claim that there are TPRs that can justify belief:

(i) One considers whether the number of stars is even and realizes that one's evidence supports this hypothesis and the negation of this hypothesis equally. One knows (never mind how) that if one did believe that the number of stars was even, a number of unrelated truths would be revealed. One also knows (never mind how) that these truths would only be revealed if one had this belief. Still, one should not believe that the number of stars is even in the circumstances described. There is a decisive reason not to.

(ii) One considers whether one knows that one knows that one has hands. One judges correctly and quite reasonably (never mind how) that one knows that one knows this. One also knows (never mind how) that if one were to abandon this belief, a great many truths would be revealed. These truths would only be revealed, however, if one abandoned one's belief that one has hands. Still, one may continue to believe that one has hands. In general, one has no obligation to refrain from believing what one knows one knows.

In (i), one ought to refrain in spite of the wonderful benefits of believing. In (ii), one is permitted to maintain a belief in spite of the wonderful benefits of abandoning it. If TPRs ever explain why one ought or ought not believe, they should do so in these circumstances. They don't.

Talbot has to contest these intuitions. To contest this intuition, he presumably has to say that TPRs give us overriding reason to believe without evidence or abandon belief that constitutes knowledge. Once we appreciate this, we can see why there cannot be TPRs. There cannot be TPRs because they could only get their work done, so to speak, by figuring in a kind of weighing

explanation of an epistemic ought. Cases like this vividly illustrate, however, that there are no weighing explanations of epistemic oughts.⁹

If there were weighing explanations of epistemic oughts, there would have to be situations in which (a) the relevant oughts were not settled until the weights of further reasons were taken into account or (b) the oughts would have been settled one way or another but the reasons one had to believe or refrain were overridden by the weights of the additional reasons. These would be situations in which one ought to believe *because* there were weightier/stronger reasons for believing than for suspending judgment or disbelieving. I don't think there could be situations like (a) or (b).

There seem to be two approaches to the epistemic end mentioned in (T2). Some think that this end should be specified in terms of aims rather than oughts and some think that this end should be specified in terms of oughts so as to cash out the metaphor of the aim. For reasons discussed by David Owens,¹⁰ Nishi Shah,¹¹ and Ralph Wedgwood,¹² I think that the best way to think about the epistemic end is in normative terms. According to Wedgwood,¹³ for example, the right way to think about the metaphor of the aim of belief is in terms of a standard of correctness according to which:

T: S ought to believe p iff p.

Assuming bivalence and that belief is governed by (T), we know that (a) is ruled out. Thus, the only way for TPRs to do any normative work is to override the reasons associated with (T). We know that situations like (b) cannot arise because the norm states an overall epistemic obligation. If it provides us with an absolute reason, it is not weighed against any other epistemic reason.

⁹ For a discussion of weighing explanations of oughts, see John Broome, "Reasons," in *Reason and Value. Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, eds. R. Jay Wallace, Philip Pettit, Samuel Scheffler, and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 28-56. As he sees it, one reason outweighing another is one way amongst many that the reasons might determine what ought to be done. See Joseph Raz, *Practical Reason and Norms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) for a helpful discussion of reasons, oughts, and norms and for reasons to think that the reasons associated with norms do not invariably enter into weighing explanations. For critical discussion of weighing explanations of epistemic oughts, see Carrie Jenkins, "Entitlement and Rationality," *Synthese* 157 (2007): 25-45 and Clayton Littlejohn, *Justification and the Truth-Connection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Chp. 2.

¹⁰ David Owens, „Does Belief Have an Aim?“ *Philosophical Studies* 115 (2003): 283-305.

¹¹ Shah, "A New Argument."

¹² Ralph Wedgwood, "The Aim of Belief," *Philosophical Perspectives* 16 (2002): 267-97.

¹³ Wedgwood, "The Aim of Belief."

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Some would argue that the fundamental epistemic norm has to do with knowledge rather than truth:

K: S ought to believe p iff S's belief that p constitutes knowledge.

Assuming that belief is governed by (K), we know that (a) is ruled out on the grounds that there will not be situations in which a belief is neither knowledge nor non-knowledge. We know that situations like (b) cannot arise because the norm states an overall obligation, one that is not overridden by further epistemic reasons. If one says that one has sufficient *epistemic* reason to violate (K) or (T), what one seems to be saying is that (T) or (K) is *not* the source of our epistemic oughts. Since we are assuming that a norm like (T) or (K) *is* the source of our epistemic oughts (e.g., one that explains why one should not believe that Jimmy Hoffa is alive and well and explains why one ought not believe lottery propositions), it seems that one must conclude that there are no weighing explanations of epistemic oughts.

The force of the point comes to this. Talbot wants to argue for TPRs by appeal to a claim about the source of reasons, one that's stated like T or perhaps K. Properly understood, these norms rule out in advance the possibility of weighing explanations of the sort required for TPRs to explain any epistemic ought. If, say, there were sufficient TPRs to believe a falsehood, there would be cases in which a subject ought not believe what's true or ought to believe what she doesn't know. Such cases would be counterexamples to K or to T. So, there is no sound route of reasoning from K or T to TPRs if the existence of such reasons points to counterexamples to K or T.

3.

Once we see why an approach to epistemic normativity that starts from the idea of a fundamental epistemic end which has to do with truth or knowledge generates certain sorts of epistemic oughts, we can see why epistemic reasons have to do with conforming to norms, not promoting the attainment of some end. To think of epistemic reasons as reasons to promote the attaining of an end, one must think that there is 'room' to explain an epistemic ought in terms of a kind of weighing explanation that's common from the practical case. There is no room for that sort of reasoning in the theoretical sphere because unlike action, belief serves a single master. As Adler rightly put it:

What is best to do is that act which is better than all the alternatives on the available reasons. But what one or should believe is only what is genuinely worthy of belief, not what is currently better than the alternatives. (Think here

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of the difference between poker, where the best hand wins, and rummy, where only the right or proper hand can win).¹⁴

¹⁴ Jonathan Adler, „Akratic Believing?“ *Philosophical Studies* 110 (2002): 4.