GROUNDING THE DOMAINS OF REASONS

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A good account of normative reasons should not only explain what makes practical and epistemic reasons a unified kind of thing, but also why practical and epistemic reasons are substantively different kinds of reasons that underlie significant categories of normative assessment and exhibit different weighing behaviors. I argue that a disjunctive account of normative reasons according to which practical and epistemic reasons have very different grounds (what I call the Different Source View) can do both of these jobs, unlike some prominent, unified alternative accounts. And the viability of this view has significant implications for metanormative theorizing: it implies that the answer to certain metanormative questions may differ between the practical and epistemic domains.

**Keywords:** normativity, normative reasons, epistemic reasons, practical reasons

**1. Introduction**

The same normative terms and properties can be found within both ethics and epistemology: there are both practical and epistemic reasons and values, an act or attitude may be what one practically ought to do or what one epistemically ought to do, and an agent may be practically or epistemically rational. This observation has led many philosophers to recast metaethical questions as *metanormative* ones: questions about the semantics, metaphysics, and epistemology of normativity, more broadly, including both the practical and epistemic domains. And this seems to presuppose that what we should be after in metaethics is an answer to these metanormative questions that is equally plausible with respect to both domains of normativity. Indeed, some explicitly argue that a metaethical theory is only as good as its epistemic counterpart. For example, Cuneo [2007] argues that because an anti-realist view is implausible with respect to epistemicnormativity, ethical anti-realism must be false too.

This line of thought is especially prevalent in the literature on normative reasons. Many metaethicists think that a good account of normative reasons should be equally plausible with respect to both practical and epistemic reasons [Broome 2004; Schroeder 2007; Thomson 2008; Kearns and Star 2008, 2009; Street 2009; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 2014]. But, as I explain in section 2, while there are important similarities between epistemic and practical reasons, which suggest that they are a unified kind of thing, epistemic and practical reasons also seem to be substantively different kinds of reasons that underlie different categories of assessment – namely, practical and theoretical rationality. Moreover, epistemic reasons are interdependent in ways that practical reasons are not, and consequently, epistemic reasons weigh against one another differently than practical reasons do. So, a good account of normative reasons should not only explain what practical and epistemic reasons have in common that makes them both normative reasons, but it should also explain what makes them so different.

In sections 3 and 4, I then consider two prominent views that offer a unified metaphysical account of practical and epistemic reasons. I argue that, while these views may offer some explanation for the similarities between practical and epistemic reasons, they fail to explain their differences. Then, in section 5, I argue that a more disjunctive metaphysical account of normative reasons, according to which epistemic and practical reasons have very different metaphysical grounds, can do both of these jobs. Showing that this is a viable view is important because it has significant upshots for metanormative inquiry: it implies that the answers to certain metanormative questions may differ between the practical and epistemic domains.

**2. Desiderata for an account of normative reasons**

Practical reasons are facts that count in favor of(or against) doing some action or having some attitude, like the following:

(1P) The fact that Pam is in the emergency room is a reason for Jim to leave the office.

(2P) The fact that Dwight is in a bad mood is a reason for Jim to leave the office.

(3P) The fact that it’s Michael’s birthday is a reason for Jim to stay at the office.

As these examples illustrate, practical reasons include both moral and prudential reasons, and they have different weights or strengths, which weigh against one another and determine what one ought to do. For example, while the reasons in (1P) and (2P) are both reasons for Jim to leave the office, the reason in (1P) is much stronger than the reason in (2P), and the reasons in (1P) and (2P) collectively outweigh the reason to stay in (3P). So, assuming there are no other reasons in play, (1P)-(3P) make it the case that Jim ought to leave the office.

And while the reasons in (1P)-(3P) are reasons regardless of whether Jim is aware of them, if Jim is aware of them, they are then reasons that Jim *has* in the sense that they matter to what is rational for Jim to do.[[1]](#footnote-1) And if these are the reasons for whichJim were to leave the office, Jimhimself would be justifiedor rational in doing so. Practical reasons thus not only determine the normative status of a particular action (or attitude), but they also determine the normative status of the agentin performing that action (or having that attitude).

But there are also epistemic reasons, which have similar features and play the same roles in determining the normative statuses of agents and their attitudes:

(1E) The fact that it’s Kevin’s birthday is a reason for Pam to believe that there will be cake in the break room.

(2E) The fact that the party planning committee is on strike is a reason for Pam to believe that there won’t be cake.

(3E) The fact that it’s Michael’s birthday is a reason for Pam to believe that there will be cake.

These facts likewise count in favor of(or against) having some attitude with a certain weight or strength, and they weigh against one another and determine what one *epistemically* ought to do: since Michael is a narcissistic boss who would be sure to bring cake for his own birthday no matter what, the reason in (3E) together with (1E) outweighs the reason in (2E), thereby making it the case that Pam (epistemically) ought to believe that there will be cake. And, again, while the reasons in (1E)-(3E) are reasons regardless of whether Pam is aware of them, if she is aware of them, they are then reasons that Pam *has* in the sense that they determine what is epistemically justified or rational for Pam to believe. And if Pam were to believe that there will be cake in the break room on the basis of these reasons, Pam herself would be epistemically justified or rational in doing so.

