

# REASONS FOR BELIEF

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# Contents

<i>Contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
Introduction	I
<i>Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen</i>	
PART I NORMATIVE REASONS FOR BELIEF	II
1 How to be a teleologist about epistemic reasons	13
<i>Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen</i>	
2 Is there reason to be theoretically rational?	34
<i>Andrew Reisner</i>	
3 Epistemic motivation: towards a metaethics of belief	54
<i>Veli Mitova</i>	
4 Error theory and reasons for belief	75
<i>Jonas Olson</i>	
5 Can reasons for belief be debunked?	94
<i>Nishi Shah</i>	
PART II REASONS AND EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION	109
6 Reasons and belief's justification	III
<i>Clayton Littlejohn</i>	
7 Perception, generality, and reasons	131
<i>Hannah Ginsborg</i>	

8	Immediate warrant, epistemic responsibility, and Moorean dogmatism <i>Adam Leite</i>	158
9	Primitively rational belief-forming processes <i>Ralph Wedgwood</i>	180
10	What does it take to “have” a reason? <i>Mark Schroeder</i>	201
11	Knowledge and reasons for belief <i>Alan Millar</i>	223
12	What is the swamping problem? <i>Duncan Pritchard</i>	244
	<i>References</i>	260
	<i>Index</i>	271

## *Introduction*

*Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen*

Over the last three decades, practical philosophy has increasingly looked at, and become dependent upon, the concept of *normative reasons* for actions, and action-related propositional attitudes. The concept gradually came into prominence in a series of classic treatments in the late seventies and early eighties and has since then become the focal point and organizing concept for a vast array of work in both ethics and the philosophy of mind and action. The core of the concept is a simple one: normative reasons are facts that *count in favor* of some action or attitude; they are the facts that determine whether or not an agent *ought* to do something, or adopt some attitude. As such, normative reasons are often thought to be the most fundamental concept relevant to understanding *rationality*, which, on this view, is the capacity to recognize and respond to reasons in appropriate ways. The link to rationality means that normative reasons not only determine what ought to be done; at least sometimes, they also play the role of explaining why an agent in fact acted or thought as she did.

Even if there is broad agreement among philosophers on these fundamental features of reasons, a detailed understanding of reasons is still subject to controversy. What kinds of facts can act as reasons? Are they restricted to representational states such as beliefs or desires, or can nonmental states of affairs act as reasons as well? Do reasons for action somehow depend on the value of taking that action, or can value itself be explained in terms of reasons? Are there different kinds of reasons, and how are these reasons then related? Can different reasons be weighed against each other? How do reasons enter into reasoning about what one ought to do? What is the logical form of reasons statements? What is the relationship between normative and explanatory reasons? These are all issues on which philosophers disagree. Nevertheless, there is some general agreement that many problems in practical philosophy are fruitfully addressed by asking what

there is reason to do, desire, or intend, and the enormous interest that the above issues have generated is testament to this fact.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, in theoretical philosophy, epistemologists have looked to the concept of *epistemic justification* as their central normative notion, and to *warrant* as a crucial subsidiary one. Important debates on whether justification depends on properties that are internal or external to the epistemic agent, what role justified belief plays in knowledge, and whether justification is context-sensitive, have, amongst many others, taken centre stage in epistemology. Although the concerns of epistemologists are somewhat different from those of practical philosophers, at least superficially, the notion of epistemic justification seems to be closely related to that of normative reasons. Epistemic justification is supposed to speak in favor of adopting the relevant belief, and, at least sometimes, the epistemic justification a person has for a given belief explains why that belief was adopted. The similarity is also reflected by the fact that epistemologists sometimes speak of the *justification* and the *reasons* a person has for her belief interchangeably. Nevertheless, debates over epistemic justification and normative reasons have largely been conducted in isolation from each other.

This raises at least two important questions. First, it raises the question of how we are to understand reasons for beliefs, where “reasons” is understood in the normative sense known from practical philosophy. Questions of this sort already have some pedigree in the philosophical debate. For example, many philosophers have been interested in whether there could be “practical” reasons for belief, in the sense of reasons for belief that are not related to the truth of the belief, but instead to some practical advantage, which the belief would accrue to its holder. However, theorizing over normative reasons for belief hasn’t yet reached the sophistication of the parallel debate over normative reasons for action, and many important issues remain largely untouched. For example, in what sense does evidence “speak in favor” of adopting a given belief? Are reasons for belief somehow value-based, even if they are truth-related or “epistemic”? Is there some general theory of reasons, which is common to both reasons for action and reasons for belief? If not, what does this show about the unity of normativity and rationality? How do reasons for belief motivate the relevant beliefs? Would it be coherent to deny the existence of normative reasons for belief? These are some of the questions taken up by the chapters in the first part of the volume.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent volume of papers devoted to the subject of normative reasons for *action*, see Sobel and Wall (2009).

The second important question raised by the above considerations is what lessons there are to be learned in regard to the traditional issues in epistemology concerning the epistemic justification of beliefs, by looking to the (at least superficially) related concept of normative reasons. Might there be something important to be learned about the conditions under which one is justified in holding a belief, by looking to theories of what it means to have a normative reason for some action or attitude? It remains a very real possibility, of course, that there is a deep reason why debates over epistemic justification and normative reasons so far have been conducted independently of each other. Perhaps the two notions really *are* too different to be usefully compared; perhaps the superficial similarity between the two concepts is nothing more than exactly that: superficial. The best way to test this is to see whether considerations concerning the one concept can in fact help elucidate the other. The chapters in the second part of the volume do exactly that, and the result, we think, is very helpful indeed.

In the remaining part of the introduction, we provide summaries of the individual chapters of the volume, highlighting along the way how the chapters speak to the two organizing questions of the volume.

#### PART I: NORMATIVE REASONS FOR BELIEF

As mentioned, the chapters in the first part of the volume are all devoted to understanding reasons for beliefs, where “reasons” is understood in the normative sense known from practical philosophy. In the first chapter, “How to be a teleologist about epistemic reasons,” Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen considers the possibility of explaining the normative source of reasons for belief in terms of the value of the beliefs that they support. According to the popular teleological conception of normative reasons, reasons are value-based in the sense that whether someone has reason to  $\varphi$  depends on the value of the result of  $\varphi$ -ing, or the intrinsic value of  $\varphi$ -ing itself. Many have been attracted to similar accounts of *epistemic* reasons, according to which epistemic reasons depend on the value of the beliefs that they support, but it has proven difficult to make such an account plausible. The central problem is that the epistemic properties in virtue of which epistemic reasons obtain aren’t always valuable. Hitherto, most defenses of the teleological account of epistemic reasons have focused on ways in which epistemic properties, despite appearances, might be seen as valuable in a sufficiently general sense to ground the teleological account. Instead of this, Steglich-Petersen pursues the alternative strategy of developing a teleological account of epistemic reasons, which is compatible with the

seeming fact that epistemic properties aren't always valuable. To this end, Steglich-Petersen distinguishes between reasons to believe that particular propositions are true, i.e. epistemic reasons, and reasons to pursue the aim of forming beliefs about those propositions in the first place. Once we realize the difference between these two kinds of reasons, epistemic reasons can be understood as instrumental reasons to pursue the aims, which the second kind of reasons support. A result of this is that epistemic reasons can be understood as value-based, without epistemic properties being valuable in all contexts.