Practical and epistemic reasons thus have significant similarities that make them seem like a very unified type of thing: normative reasons. And this is something that any good account of normative reasons should capture.

But practical and epistemic reasons also seem importantly different: the reasons in (1E)-(3E) seem distinctly epistemic,whereas the reasons in (1P)-(3P) seem distinctly practical. This is not simply a difference between certain kinds of facts, since the very same fact can be both a practical reason and an epistemic reason (as shown by (3P) and (3E)). And the relevant sense in which practical and epistemic reasons are different in kind is not the trivial sense in which, for example, health reasons and career reasons are “different kinds of reasons”. That is, practical and epistemic reasons seem like non-arbitrary domains of normative reasons that underlie significant categories of normative assessment – that of theoretical and practical rationality. So, when we talk of what one epistemically ought to do or what one practically ought to do, we carve normativity at its joints more so than we do when we talk of, for example, what one ought to do health-wise or what one ought to do career-wise. The latter sort of talk just restricts the contextually relevant domain of reasons to some arbitrary subset of normative reasons, whereas the former sort of talk seems to restrict the contextually relevant reasons to privileged domains. So, a good account of normative reasons should not just explain what practical and epistemic reasons have in common, but it should also explain what makes them substantively different kinds of reasons.

This second desideratum is somewhat controversial. It would be contested by *eliminitavists* about epistemic normativity who claim that there really are no distinctly epistemic normative reasons at all, and that all reasons like (1E)-(3E) above are really practical reasons [Gluer and Wikforss 2013; Papineau 2013; Rinard 2017]. Providing an independent argument against this eliminativist view is too large of a task to take up here. But I take it to be a fairly widespread and attractive view that epistemic reasons are genuinely normative, while nonetheless importantly distinct from practical reasons, so that they give rise to a substantively different domain of normative assessment. So, the question that I will be concerned with here is what sort of account of normative reasons (if any) can vindicate that picture? In answering this question, we may set the eliminativist view aside.

But not only do practical and epistemic reasons seem like substantively different kinds of reasons, they also exhibit two behavioral differences. First, epistemic reasons are necessarily *interdependent*: epistemic reasons in favor of believing p are necessarily epistemic reasons against believing not-p, and epistemic reasons in favor of believing not-p are necessarily epistemic reasons against believing p. But practical reasons are not necessarily interdependent: practical reasons for having some attitude A toward some object o are not necessarily reasons against having A towards not-o (and vice versa).[[2]](#footnote-2)

For example, consider (1E) and (2E). The fact that it’s Kevin’s birthday is a reason to believe that there will be cake and a reason against believing there won’t. And the fact that the party planning committee is on strike is a reason for believing that there won’t be cake and a reason against believing that there will be. But now consider some practical reasons for desire: suppose (counter-fictionally) that Pam is equally good friends with Jim and Dwight, and both are being considered for the position of Assistant Regional Manager. If Jim were to get the promotion, it would make him happy, but since Dwight is Jim’s rival, Jim’s happiness would thereby make Dwight equally unhappy. So, the fact that being promoted would make Jim happy is a reason for Pam to desire that Jim gets the job. But the fact that being promoted would make Jim happy is not a reason *against* desiring that Jim won’t get the job. Rather, since Jim’s happiness would make Dwight equally unhappy and Dwight is an equally good friend of Pam’s, the fact that being promoted would make Jim happy is also a reason for Pam to desire that Jim won’t get the job.

And practical reasons in favor of doing some action ϕ are not necessarily practical reasons against not-ϕing either. For example, suppose Pam likes chocolate cake and both Michael and Kevin’s birthday cakes are chocolate, but Pam can only have one slice. The fact that Michael’s birthday cake is chocolate is a reason for Pam to have a slice of Michael’s cake. But it’s not a reason against having a slice of Kevin’s cake instead. So, while practical reasons for attitudes and actions are surelyinterdependent in many circumstances, they are not necessarilyinterdependent, unlike epistemic reasons for belief.

The second behavioral difference between practical and epistemic reasons has been pointed out by Feldman [2000: 680-1], Dancy [2004: 95], and Berker [2018: 430]. Namely, epistemic reasons for belief *balance toward suspension*: when there are equally strong epistemicreasons for believing p and for believing not-p, one (epistemically) ought to suspend belief with respect to whether p. For example, if the fact that it’s Kevin’s birthday is an equally strong reason to believe that there will be cake as the fact that the party planning committee is on strike is a reason to believe that there won’t be, and there are no other reasons in play, then Pam (epistemically) ought to suspend belief about whether there will be cake.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But practical reasons balance out differently. When there are equally strong practical reasons to desire p as there are to desire not-p, it seems that one ought to have both desires, rather than neither. For example, in the promotion case described above, the fact that being promoted would make Jim happy is an equally strong reason for Pam to desire that Jim gets the job as it is for her to desire that Jim does not get the job. But it seems that what Pam ought to do is desire that Jim gets the job (for Jim’s sake) and desire that Jim does not get the job (for Dwight’s sake), rather than have neither of these desires. After all, she would not be a good friend to both of them unless she had both desires.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Practical reasons for action are a bit different, though: when the practical reasons for doing some action ϕ are equally strong as the practical reasons for not-ϕing, one ought to do *either* ϕ or not-ϕ. For example, if the fact that Dwight is in a bad mood is an equally strong reason to leave the office as the fact that it’s Michael’s birthday is a reason to stay (and there are no other relevant reasons), then Jim is permitted to either leave or stay. But this difference in how practical reasons balance out for action versus attitudes is explained simply by the fact that the relevant alternatives in the case of action arenot copossible,whereas the relevant alternatives in the case of attitudes are. Jim is permitted to either leave or stay at the office, rather than required to do both, simply because Jim can’t do both. But Pam ought to both desire that Jim gets the promotion and desire that he doesn’t because she has sufficient reasons for each desire and she canhave both at the same time.

Importantly, these two behavioral differences between epistemic and practical reasons are connected: epistemic reasons for belief balance toward suspension, while practical reasons do not, precisely becauseepistemic reasons are necessarily interdependent, while practical reasons are not. Because epistemic reasons for believing p are necessarily reasons against believing not-p and vice versa, when there are equally strong epistemic reasons for believing p as there are for believing not-p, there are also equally strong epistemic reasons *against* believing p and *against* believing not-p. These reasons thereby cancel each other out, making it such that, on balance, there is neither sufficient reason to believe p nor sufficient reason to believe not-p, and thus that one ought to do neither and, instead, suspend judgment with respect to p. On the other hand, when there are equally strong practical reasons to desire p as there are to desire not-p, this does not entail that there are also equally strong reasons against desiring p and against desiring not-p. In such cases, then, one has sufficient reason to desire p and sufficient reason to desire not-p, and so, one should do both. So, an account of normative reasons that can explain the first behavioral difference between epistemic and practical reasons can thereby explain the second.

One might think that both of these behavioral differences can be explained simply by the nature of belief. But it can’t be that simple. This is because, while it’s controversial whether there are practical reasons for belief (and my desiderata is neutral with respect to this issue), it seems clear that, if there were practical reasons for belief, they would behave like other practical reasons. For example, suppose that Jim promises to pay Pam $100 if she believes that he’ll get the job and Dwight promises to pay Pam $100 if she believes that Jim won’t get the job. If there are practical reasons for belief, the fact that Jim will pay Pam $100 is a practical reason for her to believe that Jim will be promoted, but it’s not a reason againstbelieving that Jim won’t be promoted. And while Pam has equally strong practical reasons for believing that Jim will get the job as she does for believing that he won’t, she clearly shouldn’t suspend belief, since then she would receive $0. Instead, Pam ought to have both beliefs (if she can), so that she’ll get $200.

So, to summarize, a good account of normative reasons should explain not only (a) what practical and epistemic reasons have in common that makes them both normative reasons, but also (b) what makes them substantively different kinds of reasons and (c) why they exhibit the above two behavioral differences. In sections 3 and 4, I argue that two prominent, unified metaphysical views about normative reasons can explain (a), but they fail to explain (b) or (c). I then argue in section 5 that a more disjunctive metaphysical view can explain all three desiderata.

**3. The Different Objects View**

According to the first view, practical and epistemic reasons are facts that bear the very same normative relation – let’s call it the *reason relation* – but they bear this relation to different objects.[[5]](#footnote-5) Namely, epistemic reasons bear this relation to doxastic attitudes (beliefs, credences, suspending judgment, etc.), whereas practical reasons bear this relation to actions and non-doxastic attitudes like desires, intentions, etc. Let’s call this the *Different Objects View*.

This view is compatible with many views about the reason relation itself. One might endorse this view and take the reason relation to be a primitive, fundamental normative relation [Parfit: ch 31]. Or one might hold, instead, that what it is for a fact to bear the reason relation to some object ϕ is for it to indicate that ϕing is correct, given the constitutive standards of correctness for objects of ϕ’s kind [Thomson 2008: ch. 8]. Or, she might hold that what grounds the fact that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ is that R explains why S’s ϕing would promote some value v [Maguire 2016].

But any Different Objects View is committed to two substantive claims about the objects of epistemic and practical reasons: that there cannot be practical reasons for doxastic attitudes, and that there cannot be epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes. So, defending the Different Objects View requires insisting that alleged practical reasons for belief are really practical reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes, and that alleged epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes are really practical reasons. For example, defenders of the Different Objects View must insist that, if Jim will pay Pam $100 to believe that he’ll be promoted, this is not a practical reason for Pam to *believe* that Jim will be promoted, but is instead a practical reason for Pam to *desire* or to *cause* herself to have that belief.[[6]](#footnote-6) And defenders of the Different Objects View must also insist that, if one’s evidence is equally split between p and not-p, one may have a practical reason to gather (and desire) more evidence, but not an epistemic one.

I set aside these issues here, since my main aim is to determine whether the Different Objects View can explain the desiderata outlined earlier. With respect to the first desideratum, the Different Objects View looks promising: on this view, practical and epistemic reasons are both facts that bear the very same normative relation – the reason relation. This explains why they are a unified kind of thing that play the same roles.