Andrew Reisner's chapter, "Is there reason to be theoretically rational?," explores the relation between reasons for belief and rationality. During the last decade, it has become increasingly fashionable to believe that rationality strongly supervenes on the mental, whereas normative reasons depend on non-mental facts (for the most part). Reisner explores this claim for the particular case of the rationality of belief. The chapter first gives a brief history of how the current view about the distinction between rationality and reasons came to be held. Reisner argues that the distinction is essentially well motivated and that there is a conceptual distinction between a belief's, or collection of beliefs', being rational and there being reason to have that belief or collection of beliefs. Nonetheless, there remains the question of whether its being rational to hold a collection of beliefs in some way entails that there is a reason to hold that collection of beliefs. Reisner argues that its being rational to hold a collection of beliefs does provide a very strong reason to hold that collection of beliefs, at least for rational requirements of a certain kind (those that are wide-scope consistency requirements). Ordinary evidential reasons for belief, it is argued, give us wide-scope reasons not to hold collections of inconsistent beliefs, and these beliefs are forbidden by the requirements of theoretical rationality.

In the section's third chapter, "Epistemic motivation: towards a metaethics of belief," Veli Mitova takes the first steps towards a more systematic extension of traditional metaethical concerns to the ethics of belief. As pointed out by Mitova, three fundamental debates largely define contemporary metaethics. The first is between internalists and externalists about moral motivation. While internalists think that there is a necessary connection between making a moral reasons judgment and being motivated to act in accordance with it, and that such a connection is necessary if we are to explain the manner in which moral reasons can guide and explain actions, externalists deny any such necessary connection. The second main debate is that between Humeans and anti-Humeans about motivation. The issue here is whether desires, or some desire-like states, as the Humeans

hold, are necessary in order to explain the motivation of actions, or, as the anti-Humeans hold, a cognitive state such as a belief can suffice for motivating action on its own. The last main debate concerns the truth-aptness of moral judgments. Cognitivists claim that moral judgments can be true or false, and that to make a moral judgment entails having a belief with that content. Non-cognitivists deny this, and hold instead that such judgments should be understood as the expression of some non-cognitive attitude. The aim of Mitova's chapter is to transpose, in a systematic way, these debates to the ethics of belief. Her guiding observation is that the three debates are interdependent. In particular, commitment to anti-Humeanism and internalism about moral motivation seems to entail a commitment to moral cognitivism. This forms the starting point for Mitova's argument. She first provides a novel argument for a form of anti-Humeanism and internalism about the way in which normative reasons judgments motivate beliefs, and then relies on these arguments to establish a form of cognitivism about such judgments.

In his chapter, "Error theory and reasons for belief," Jonas Olson considers the radical possibility that there simply *are no* reasons for belief and the prospects of an accompanying *error theory* about such reasons. This option has been explored in some detail in the practical domain, motivated mainly by a desire to avoid commitment to "queer" and non-natural normative entities suggested by moral thought. But a parallel position in regard to reasons for belief has often been assumed to be a non-starter. In fact, the perceived implausibility of an error theory about epistemic reasons has been regarded by many as an embarrassment for error theorists in the practical domain. Using a "companion in guilt" strategy, these philosophers have argued that since error theory about epistemic reasons is so implausible, and arguments for error theory in the practical domain seem to entail a commitment to an analogous theory about reasons for belief, we should reject error theory in the practical domain too. In his chapter, Olson considers whether an error theory about reasons for belief would really be so implausible as is often supposed. In particular, Olson discusses what Terence Cuneo (2007) has recently described as three unpalatable results for such a theory, *viz.* that it would be self-defeating or polemically impotent; that it would imply that there can be no arguments for anything; and that it rules out the possibility of epistemic merits and demerits. In his careful discussion, Olson argues that these results either do not follow, or are less unpalatable than Cuneo supposes.

Nishi Shah is more skeptical concerning the possibility of an error theory about reasons for belief. In his chapter, "Can reasons for belief be



debunked?,” Shah develops a novel argument against this possibility. Like Cuneo, Shah thinks that an epistemic error theory would be inconsistent or self-undermining. But as opposed to Cuneo’s argument, Shah’s depends only upon a number of widely accepted assumptions about the nature of belief itself. Shah argues that even the error theorist is committed to the existence of beliefs – after all, the core claim of the epistemic error theorist is that our *judgments* or *beliefs* about epistemic reasons are systematically false, which presupposes that these judgments or beliefs are there to be false in the first place. If statements about epistemic reasons were to be interpreted as mere expressions of conative states, which are neither true nor false, the error theorist’s claim would make no sense. But according to the account of belief previously defended by Shah, ascriptions of belief require making normative judgments. In order to ascribe a belief to someone one must judge, at least implicitly, that the mental state one has just classified as a belief is *correct* if and only if the proposition believed is true. If Shah is right, it is simply part of the nature of belief, that beliefs are governed by this norm of correctness. But if the error theorist accepts this, it seems, as Shah argues, that she will also be committed to the truth of at least some true normative judgments about reasons for belief. Hence, the error theory about such reasons fails.

## PART II: REASONS AND EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION

As mentioned above, the chapters in Part II all explore different ways in which elements from the debate over normative reasons might help elucidate some more traditional epistemological concerns over the justification of beliefs. In the first chapter of Part II, “Reasons and belief’s justification,” Clayton Littlejohn begins by observing that there is little to say about the justification of beliefs that cannot be said in terms of reasons. Hence, we must be able to work our way from an account of the demands of reasons to an account of epistemic justification. A prominent view on the former issue is that reasons demand *conformance*: if there is reason for an agent to  $\varphi$ , its demands are met if the agent in fact  $\varphi$ s, and otherwise not. A common objection is that conforming is not always rational. For this to be the case, the agent must also *comply* with the reason, i.e.  $\varphi$  for that very reason. But according to Littlejohn, this additional demand should be replaced by a demand that we exercise due care to avoid acting against a reason and failing to conform to its demands. If this is true, important consequences follow for how we should think of epistemic justification. In particular, the traditional view that a person’s justification for a belief

supervenes on the evidence available to the agent, and the account of justification which relies on the assumption that knowledge is the norm for belief, both seem to be in trouble. If Littlejohn's argument is successful, it would thus constitute an important example of the importance of the notion of normative reasons to traditional epistemological concerns.