But whether this view can explain the weights of practical and epistemic reasons depends on what one says about the reason relation itself. If the reason relation is fundamental, then it’s presumably also fundamental that it admits of degrees. And while the relative weights of particular, contingent practical and epistemic reasons (like the fact that it’s Michael’s birthday and the fact that Dwight is in a bad mood) might be explainable in terms of more general, necessary principles about the relative weights of general types of reasons (for example, that reasons to support one’s friends are weightier than reasons to avoid minor annoyances), these more general principles would presumably be fundamental, on this view. So, the Parfitian version of the Different Objects View ultimately cannot offer a full explanation for why practical and epistemic reasons have the weights that they do.

But other versions of the Different Objects View that take facts about reasons to be fully grounded in further facts – specifically, further facts that admit of degrees – can fare better here. For example, if what grounds the fact that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ is that R explains why S’s ϕing would promote some value v, then presumably R’s weight can be explained in terms of the degree to which v would be promoted and the degree to which R plays an explanatory role in this.

With respect to the remaining desiderata, however, the Different Objects View does a poor job. According to the Different Objects View, epistemic reasons are simply reasons for doxastic attitudes, whereas practical reasons are reasons for everything else. But doxastic attitudes are just one category of a myriad of attitudes for which there are normative reasons. And it’s unclear what is so special about doxastic attitudes that makes distinguishing between reasons for them and reasons for everything else a more natural way of carving up normativity than, for example, distinguishing between reasons for conative attitudes and reasons for everything else. So, the Different Objects View renders the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons a quite arbitrary one, rather than explaining what makes them substantively different kinds of reasons that underlie significant categories of normative assessment.

Moreover, the mere fact that practical and epistemic reasons bear the reason relation to different objects does not seem to explain their two different weighing behaviors. One might argue that reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes do not balance toward suspension simply because doxastic attitudes are the only sorts of attitudes for which suspension is an available alternative. After all, there is simply no third alternative inbetween doing some action ϕ and not-ϕing. And while one may neither desire p nor desire not-p, and one may neither intend p nor intend not-p, merely lacking these attitudes is not analogous to suspension of belief, since suspending belief with respect to p amounts to more than simply lacking the belief that p and the belief that not-p. Specifically, suspending belief with respect to p amounts to having a distinct attitude in which one takes a neutral stance with respect to p [Friedman 2013]. One might thus think that the Different Objects View does explain why epistemic reasons balance toward suspension, while practical reasons do not.

But there are other non-doxastic attitudes for which there is something analogous to suspension of belief, and for which there are practical reasons that do not balance toward suspension. For example, consider approval: one may suspend approval of some object o, where this does not amount to lacking the attitudes of approval and disapproval of o, but taking a neutral stance towards o. And practical reasons for approval do not balance toward suspension: for example, if Jim and Dwight are both equally qualified and deserving of the promotion, Pam should both approve of Jim getting the job and approve of him not getting the job, but Dwight getting it instead. The fact that belief is the sort of attitude that has a suspension alternative thus does not by itself explain why epistemic reasons balance toward suspension, while practical reasons don’t.

So, the Different Objects View may provide an explanation of what epistemic and practical reasons have in common, but it fails to explain what makes epistemic and practical reasons substantively different kinds of reasons that have different weighing behaviors.

**4. The Different Desire View**

According to a desire-based theory of normative reasons, epistemic and practical reasons are facts that bear the very same reason relation in virtue of some fact about the agent’s desires, and what distinguishes practical reasons from epistemic ones is the relevant desire that grounds them. While this view has its origins in James [1896] and Foley [1987], I’ll use Schroeder’s [2007] more recent view to illustrate. According to Schroeder, what grounds that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ is the fact that R is part of what explains that ϕing promotes the satisfaction of S’s desire for some object o. The desire-based theorist might then claim that whether R is a practical or an epistemic reason depends on which sort of desire is involved in the grounds of R’s being a normative reason. For example, she might claim that, if R is part of what explains why ϕing promotes the satisfaction of S’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to some proposition p, then R is an epistemic reason.[[7]](#footnote-7) Whereas if R is part of what explains why ϕing promotes the satisfaction of any of S’s other desires, then R is a practical reason. I call this the *Different Desire View.*

Unlike the Different Objects View, the Different Desire View allows that there can be both practical and epistemic reasons for actions, doxastic attitudes, and non-doxastic attitudes. If believing p would make one happier, the Different Desire View implies that this is a practical reason for one to believe p, if one desires to be happy. And if gathering more evidence about whether p would help satisfy one’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error, then the Different Desire View implies that one has an epistemic reason to desire and gather more evidence.

Whether the Different Desire View can provide an extensionally adequate account of both epistemic and practical reasons has already received lots of attention [Foley 1987; Fumerton 2001; Kelly 2003; Leite 2007; Schroeder 2007; Parfit 2011; Berker 2013; Rinard 2017]. So, let’s set this issue aside, and simply ask how does the Different Desire View fare with respect to our desiderata?

This view offers the same explanation as the Different Objects View regarding what epistemic and practical reasons have in common that makes them both normative reasons: they are both facts that bear the very same reason relation. And the Different Desire View also has the resources to explain the weights of practical and epistemic reasons: presumably, their weights depend on the strength of the relevant desire that grounds them and the degree to which one’s doing the relevant act or having the relevant attitude would satisfy that desire, given those reasons.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Unlike the Different Objects View, though, the Different Desire View can explain why epistemic reasons for belief are interdependent, while practical reasons are not. The desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to p is a unique sort of desire for which considerations that explain why believing p would promote the satisfaction of that desire also necessarily explain why *not* believing not-p would promote the satisfaction of that desire (and vice versa). After all, if R explains why believing p would help satisfy one’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error regarding p, this must be because R indicates that p is true. And if R indicates that p is true, R also necessarily indicates that not-p is false. So, R also necessarily explains why *not* believing not-pwould help satisfy one’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error regarding p. Conversely, if R explains why believing not-pwould help satisfy one’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to p, this must be because R indicates that not-p is true and that p is false, and thus also necessarily explains why *not* believing p would help satisfy that same desire.

But not all desires are like this. Suppose that Pam wants her friends to be happy, she’s equally good friends with Jim and Dwight, and who she wants to be Assistant Regional Manager will affect who Michael chooses to promote. On Schroeder’s view, the fact that Jim’s being promoted would make him happy is a reason for Pam to desire that Jim gets the job because it’s part of what explains why Pam’s desiring that Jim gets the job would help satisfy her desire for her friends to be happy. But the fact that Jim’s being promoted would make him happy does not explain why Pam’s *not* desiring that Jim doesn’t get promoted would help satisfy her desire that her friends be happy. To the contrary, Pam’s desiring that Jim doesn’t get promoted would actually help satisfy her desire that her friends be happy to the very same extent as desiring that Jim does get promoted.

According to the Different Desire View, then, epistemic reasons for believing p are necessarily interdependent because the grounds of epistemic reasons involve a unique, two-pronged desire for which considerations that explain why believing p would help satisfy that desire also necessarily explain why not believing not-p would help satisfy that same desire. But the grounds of practical reasons may involve other desires that aren’t like this, and this is why practical reasons need not be interdependent in this way. The Different Desire View thereby also explains why epistemic reasons for belief balance toward suspension, while practical reasons balance out differently since, as I argued in section 2, the interdependency of epistemic reasons for belief explains their balancing behavior.

But a complication arises for the Different Desire View because it allows that there are epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes. Namely, it seems that such epistemic reasons are not necessarily interdependent and balance out like practical reasons. For example, Berker [2018: 458] gives the following example: suppose I want to know whether p and I can go to one of two nearby libraries A and B that would provide me with equally good evidence about whether p, so that I have an epistemic reason to go to library A and an equally strong epistemic reason to go to library B. Neither of these epistemic reasons seems to be a reason against the alternative: my reason to go to library A is not a reason to *not* go to library B, and vice versa. Moreover, assuming these are the only reasons in play, what I ought to do, on balance, is either go to library A or go to library B [Berker 2018: 458]. Epistemic reasons for action thus seem to behave just like practical reasons for action. (There are also presumably epistemic reasons for me to desire to go to each library, and these reasons also seem to behave like practical reasons for desire.) So, once we allow that there are epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes, the phenomenon that needs explaining is more complicated: we need to explain why epistemic reasons for belief are necessarily interdependent and balance toward suspension, while practical reasons and epistemic reasons for action and other attitudes, behave differently.

But the Different Desire View can actually explain this more complicated phenomenon. On this view, what makes the fact that library A contains information about whether p an epistemic reason for me to go to library A is that it explains why my going to library A will help satisfy my desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to p. But the fact that library A contains information about whether p does *not* explain why my notgoing to library B will help satisfy that desire. On the contrary, my going to library B would help satisfy that desire just as much as going to library A. So, the fact that library A contains information about whether p is not an epistemic reason against me going to library B. The Different Desire View thus implies that epistemic reasons for action are not necessarily interdependent and thereby balance out differently than epistemic reasons for belief. (And a similar explanation can be given for epistemic reasons for desire.)

What this complication shows, though, is that what explains the unique behavior of epistemic reasons for belief, according to the Different Desire View, is not just the particular desire that grounds epistemic reasons, but also a unique feature of belief: namely, believing p and believing not-p cannot simultaneously help satisfy one’s desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to p. On the other hand, doing two incompatible actions or having two contradictory non-doxastic attitudes may both simultaneously help satisfy that desire.

Where the Different Desire View falls short, though, is in explaining why practical and epistemic reasons are substantively different kinds of normative reasons that give rise to important categories of normative assessment. On this view, the only difference between epistemic and practical reasons is that epistemic reasons are grounded in a particular desire – the desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to some proposition. But this is just one very specific desire out of an incredibly diverse array of desires that agents may have. So, if this is all the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons amounts to, it seems like a very arbitrary one. After all, what makes the desire to believe the truth and avoid error more special than, for example, one’s career-related desires or one’s health-related desires, so that distinguishing between epistemic reasons and practical reasons is especially joint-carving?