In her chapter, "Perception, generality, and reasons," Hannah Ginsborg relies in part on the notion of reasons in evaluating a recent trend in the theory of perception. For a long time, philosophers have debated whether the representational content of perceptual states is conceptual or non-conceptual, but recently a new trend has emerged challenging the assumption that perceptual states are representational *at all*. This idea must be rejected, they say, if we are to adequately characterize what is distinctive about perception in contrast to thought and belief. Ginsborg considers the implication of this view for the idea that perceptual experiences can stand in rational or reason-giving relations to belief, and argues that the two ideas are irreconcilable. Denying that perceptual states have representational content implies denying that perception can play the proper reason-giving role in regard to belief, at least in the sense traditionally invoked in epistemological debates over the justification of empirical belief. In making this point, she relies on the distinction familiar from practical philosophy between a reason understood as a consideration counting in favor of an action or attitude (Scanlon 1998), and a reason understood as a belief that stands in a rationalizing relation to actions or attitudes. Ginsborg argues that while the non-representational view may be able to explain perceptual reasons in the first sense, it cannot explain perceptual reasons in the second sense, which is the more interesting one from an epistemological point of view. Instead, Ginsborg outlines a version of the representational theory of perception, which both addresses the worries motivating the non-representational view, and explains the ways in which perception can rationalize thought and belief.

Adam Leite's contribution to the volume, "Immediate warrant, epistemic responsibility, and Moorean dogmatism," also takes up the problem of accounting for the reasons for belief provided us by our sensory experiences. According to the hotly debated "Moorean dogmatist" response to external world skepticism, our sensory experience provides us with *prima facie* immediate justification, warrant, or reason to believe certain propositions about the world. This position has a great deal of intuitive appeal and can easily seem to be exemplified in our ordinary epistemic practice. At the same time, the strategy endorses forms of reasoning or argumentation that many people find objectionable. In particular, the dogmatists appear to

hold that an ideal rational agent who considers the question of whether she is being deceived by an evil demon could start from a position which presupposes no beliefs at all about the world, consciously take her current experience as a reason for believing that she has hands and so believe that she has hands on that basis, reason from that belief to the conclusion that she is not being deceived by an evil demon, and thereby form the latter belief in a fully satisfactory way. To many people this line of reasoning seems objectionable, but it has proven difficult to locate the source of dissatisfaction. In his chapter, Leite seeks to locate this dissatisfaction in considerations about epistemic responsibility. To this end, Leite develops a theory of immediate warrant and shows how it can be combined with plausible “inferential internalist” demands arising from considerations of epistemic responsibility. The resulting view endorses immediate perceptual warrant but forbids the sort of reasoning that Moorean dogmatism would allow. A surprising result of this discussion will be that dogmatism alone isn’t enough to avoid standard arguments for skepticism about the external world.

Ralph Wedgwood’s chapter, “Primitively rational belief-forming practices,” seeks to explore the common view that one can only have a reason to do something if there is a sound process of reasoning that takes one from one’s current mental states to the performance of the relevant action. Wedgwood suggests that this same view may be applied to belief, and in particular to belief formation. He explores the topic by asking where there are primitively rational belief-forming practices – practices that, if carried out, make it rational for an agent to form the belief resulting from those practices. Wedgwood puts three constraints on these practices: that they are rational practices that result in rational beliefs; that they are not infallible practices (even if they are reliable); and that they are primitive or basic, i.e. they do not require some practice-independent justification for their rationality. The particular putative primitively rational belief-forming practice that he considers is “taking experience at face value,” which is the practice of coming to believe  $p$  in response to  $p$ ’s being part of one’s conscious experience. After developing a more careful account of what it is to take experience at face value, Wedgwood argues that the practice may well be a primitively rational belief-forming practice and that understanding why will help us to understand in general what is required for something to be such a practice. He suggests that the central criterion is that such practices must be, and indeed are, built into our very capacity to possess certain kinds of concepts and to have certain kinds of propositional attitudes, and that they are therefore *a priori* practices.

In Mark Schroeder's chapter, "What does it take to 'have' a reason?," questions about beliefs derived from perception also take a central role, but in this case to raise broader questions about the role evidence plays in inferential justification: in our having reasons for beliefs that we have arrived at by inference. The aim of the chapter is to consider, and then reject, a series of arguments that suggest that the bar for having reasons for beliefs arrived at inferentially is high. Schroeder argues that beliefs inferred from perceptual experiences would be ruled out by accounts that require a high bar for inferentially arrived at beliefs. Accepting such accounts would either rule out the possibility that perception can play an appropriate role in giving us reasons for our beliefs (serving as evidence for those beliefs), or that we need two accounts of justification for inferential beliefs: a low bar account for perceptually grounded beliefs and a higher bar account for other cases. Schroeder argues that we should retain a unified account with a lower bar. If correct, his view appears to have far-reaching consequences, as it offers up resources for resisting both coherentist and radical externalist views about justification within epistemology.

In "Knowledge and reasons for belief," Alan Millar poses a puzzle of a general form for epistemologists: how can we get so much from so little? The exemplar of this puzzle is testimony: it is commonly thought that we can gain knowledge through testimony, even when we have not reasoned carefully about the testifier's epistemological *bona fides*. A central feature of this puzzle is that we are inclined to believe that this ability to gain knowledge suggests an ability to gain justified belief, even without particular commitments concerning whether knowledge can be analyzed in terms of justified belief. Famous challenges to gaining justification on such a minimal basis abound, and it is Millar's project to develop a sketch of how one might show that under suitable circumstances, one might indeed be able to be justified in believing something on apparently less than ideally robust bases. In building the account, the notion of a recognitional ability is developed. That we have the capacity to recognize the way things are under suitable circumstances allows us to accord experience an explanatory role in our acquisition of knowledge and the possession of reasons for belief. Millar reverses the traditional order of explanation by suggesting that experiences are not themselves reasons for believing that things are as the experiences take them to be. Instead, it is what we know about our environment and our perceptual ability to access it that provides the justification for perceptual knowledge. The order of explanation can be reversed by understanding what kind of reasons we get from certain kinds of thin epistemic bases, such as testimony or indicator phenomena in

general: that is, they are reasons that are given in terms of understanding how they derive from our knowledge of the environment and our capacities for accessing that environment. Millar's chapter concludes that we gain important understanding about our knowledge of the world in traditionally problematic cases like those that arise for perceptual knowledge, if we take a knowledge-first approach. This leads to the development of a particular category of knowledge: detached standing knowledge. In such cases, justification does not serve as a basis for knowledge, but rather we can explain why we are justified in believing something because of what we know. Millar links the availability of reasons for belief to an understanding of how we have come to know what we know.

In the final chapter of the volume, "What is the swamping problem?," Duncan Pritchard returns us to another problem in traditional epistemology. If the only valuable feature of a belief is that it is true, then what non-instrumental value do other normative epistemological concepts such as *justified belief*, *rational belief*, and *knowledge* have? Put another way, we can understand the swamping problem as being, or at least implying, a thesis about reasons for belief: our central way of evaluating belief is in terms of whether there are reasons pointing toward a belief's being true. The swamping problem is normally thought to apply only to certain kinds of epistemological views. Pritchard argues that the problem is not constrained to a narrow range of positions, and he gives a more precise account of the swamping problem in terms of three claims: a general thesis about value, a more specific thesis about epistemic value, and the (putative) correctness of a popular thesis in epistemology, called "T-monism" by Pritchard. It is argued that each of these claims is independently plausible, but that they are collectively inconsistent. Having set things out in this way, the options available to epistemologists for solving the swamping problem are discussed. It is conjectured that, from amongst the available options, the most promising way of resolving the swamping problem will require us to adopt a type of value pluralism which casts into doubt the central role that knowledge has played in traditional epistemology.