One might think that the fact that this desire gives rise to necessarily interdependent reasons for belief is precisely what makes it special. But there are other, similarly two-pronged, desires that can give rise to necessarily interdependent practical reasons for belief. For example, suppose Dwight desires to believe that he’ll be promoted and to avoid having any beliefs that will make him less likely to do so. If believing p (for example, that he’s most qualified) would make Dwight more likely to believe that he’ll be promoted, then Dwight’s believing not-p (that he’s not the most qualified) would make Dwight less likely to believe that he’ll be promoted. So, any consideration R that explains why believing p would help satisfy Dwight’s desire to believe that he’ll be promoted would also thereby explain why *not* believing not-p would help satisfy this desire. The Different Desire View seems to imply that the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons is just as arbitrary as distinguishing between reasons that are grounded in these sorts of desires we have about what to believe and reasons that are grounded in all other desires.

Of course, some desire-based theorists may simply embrace this consequence of their view and accept that epistemic reasons are a species of practical reasons after all. This would amount to accepting the eliminativist view about epistemic normativity according to which epistemic reasons, ‘ought’s, and rationality *just are* practical reasons, ‘ought’s, and rationality. And while this may seem like a cost of the view, desire-based theorists may see it as a cost worth taking on in order to explain the behavioral differences between epistemic and practical reasons.

But what I aim to show in the following section is that we need not make this trade-off. I argue that there’s an alternative view of practical and epistemic reasons that can explain the similarities and behavioral differences between epistemic and practical reasons, while also vindicating the widespread idea that epistemic and practical reasons are substantivelydifferent kinds of reasons that give rise to significant domains of normativity.

**5. The Different Source View**

According to the view I have in mind, epistemic and practical reasons bear the same reason relation to the same objects, but what differentiates practical reasons from epistemic reasons is that they have very different grounds. So, on this view, what grounds that some fact R bears the reason relation may be one of two quite different kinds of facts, and which kind of fact grounds that R bears the reason relation determines whether it is practical or epistemic*.* I call this the *Different Source View*. This is a very general view that is not committed to any particular account of what grounds practical and epistemic reasons. But I take this general view to be initially plausible because, presumably, what grounds that R is an epistemic reason has something to do with truth, while what grounds that R is a practical reason does not.

Of course, it may be the case that not all epistemic reasons are *evidential* (reasons that bear on the truth value of the relevant proposition). For example, Schroeder [2012] argues that in certain cases where more evidence is soon forthcoming about whether p, even though this fact doesn’t bear on whether p is true or false, it’s still an epistemic reason to withhold belief regarding p. Similarly, one might think that the fact that you lack any evidence regarding p is an epistemic reason to suspend belief regarding p (and to gather evidence regarding p), even though the fact that you lack evidence regarding p doesn’t bear on whether p is true or false.

But even these non-evidential epistemic reasons seem to be reasons becausethey are in some way connected to truth. For example, one might think that the fact that more evidence is soon forthcoming with respect to p is a reason to suspend belief with respect to p because it indicates that suspending belief shows commitment to, or respect for, the truth.[[9]](#footnote-9) So, what grounds that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ, when R is an epistemicreason, is presumably that R stands insometruth-involving relation to ϕ, although it may be very difficult to specify what exactly that truth-involving relation is (and there might even be multiple relations).

On the other hand, while it’s highly controversial what grounds that R is a practical reason for S to ϕ, it seems quite clear that it does not have anything to do with R’s standing in any kind of truth-involving relation to ϕ*.* For example, what metaphysically explains why Pam’s being in the emergency room and Dwight’s being in a bad mood are reasons for Jim to leave the office has nothing to do with truth. So, it seems plausible that practical and epistemic reasons have very different grounds, even before we give any precise account of what the grounds of practical and epistemic reasons are.

Given the Different Source View, then, one could endorse the following pair of views:

*Humean ViewP*  For practical reasons, the fact that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ is grounded in the fact that R explains why S’s ϕing would help satisfy S’s desire for some object o.

*Truth-Commitment ViewE* For epistemic reasons, the fact that R is a normative reason for S to ϕ with respect to p (where ϕing may be believing, desiring, gathering evidence, etc.) is grounded in the fact that R indicates that S’s ϕing with respect to p will show commitment to believing the truth with respect to p.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Alternatively, one may accept a value-based account of practical reasons, on which the fact that R is a practical reason for S to ϕ is grounded in the fact that R explains why S’s ϕing would promote some value v [Maguire 2016], together with an evidentialist account of epistemic reasons, on which the fact that R is an epistemic reason to believe p is grounded in the fact that R increases the probability that p is true. But, importantly, in order for that pair of views to be compatible with the Different Source View, one must deny that truth is a *value* and that it’s the promotion of this value that makes R an epistemic reason, so that the way that epistemic reasons are grounded is not just a specific instance of the way in which practical reasons are grounded*.* This is because what the Different Source View rules out is that practical and epistemic reasons have the same kinds of grounds.

To illustrate the Different Source View’s explanatory payoffs, I’ll focus on the version of the view that endorses the Humean ViewP and the Truth-Commitment ViewE. First, on the Different Source View, what practical and epistemic reasons have in common is that they bear the very same reason relation. One might worry, however, that this view implies that the reason relation is a mere disjunction – for example, the relation of *explaining why ϕing would help satisfy someone’s desires or* *indicating that ϕing would show commitment to the truth.* But disjunctive properties and relations do not typically make for much objective similarity or feature in explanations. For example, the property of *being an elephant or a refrigerator* is not the sort of property that features in explanations, and two things may share this propertywithout having any important similarities. So, if the reason relation is a mere disjunction, this wouldn’t explain why practical and epistemic reasons share important similarities and explain similar higher-order normative facts.

It’s important to distinguish, though, between what some property is and what grounds thatsomething has that property. It doesn’t follow from the claim that a property F has multiple, different possible grounds that F is a disjunctive property. For example, a creature may have the property of *being in pain* in virtue of being in a particular grey-matter-brain-state or in virtue of being in a particular silicon-brain-state, even though *being in pain* is a unified property that makes for objective similarities and features in causal explanations. So, the claim that some fact may bear the reason relation in virtue of multiple, very different kinds of facts is compatible with taking the reason relation itself to be a unified, non-disjunctive relation that makes for similarity.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In fact, the Different Source View can explain the important similarity between practical and epistemic reasons: their weights. For example, given the Humean ViewP, R’s weight may be determined by the strength of the relevant desire that grounds its being a reason and the extent to which one’s ϕing would help satisfy that desire; and on the Truth-Commitment ViewE, R’s weight may be determined by the extent to which R indicates that ϕing with respect to p shows commitment to believing the truth regarding p. More generally, one may explain why practical and epistemic reasons both have weights, even though they have very different grounds, so long as one takes the grounds of practical and epistemic reasons to both be facts that admit of degrees*.*

And if practical and epistemic reasons have very different grounds, this allows that the grounds of R’s being a practical reason to ϕ do *not* necessitate the grounds of R’s being a practical reason against not-ϕing, while the grounds of R’s being an epistemic reason for S to believe p do necessitate the grounds of R’s being an epistemic reason against believing not-p (and vice versa).

For example, as discussed in section 4, the Humean ViewP explains why practical reasons are not necessarily interdependent: R may explain why S’s ϕing would help satisfy A’s desire for o, while *not* explaining why S’s *not* not-ϕing would help satisfy A’s desire for o. But the Truth-Commitment ViewE explains why epistemic reasons for belief are interdependent. If R indicates that S’s believing p will show commitment to believing the truth regarding p, this must be because R indicates that p is true; and if R indicates that p is true, then R also indicates that not-p is false, and thus that *not* believing not-p will also show commitment to believing the truth regarding p. Conversely, if R indicates that S’s believing not-p would show commitment to believing the truth regarding p, then this must be because R indicates that not-p is true; and since R thereby also indicates that p is false, R necessarily indicates that S’s *not* believing p would also show commitment to believing the truth regarding p. The Humean ViewP and the Truth-Commitment ViewE taken together thus explain why epistemic reasons for belief are necessarily interdependent and thus balance toward suspension, while practical reasons behave differently.

But like the Different Desire View, the Different Source View also allows that there are epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes as well. So, again, there’s an additional phenomenon that the Different Source View needs to explain: why epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes behave like practical reasons, rather than epistemic reasons for belief. But the Different Source View can explain this too. The Truth-Commitment ViewE offers an explanation that is analogous to that of the Different Desire View. The difference between epistemic reasons for belief and epistemic reasons for action and non-doxastic attitudes is explained by the fact that having two contradictory beliefs regarding p cannot simultaneously show commitment to the truth regarding p (since p and not-p cannot both be true), while two incompatible actions (like going to library A and going to library B) or having two contradictory non-doxastic attitudes (like desiring to go to library A and desiring to not go to library A) can simultaneously show commitment to the truth regarding p. So, on the Different Source View, it’s not the source of epistemic reasons alone that explains why epistemic reasons for beliefare necessarily interdependent and balance toward suspension. It’s the source of epistemic reasons together with this related fact about belief.

But unlike the Different Desire View, the Different Source View can explain why epistemic and practical reasons are substantively different kinds of reasons. On the Different Source View, distinguishing between epistemic and practical reasons divides up normative reasons by the more fundamental facts that ground them. And, importantly, these two sets of more fundamental facts have a certain kind of unity to them: epistemic reasons are all grounded in one kind of fact (facts having to do with commitment to the truth), while practical reasons are all grounded in another kind of fact (like facts about desires, or facts about value).

In contrast, when we distinguish between career and health reasons it doesn’t seem like we are dividing up normative reasons at this more fundamental level, but simply dividing up reasons by the sorts of activities to which they pertain. But suppose we were to divide up normative reasons at this more fundamental level by distinguishing between reasons that are grounded in one’s career-related desires and reasons that are grounded in everything else. While this may be a deeper distinction, it still seems arbitrary because one of these sets of grounds lacks unity: the grounds in the “everything else” category may include, for example, facts about desires and facts about showing commitment to the truth. So, distinguishing between epistemic and practical reasons, where this is a distinction between all reasons that are grounded in one unified kind of fact and all reasons that are grounded in another unified kind of fact, does a better job of carving normativity at its joints.