## CHAPTER I

# *How to be a teleologist about epistemic reasons*

*Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen*

### I.1 INTRODUCTION

According to the teleological conception, reasons are value-based. Whether someone has reason to  $\phi$  depends on the value of the result of  $\phi$ -ing, or the intrinsic value of  $\phi$ -ing itself (Scanlon 1998: 84). Accordingly, on the teleological conception of reasons for belief, whether someone has reason to believe some particular proposition  $p$  on some particular occasion depends on the value of the result of believing  $p$ , or the intrinsic value of believing  $p$ , on that occasion. Although this basic tenet of the teleological account of reasons for belief has seemed plausible to many, and a number of attempts have been made at fleshing it out in detail, it remains controversial whether it can be made to work.<sup>1</sup>

We can distinguish between two distinct challenges, or broad categories of challenges, for the teleological conception of reasons for belief. On the one hand, there is the problem of explaining why, on the teleological account, one couldn't have reason to believe a proposition that is not supported by evidence. If reasons for belief are reasons that obtain in virtue of the value of the relevant belief, why does the pleasantness (or some other non-epistemic property of value) of believing a particular proposition not provide a reason for holding it? There are those, of course, who accept the possibility of such non-epistemic reasons for belief.<sup>2</sup> But many teleologists about reasons for belief wish to maintain that one can have reason to believe a proposition only insofar as the belief is evidentially supported, or has some other epistemic property, depending on the specific account. We can call this 'the exclusivity problem' for teleologists. The problem is that of explaining why only certain properties of value, namely the epistemic

<sup>1</sup> For prominent examples, see Alston (2005), Bonjour (1985), Foley (1987), Goldman (1999b), Lehrer (1990), Lynch (2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Reisner (2008 and 2009a) for a recent discussion and defence of the idea of non-epistemic reasons for belief.

ones, can count in favour of beliefs, if reasons are generally a matter of the relevant actions or attitudes resulting in or promoting something of value. I have argued in previous papers that a teleological conception of reasons for belief is compatible with there only being epistemic reasons for belief, and I shall simply assume in the following that this is the case.<sup>3</sup>

The second major challenge for the teleological account concerns the nature of *epistemic* reasons specifically, regardless of whether such reasons are somehow privileged in supporting beliefs. The problem is that of explaining how epistemic reasons could be value-based in the first place. If epistemic reasons for belief are reasons that obtain in virtue of the epistemic properties of the beliefs that they support, a teleological conception must explain epistemic reasons in terms of the value, whether intrinsic or derived, of those epistemic properties. But as witnessed by the latest decades of theorizing about this question, it is all but clear how or why epistemic properties are valuable or conducive to something of value, in a sense that is sufficiently general to form the basis of a teleological account of epistemic reasons.<sup>4</sup> This is the challenge I address in this chapter. In the following, I shall call it ‘the value problem’ for teleological accounts of epistemic reasons.<sup>5</sup>

The most common approach to the value problem accepts the basic premise of the challenge, namely that if the teleological account is to succeed, epistemic properties must somehow be of value, or be conducive to something of value, in some *general* sense. Accordingly, the common approach attempts to solve the problem by locating the epistemic properties of value, and explaining the sense in which they are valuable. A candidate account might hold, for example, that true beliefs are of intrinsic value, and that any property of beliefs that ensures or makes it likely that a belief is true (such as the property of being evidentially supported or being the result of a reliable mechanism) therefore is valuable as well.<sup>6</sup> However, in spite of intensive efforts, this strategy has not yet reached a widely accepted solution.

In this chapter, I explore the prospects of a slightly different strategy in solving the value problem for the teleological account of epistemic reasons.

<sup>3</sup> See Steglich-Petersen (2006a, 2006b, and 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For a recent discussion of representative proponents of this line of explanation, see Grimm (2009).

<sup>5</sup> The value problem for a teleological account of epistemic reasons is distinct from several other so-called ‘value problems’ in epistemology, most notably the problem of explaining the value of knowledge as opposed to mere true belief. For a survey of recent work on this problem, see Pritchard (2007b).

<sup>6</sup> For this particular account, see Lynch (2004).

The starting point of the strategy is to concede the main criticism of teleological accounts of epistemic reasons, namely that epistemic properties (whatever the relevant epistemic properties might be) are *not* valuable generally and in all contexts, and that a teleological account relying on such a claim therefore fails. So the question becomes whether a teleological explanation of epistemic reasons which doesn't rely on that claim is available. I will introduce and motivate such an account.

At the core of the account lies a distinction between two different kinds of reasons concerning beliefs, namely reasons to form beliefs *that* particular propositions are true, i.e. epistemic reasons, and reasons to form beliefs *about* certain propositions or subject matters. I shall argue that the latter kind of reasons is connected to value in a straightforward way: whether one has reason to form beliefs *about* some proposition or subject matter is determined by the value of doing so, in the same way that reasons for actions seem determined by the intrinsic or derived value of those actions. I shall argue further that the two kinds of reasons stand in a certain systematic relationship to each other that any theory of those reasons must explain. To anticipate, epistemic reasons to believe *that*  $p$  entail that one ought to believe that  $p$  only in the context of an all-things-considered reason to form a belief *about*  $p$ . I then go on to provide a teleological account of this relationship. I shall argue that the relationship can be explained by supposing that having an epistemic reason to believe that  $p$  is equivalent to having what I term a 'hypothetical instrumental reason'. The main virtue of the account is that it does not require the epistemic properties underlying epistemic reasons to be of value in all contexts. Only if one has reason to form beliefs about the relevant subject matter do epistemic properties of some potential belief about that subject matter become valuable, and since one can have epistemic reason to believe some proposition without having reason to form beliefs about that proposition, epistemic reasons can obtain without the epistemic properties in question being of value.

## 1.2 DEFINITIONS

To fix matters, it will be useful to begin by clarifying what I shall mean by a number of central notions. First of all, we need to clarify the notion of a 'reason'. By a 'reason', I shall mean a fact or consideration that stands in a reason-giving relation to some particular action or attitude of some particular agent (Scanlon 1998: 17). The reason-giving relation can take different forms, depending on the kind of reason. Generally, the relation is that of *favours* the relevant action or attitude, so a reason to  $\phi$  is



something that somehow favours  $\phi$ -ing. But there are different kinds or ‘grades’ of favouring. Some reasons may by themselves *require*  $\phi$ -ing, i.e. make it the case that one ought to  $\phi$ . Such reasons are sometimes called ‘perfect reasons’ (Broome 2004), but I shall instead call them ‘all-things-considered reasons’. Other reasons may favour  $\phi$ -ing in a mere ‘pro tanto’ way. Such reasons can usefully be thought of as considerations that can play a role in a weighing-explanation of what one ought to do, where the weights of several pro tanto reasons are compared to reach a judgement about what one overall ought to do in a given situation (Broome 2004). So having a pro tanto reason to  $\phi$  does not necessarily entail that one ought to  $\phi$ . There might be other pro tanto reasons *not* to  $\phi$ , or to do something else that excludes  $\phi$ -ing, which weigh heavier than one’s reason to  $\phi$ . This being said, the distinction between all-things-considered reasons and pro tanto reasons should not be understood too sharply. Sometimes a pro tanto reason to  $\phi$  by itself makes it the case that one ought to  $\phi$  – for example in case there are no opposing reasons not to  $\phi$ . In that case, the pro tanto reason to  $\phi$  is an all-things-considered reason as well. Moreover, what we treat as all-things-considered reasons are often in fact the result of weighing several pro tanto reasons for and against the relevant action. The distinction is thus somewhat blurry, and I agree with those who regard the notion of all-things-considered reasons as derivative of the notion of pro tanto reasons (Broome 2004). Nevertheless, the distinction is useful.<sup>7</sup>

For reasons that will emerge later in the chapter, it will be useful to represent these relationships between reasons and corresponding ought-statements as conditionals, having reason-statements as antecedents and statements about what an agent ought to do in the appropriate sense as consequents:

Necessarily, if S has all-things-considered reason to  $\phi$ , then S ought to  $\phi$ .<sup>8</sup>

Necessarily, if S has pro tanto reason to  $\phi$ , then, in the absence of opposing reasons, S ought to  $\phi$ .

Different kinds of reasons can thus be distinguished, at least in part, by the kinds of ought-statements they entail. In investigating a class of reasons,

<sup>7</sup> Some have suggested that there are reasons that merely ‘entice’, i.e. make it the case that  $\phi$ -ing would be *attractive* for the agent, without thereby implying that the agent would commit a mistake or otherwise be in the wrong if he fails to respond to it (Dancy 2004). For a discussion relating these different kinds of reasons to evidence, see Steglich-Petersen (2008b).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Necessarily’ indicates that the relevant conditional is that of entailment rather than a contingent relation. Whenever not explicitly mentioned otherwise, I shall take ‘if’ to stand for the material conditional.

part of what we are interested in is the kind of ought-statement entailed by that class of reasons, i.e. in what sense the reason in question favours the relevant action or attitude. As the case of *pro tanto* reasons shows, reasons do not always entail unqualified oughts, but only more complex or conditional statements including oughts. This will become important later on when investigating the nature of epistemic reasons, where it is all but clear in what sense they favour or make it the case that one ought to form the relevant belief.

Although the teleological account of reasons might be committed to certain characteristics of the favouring relation that reasons can stand in,<sup>9</sup> it is primarily an account of another aspect of reasons, namely of the kinds of considerations or facts that are able to constitute reasons, and thus stand in the favouring relation to actions or attitudes in the first place. According to the teleological account, some fact or consideration can be a reason for an action or attitude only in virtue of being a fact or consideration about the value, intrinsic or derived, of the action or attitude that it favours. For example, the fact that an action promotes well-being is a reason to perform it, since well-being is valuable.

Finally, by 'epistemic reasons', I shall refer to considerations that count in favour of holding a belief in a particular proposition solely on account of that (potential) belief's epistemic properties. In this chapter I wish to remain neutral on the exact nature of the epistemic properties giving rise to epistemic reasons, but by 'epistemic properties' I shall generally mean properties that are in some way relevant to whether or not the proposition believed is true. On this very general definition, being evidentially supported is the most obvious candidate for an epistemic property, but I shall not exclude other candidates in advance.

### 1.3 EPISTEMIC REASONS AND VALUE

With this rough characterization of reasons, and the teleological account of these, we can go on to consider the teleological account of epistemic reasons specifically. According to the common version of this account, epistemic reasons for beliefs obtain in virtue of the value, either intrinsic or instrumental, of the epistemic properties of the beliefs they support. When I have an epistemic reason for a particular belief, the belief must

<sup>9</sup> For example, it is sometimes argued that teleological accounts of reasons are committed to the view that all reasons can be compared and weighed against each other. For this view, see in particular Joseph Raz (1986).

have some epistemic property that somehow constitutes or promotes something of value. On the teleological account, epistemic reasons thus share an important characteristic with practical reasons: they both support actions or attitudes in virtue of those actions or attitudes promoting or constituting something of value. What distinguishes epistemic reasons is that the valuable property of beliefs, which the reason is based on, is an epistemic property, such as being true, supported by evidence, etc., depending on the specific teleological account. This means that the teleologian must explain why those epistemic properties are valuable or promote something of value.

Critics often point out that beliefs supported by epistemic reasons do not thereby become valuable or come to promote something of value. If epistemic reasons for beliefs are reasons that obtain in virtue of the relevant beliefs having some epistemic property that is of value or promotes something of value, then *all* beliefs supported by epistemic reasons must be valuable or value-promoting. But not all beliefs supported by epistemic reasons are valuable or value-promoting. In fact, some beliefs are just the opposite, despite being supported by epistemic reasons. Numerous examples of such beliefs have been given in the literature. Most of them invoke propositional contents that it would be trivial or even harmful to form beliefs about, but are nonetheless supported by epistemic reasons. To give but a few recent examples: Thomas Kelly (2003) asks us to imagine being about to watch a suspense thriller. In that case, most of us would prefer not having epistemically supported beliefs about the ending of the movie, since our enjoyment of it hinges at least in part on not knowing the ending. Alvin Goldman (1999b) and Stephen Grimm (2009) offer several examples of propositions that it wouldn't be outright value-detracting, but nevertheless worthless to form beliefs about: What is the 323rd entry in the Wichita, Kansas phone directory? Is there an even number of dust specks on my desk? Such cases seem to show that epistemic reasons for beliefs do not depend on the value of those beliefs. A belief can be true, justified, warranted, supported by evidence, etc., without thereby becoming either intrinsically valuable, or conducive to something of intrinsic value. A world in which I have a true, warranted belief about the number of dust specks on my desk is not better than a world in which I have no such belief. A world in which I have a true, warranted belief about the ending of a suspense thriller I am about to watch is actively *worse*, certainly from the perspective of my own aims, but arguably also intrinsically, than a world in which I have no such belief. Epistemic evaluation of beliefs thus seems entirely independent from questions of value.