Unlike the other two views considered earlier, then, the Different Source View has the resources to satisfy all of our desiderata: it can explain what makes epistemic and practical reasons both normative reasons, but also what makes them substantively different kinds of reasons that have different weighing behaviors. While I’ve used a particular version of the Different Source View to illustrate this, it’s important to note that it’s the general structural features of the Different Source View that allows it to meet all these desiderata. It’s because the Different Source View takes practical and epistemic reasons to bear the very same, non-fundamental reason relation that explains what makes them both normative reasons with weights. But it’s because the Different Source View takes practical and epistemic reasons to have very different grounds that allows it to explain why practical and epistemic reasons are substantively different and have different weighing behaviors. These structural features make the Different Source View plausible as a general view, even without making commitments about the details.

**6. Conclusion**

I thus take the Different Source View to be a more plausible view of normative reasons than some of the prominent, more unified alternatives. And the viability of this view has important implications for metanormative inquiry. After all, some metanormative questions are questions about grounding. When one asks whether normative reasons are mind-dependent, one is asking whether facts about normative reasons are necessarily grounded in facts about agents’ evaluative attitudes; when one asks whether the good is prior to the right, one is asking whether all facts about normative reasons are grounded in facts about value; and when one asks whether normative reasons are natural or non-natural, one may be interested in whether all facts about normative reasons are fully grounded in naturalfacts. If the Different Source View is correct, however, the answers to these questions may differ for practical and epistemic reasons. For example, it allows that only practical reasons are grounded in facts about agents’ evaluative attitudes, or in facts about values; and it allows that epistemic reasons are fully grounded in natural facts, while practical reasons are not. The viability of the Different Source View thus suggests that we should not assume that such questions deserve a unified answer across the practical and the epistemic domains. So, we should be wary of recasting metaethical questions as metanormative questions in the first place, since doing so seems to presuppose that very assumption.

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1. It’s controversial whether having a reason (in the sense relevant to rationality)amounts to there being a reason and one’s possessingthis reason in some way (see Schroeder [2008] and Lord [2010]). But nothing I say here hangs on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thanks to Selim Berker for this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I’m only claiming that epistemic reasons *for belief* balance in this way. One might think that there are epistemic reasons for action and other attitudes, and that such reasons balance out like practical reasons. My desiderata in this section are neutral about this, but I will revisit the issue in sections 4 and 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to Selim Berker again for discussion of this sort of case. One might think, instead, that in such cases one ought to have one or other of these conflicting desires, but not both. But this, too, implies that practical reasons for desire balance out differently than epistemic reasons for belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. One might take “facts” here to be states of affairs [Dancy 2000] or true propositions [Schroeder 2007], and one might also take the relata of these relations to include a circumstance and a time [Scanlon 2014]. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Parfit [2011] argues precisely that, but I argue elsewhere that this is not a promising strategy [Leary 2016]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I assume that the most plausible desire that can ground all epistemic reasons is a two-pronged desire to believe the truth and avoid error for reasons originating in James [1896]: if our epistemic goals included only believing the truth, this would imply that we ought to believe every proposition, but if our epistemic goals included only avoiding believing falsehoods, this would imply that we ought to believe nothing. I also assume that this desire must be relativized to a particular proposition for reasons originating in Fumerton [2001]: if epistemic reasons were grounded in a general desire to believe the truth and avoid error, then the fact that believing some known falsehood will cause one to have many more true beliefs would be an epistemic reason to believe that known falsehood. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Schroeder [2007] himself rejects this account of the weights of reasons, though, and argues that a better account is available to a desire-based theory of normative reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is inspired by Hurka [2001] and Sylvan [2012]. Hurka argues that showing respect or commitmentto some final value v may itself be derivatively valuable, even though showing respect or commitment to v does not promotev, and is thus not instrumentally valuable. Similarly, Sylvan argues that, while epistemic justification may not always promotebelieving the truth, and may thus fail to be instrumentally valuable, its value may nonetheless be derivative of the value of truth because it shows respect or commitment to the truth. I am not making any claims about the value of justification or the relation between values and reasons, but instead a similar point about reasons: that some epistemic reasons may be reasons not because they promote having true beliefs, but because they show respect or commitment to the truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This view is different from a desire-based view of epistemic reasons in two crucial ways. First, on this view, epistemic reasons do not depend on the agent’s actually having any desire to believe the truth and avoid error with respect to whether p, and thus does not face the sorts of counterexamples provided by Kelly [2003]. Second, the Truth-Commitment ViewE does not claim that all epistemic reasons to ϕ with respect to p are reasons because they promotebelieving the truth and avoiding error with respect to p. The Truth-Commitment View is thus not a teleological view of epistemic reasons, and thus avoids Berker’s [2013] criticisms. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Indeed, the Different Source View is compatible with adopting an analysis of the reason relation itself along the lines of Broome [2004] or Kearns and Star [2008], [2009]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)