It may well seem fantastic to claim that epistemic reasons do not depend on the value of the beliefs that they support. Surely, a warranted belief is more valuable than an unwarranted one; surely, a true belief is more valuable than a false one. But if the above criticism of the teleological account is sound, that is the conclusion we are driven to accept. Although it *often* is the case that a warranted belief is valuable, no *general* claim of that sort seems available. It is always possible to find counter-examples involving epistemically supported beliefs in very trivial propositions, or propositions that the believer would be better off not having beliefs about.<sup>10</sup>

There are two common strategies for averting this objection against the teleological account.<sup>11</sup> Some defenders of the teleological account have tried to avert it by attempting to show that epistemic reasons, despite appearances, *do* indicate that the relevant beliefs are somehow valuable. Michael Lynch (2004) insists, for example, that epistemically well-founded beliefs (in his case, true beliefs), about even extremely trivial or inconsequential matters *are* valuable, since we value truth in its own right. The main problem with this view is that it seems implausible to claim it worthwhile or valuable to form beliefs about trivial matters such as those mentioned above. Other teleologists recognize that some epistemically well-founded beliefs aren't valuable, but attempt to salvage the teleological account by restricting epistemic reasons to support beliefs that are of interest.<sup>12</sup> But this strategy undermines the basic tenet of the teleological explanation of epistemic reasons. If epistemic reasons obtain in virtue of the relevant beliefs having valuable epistemic properties, then beliefs without valuable epistemic properties cannot be supported by epistemic reasons. But it seems that even extremely trivial and uninteresting beliefs can be supported by epistemic reasons. However uninteresting, it is possible to have an epistemically well-supported belief that there is an even number of dust specks on my desk. Although I cannot argue for this claim in full here, it thus seems that both common strategies in salvaging the teleological account are in trouble.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Something not often noted is that the value-independence of epistemic reasons, if true, would be just as puzzling for non-teleological accounts. How can *any* reason, let alone teleological ones, be entirely independent of value? Some have suggested that reasons for belief are instead generated by a special constitutive non-teleological norm governing belief (Shah 2003; Shah and Velleman 2005). For criticism of this view, see Steglich-Petersen (2006a, 2008a).

<sup>11</sup> For a more thorough recent criticism of these two strategies along the same lines, see Grimm (2009).

<sup>12</sup> This strategy is adopted by, for example, Goldman (1999b) and Alston (2005).

<sup>13</sup> If epistemic and practical values could be weighed against each other, these problems would have an easy solution: in all of the mentioned cases, the epistemic value of the relevant belief is outweighed by some competing practical value. It is doubtful, however, whether such weighing is possible. For further discussion, see Reisner (2008) and Steglich-Petersen (2009).

In the following, I propose to accept that epistemic reasons can obtain independently of the value, whether intrinsic or derived, of the beliefs that they support. My belief that the suspense thriller I am about to watch ends in a particular way can be epistemically unassailable, entirely underwritten by epistemic reason, even if it would be better from a value perspective if I hadn't had that belief. Likewise, my belief that there is an even number of dust specks on my desk can be well supported by epistemic reasons, even if nothing of value would be promoted by forming such a belief. Nevertheless, I will argue that there is a broadly teleological account compatible with these claims.

#### 1.4 TWO KINDS OF REASONS FOR BELIEF

Normally, reasons for belief are taken to be reasons for believing *that* some particular proposition, or body of propositions, is true. But this is not the only kind of reasons relating to beliefs. Another important class of reasons for belief are the reasons we might have to form or have beliefs *about* particular propositions, or sets of propositions. When one has reason to form a belief *about* some proposition  $p$ , one has reason to form a belief as to whether  $p$  is true or not. These two kinds of reasons are clearly independent of each other in the sense that neither entails the other in regard to some particular proposition. Having reason to form a belief *about* or *as to whether*  $p$  does not entail having a reason to believe *that*  $p$ , nor vice versa. I can have reason to form a belief as to whether the Americans landed a man on the Moon, without having reason to believe that they did in fact land a man on the Moon. For example, I might expect to be met with that question in a quiz, but not yet have any evidence concerning it. On the other hand, I can have reason to believe that there is an even number of dust specks on my desk (in the sense of having the relevant evidence), without thereby having any reason to form a belief *about* that proposition. I might be completely uninterested in the matter, and with good reason.

The notion of reasons to form beliefs *about* propositions or subject matters is in some respects similar to the notion of having a reason to engage in *enquiry*, i.e. a reason to actively pursue evidence bearing on a certain proposition or subject matter. There are important differences, however. For one thing, reasons to form beliefs about propositions are more general than reasons to engage in enquiry in regard to those propositions. It may be that reasons of the former kind *entail* reasons of the latter kind, i.e. that one has reason to engage in enquiry about some subject matter whenever one has reason to form beliefs about it. But that does not make them identical. Another reason to not simply treat them as identical is that

doing so would exclude in advance the possibility of practical reasons for belief, which one might find an altogether too swift argument against this possibility.

Most importantly for our purposes, reasons to form beliefs about propositions seem value-driven in a relatively straightforward sense. Whether one has reason to form a belief about a particular subject matter depends on the value, whether intrinsic or derived, of having a belief about that subject matter. Clearly, the reasons can be grounded on a multitude of values. There is nothing to suggest that a single value, or category of values, should govern such reasons. They may be based on personal interest or curiosity. Arguably, my interest in road cycling gives me reason to form beliefs about the latest developments in the Tour de France, while those without such interests have little or no reason to form such beliefs. In other cases, the reasons might be independent of personal interests, and even be universal in nature. Even if I have little personal interest in Danish politics, it is arguably my duty as a Danish citizen to exercise my democratic rights by voting, and thus to form beliefs about subject matters that are relevant to making an informed decision. At a more general level, we might all have a duty to form beliefs about the ways in which our actions affect others, the environment, or other common goods. The reasons may also be purely instrumental, as when we have reason to form the beliefs necessary to achieve goods of various sorts.

Another characteristic of reasons to form beliefs about propositions or subject matters is that they come in degrees of weight or importance. Although I have reason to form beliefs now about the latest developments in the Tour de France, there might be other and more urgent matters I have more reason to form beliefs about. As such, reasons to form beliefs about propositions can be compared and weighed against other such reasons in the usual ways. In cases where I have equal reason to form beliefs about two alternative propositions or subject matters, and cannot form beliefs about both (I might have limited time to find out about the subject matters), I am rationally permitted to choose either of the two options. Reasons to form beliefs about propositions may also be weighed against practical reasons. It is not uncommon for reasons to form beliefs about subject matters to compete with practical reasons, since finding out about subject matters takes time and resources that could otherwise be devoted to other practical pursuits. In such cases, the value of forming the relevant beliefs must be weighed against the value of pursuing the competing practical pursuits.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed discussion of the way reasons to form beliefs may be weighed against each other, and against practical reasons, see Steglich-Petersen (2009).

These are all characteristics that set reasons to form or have beliefs about propositions apart from epistemic reasons to believe *that* some particular proposition is true. Whether I have epistemic reason to believe a particular proposition depends on the epistemic properties of that (potential) belief only, and these properties are entirely unaffected by the interest I may or may not have in that proposition, the moral or instrumental worth of believing the proposition, or any other such value-giving property.

As such, the weighing of epistemic reasons with other epistemic reasons is entirely different in nature from the weighing of reasons to form beliefs about propositions or subject matters. In a paper not otherwise devoted to the nature of epistemic reasons, Jonathan Dancy observes the following:

One of the most striking differences between theoretical and practical rationality is that if I have sufficient practical reason for more than one option [...] I am rationally permitted to choose any of them, so long as they are roughly equally supported. By contrast, if I have sufficient and equally good reason for each of a set of alternative beliefs, I am not rationally permitted to choose any of them in preference to the others. (Dancy 2004: 95)

To illustrate the point I take Dancy to make, consider first a case in which you have sufficient practical reason for two alternative options that cannot both be pursued. For example, the fact that it would be fun to spend the afternoon playing cricket is a reason to do so; on the other hand, the fact that it would be pleasant to go swimming is a reason to pursue that option instead. In the absence of defeating reasons, both considerations provide sufficient reason, and they support the options with roughly equal weight. In that case, one is permitted to choose either. But consider now a case where you have roughly equal epistemic reason to hold each of two alternative beliefs, such that both cannot rationally be held at the same time. For simplicity, we might suppose that you have evidence for both  $p$  and  $\text{not-}p$ , that the two bodies of evidence support the truth of the relevant propositions to roughly the same degree, and that either body of evidence would have been sufficient to hold the relevant belief in the absence of any other evidence bearing on the matter. In this case, one is *not* permitted to hold either belief. The two epistemic reasons defeat each other, rather than make either option permissible. This difference between practical and epistemic reasons is easy to miss, because reasons of both kinds can outweigh reasons of the same kind, in case they support their relative options to a greater degree than the competing reasons. The difference only shows up in cases where there is (roughly) equal reason to pursue either of two alternative options, or hold either of two alternative beliefs.

With these initial characterizations in place, we can explore, in a loose and tentative way, the *relationship* between reasons for having beliefs about some proposition or subject matter, and epistemic reasons for believing that particular propositions are true. It has already been noted that reasons of neither kind entail reasons of the other. But we now need to explore how the two kinds of reasons rely upon each other in determining what one *ought* to believe.

First consider the situation in which S has an all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about some subject matter. Suppose, for example, that S is a registered voter, and that much is at stake in the election. In that case, it is plausible that S has all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about the policies of the presidential candidates. This in itself is not sufficient to make it the case that S ought to believe particular propositions about the policies of the respective candidates, for example that one candidate is in favour of universal health care. If S has no evidence concerning that candidate's health-care policy, it seems plausible that S shouldn't believe any particular propositions on that topic (or only extremely trivial ones, such as the proposition that it is the case of the candidate's health-care policy that S has no evidence concerning it). So having all-things-considered reason to form a belief *about p* does not in itself entail that one *ought* to believe either that *p* or not-*p*. But suppose that S acquires sufficient evidence, and thus an epistemic reason to believe that the candidate indeed is in favour of universal health care. In that case, it seems that S ought to form the belief that the candidate is in favour of universal health care.

Consider next the case where S has no reason to form beliefs about some proposition or subject matter. Suppose, for example, that the subject matter is whether there is an even number of dust specks on S's desk. Let us also suppose that S has excellent evidence, and thus epistemic reason to believe in the sense defined, that there indeed is an even number of dust specks on his desk. In spite of this epistemic reason, it does not seem to be the case that S ought to form the belief that there is an even number of dust specks on his desk. It may be that S as a matter of fact *cannot avoid* forming that belief, since we are psychologically disposed to form beliefs that are supported by consciously considered evidence. But it is nonetheless not the case that S ought to form that belief. If S failed to form the belief, we wouldn't fault him or regard him as normatively worse off for that reason.<sup>15</sup> We may regret that S's general psychological disposition did not make him form the belief, since more often than not it is desirable

<sup>15</sup> For further arguments to the effect that one cannot derive a normative conclusion from the fact that we are psychologically disposed to form beliefs in accordance with our consciously considered evidence, see Steglich-Petersen (2006a) and Dretske (2000).



to be disposed to form beliefs in accordance with the available evidence. But we would not regard S as having failed to do something he ought to have done. Nevertheless, S has epistemic reason to believe the relevant proposition. So one may have overall epistemic reason to believe that  $p$  without it being the case that one ought to believe that  $p$ .<sup>16</sup> If, on the other hand, a belief about the number of dust specks should become valuable for S (an eccentric billionaire might give him a prize for forming a belief about that proposition<sup>17</sup>), thus giving rise to an all-things-considered reason to form a belief as to whether the content is true, this, together with the epistemic reason, would mean that S ought to believe that there is an even number of dust specks on his desk.

So far, then, the following relationships hold. If S has epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ , S is such that, *if* he has all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about or as to whether  $p$ , *then* he ought to believe that  $p$ . If the latter conditional is false (which it is just in case the antecedent is true and the consequent is false), it is also false that S has epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ . In other words, if it is not the case of S that having a reason to form beliefs about  $p$  materially implies that he ought to believe that  $p$ , we may deduce that S does not have epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ .

The same holds for reasons to form beliefs about or as to whether  $p$ . If S has all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about  $p$ , S is such that, *if* he has epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ , S ought to believe that  $p$ . If the latter conditional is false (which it is just in case the antecedent is true and the consequent is false), it is also false that S has reason to form beliefs about  $p$ . In other words, if it is not the case of S that having epistemic reason to believe that  $p$  materially implies that he ought to believe that  $p$ , we may deduce that S does not have all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about  $p$ . These relationships can thus be summed up as follows (where ‘T’ stands for ‘belief that’ and ‘A’ stands for ‘belief about’):

(T)	Necessarily, if S has epistemic reason to believe that $p$ , then [if S has all-things-considered reason to form a belief about $p$ , S ought to believe that $p$ ].
(A)	Necessarily, if S has all-things-considered reason to form a belief about $p$ , then [if S has epistemic reason to believe that $p$ , S ought to believe that $p$ ]. <sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For further defence of this claim, see Steglich-Petersen (2008b).

<sup>17</sup> Since the billionaire does not require you to adopt a belief that a particular proposition is true, but only a belief *as to whether* the proposition is true, this example does not raise problems concerning the possibility of practical reasons for belief.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, in both schemas, the necessity operator attaches to the main connective only, and thus not to the embedded conditional. Part of the upshot of the above discussion is that reasons of neither kind ever on their own entail that one ought to form the relevant belief.

It is important to make clear that these schemas are not intended as analyses or definitions of the respective kinds of reasons. The schemas merely state certain complex relationships between reasons to form beliefs about propositions, epistemic reasons to believe propositions, and whether an agent ought to form a particular belief. As such, the schemas are compatible with the truth of a number of other claims about the relationship between these three conditions, some of which may be stronger than the ones focused on here. As indicated by the above discussion, however, the schemas do describe what appear to be fundamental properties of these two kinds of reasons. Furthermore, the schemas are quite permissive in a number of ways. For one thing, they leave open the details as to what it takes to have a reason to form a belief about some subject matter, and what epistemic properties some potential belief that  $p$  must have in order to make it the case that one has epistemic reason to believe that  $p$ . Perhaps more importantly, the schemas are silent as to whether there could be non-epistemic reasons to believe that  $p$ . I mentioned at the outset that I would simply assume in this chapter that some version of evidentialism is true, but nothing in these schemas excludes that it could be the case that one ought to believe that  $p$  in the absence of an epistemic reason. As mentioned, I take it to be a separate problem to explain the exclusivity of epistemic reasons, and I have dealt with it elsewhere (see footnote 3).

Since this chapter is primarily about epistemic reasons, I will now leave schema (A) aside, and focus on schema (T), stating a necessary conditional with a statement about epistemic reasons as the antecedent. This schema can be altered and qualified in various ways to take into account a number of subtleties. For example, one might find it plausible that the normative force of the reason one has to form beliefs *about* some subject matter carries over to the ought-statement concerning belief in a particular proposition, on the condition that one has epistemic reason for believing that proposition. For example, consider two mutually independent propositions  $p$  and  $q$ , where  $p$  is of great significance and  $q$  is of lower significance to the believer, such that one has an all-things-considered reason to form a belief about  $p$  and a mere weak pro tanto reason to form a belief about  $q$ . Suppose further that one has evidence of identical strength regarding the truth of the two propositions, and thus equal epistemic reason to believe either. Despite the equally strong epistemic reasons, it seems that the ought-statement concerning belief that  $p$  should be stronger than that concerning belief that  $q$ . In particular, it seems that in the case of  $p$  it is entailed that one ought to believe it, while in the case of  $q$  it is merely entailed that one

ought to believe it in the absence of opposing reasons (these differences are analogous to the explanation of all-things-considered reasons and pro tanto reasons set out in section 1.2). So the force of the ought-statement concerning belief in particular propositions depends on the force of the reasons to form beliefs *about* those propositions, and not on the force of the epistemic reasons one has for believing those propositions. Indeed, it is doubtful whether epistemic reasons have normative ‘force’ or ‘weight’ in that sense at all. When we speak of the ‘force’ or ‘weight’ of epistemic reasons, we usually have in mind a different quality, namely the degree to which the evidence, which the epistemic reasons depend upon, confirms the relevant proposition. But this only affects the *degree of belief* one should adopt in that proposition, not the force of the ought-statement concerning the formation of the relevant belief. If this is plausible, the schema might be qualified in the following way, where the inserted parentheses indicate that the degree of belief one ought to adopt is determined by the epistemic reason, and the split of the schema into two, corresponding to pro tanto reasons and all-things-considered reasons respectively, indicates that the normative force of the ought-statement concerning belief in a particular proposition is determined by the reason one has to form beliefs about that proposition:

(T – all things considered)
Necessarily, if S has epistemic reason to believe that $p$ (to degree $D$ ), then [if S has all-things-considered reason to form a belief about $p$ , S ought to believe that $p$ (to degree $D$ )].
(T – pro tanto)
Necessarily, if S has epistemic reason to believe that $p$ (to degree $D$ ), then [if S has a pro tanto reason to form a belief about $p$ , then, in the absence of opposing reasons, S ought to believe that $p$ (to degree $D$ )].

However, in the following I will ignore these qualifications of schema (T), and focus on the initial simple version of (T) only. The important thing for our purposes is that the schema specifies a precise sense in which epistemic reasons for some belief are related to the value of having that belief. If reasons for forming beliefs about propositions are value-driven, then epistemic reasons are value-driven too, in the sense that they entail that one ought to believe particular propositions in the context of a value-driven reason only. Pointing out this dependence of epistemic reasons on values is a significant step towards solving the value problem for the teleological

account of epistemic reasons. It is not in itself, however, sufficient. What is still missing is an *explanation* of why this dependence holds.

### 1.5 A TELEOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP

The teleological explanation to be offered in this section is a version of the instrumentalist account of epistemic reasons. According to one influential version of this account, epistemic reasons are a species of standard instrumental reasons. Roughly, *S* has instrumental reason to  $\phi$  if and only if there is some aim that *S* has reason to pursue, and  $\phi$ -ing is the best available way (or a step in the best available way) of realizing that aim.<sup>19</sup> For example, if I have reason to go to London, and going to the airport is a step in the best available way of going to London, I have instrumental reason to go to the airport. The standard analogous instrumentalist explanation of epistemic reasons proceeds roughly as follows. First it is observed that forming a belief involves having a particular aim, for example that the belief is true or amounts to knowledge. So if *S* has reason to form a belief about *p*, *S* has reason to pursue the aim involved with forming a belief about *p*, i.e. believing the truth concerning *p*, or coming to know whether *p*, depending on the specific account. This means that one has instrumental reason to believe that *p* just in case one has reason to form a belief about *p*, and believing *p* is the best way to realize the aim involved with forming such a belief. Finally, it is pointed out that the conditions under which believing *p* is instrumental or conducive to the aim involved with forming a belief about *p* coincide with the conditions under which one has epistemic reason to believe that *p*, thus making it plausible to regard epistemic reasons as a special case of instrumental reasons.

As already pointed out, however, this simple instrumentalist explanation is flawed since epistemic reasons do not depend in such a straightforward sense on reasons for forming the relevant beliefs, and thus for adopting the putative aim involved with forming those beliefs. I can have an epistemic reason to believe that there is an even number of dust specks on my desk, regardless of whether I have reason to form a belief about that matter in the first place. So a straight assimilation between epistemic reasons and instrumental reasons is not available.

However, there is a different sense of instrumental reasons to which epistemic reasons might be assimilated instead. This is the purely hypothetical

<sup>19</sup> Although this rough account will be sufficient for our purposes, the question of how to correctly understand instrumental reasons is a subtle and much-debated issue. For representative strands of the recent debate, see Broome (2007c), Schroeder (2004), and Wallace (2001).

sense of instrumental reasons that we have to pursue hypothetical aims, regardless of whether or not we in fact have those aims, or have reason to pursue those aims. For example, regardless of whether I have reason to go to London, I am such that *if* I have reason to go to London, *then* I ought to go to the airport. Countless such conditional statements are true of each of us all the time, corresponding to all of the instrumental actions to hypothetical aims that are available to us. For each of the endless number of hypothetical aims I might adopt, there will be a number of available actions that are instrumental to that aim. Once again, we can characterize this kind of reasons in terms of a conditional statement (where ‘HI’ stands for ‘hypothetical instrumental reason’):

(HI)	Necessarily, if S has hypothetical instrumental reason to $\phi$ in pursuit of aim A, then [if S has all-things-considered reason to pursue aim A, S ought to $\phi$ ].
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Once again, this conditional does not amount to an analysis or a definition of hypothetical instrumental reasons, but merely states an important relationship between such reasons, all-things-considered reasons, and ought-statements. A number of qualifications and comments are needed. The first concerns the possibility of competing instrumental reasons to pursue the same aim. Often there will be several ways to achieve the same aim, so one cannot infer from the fact that there is instrumental reason for S to  $\phi$  in order to achieve A, to it being the case that S instrumentally ought to  $\phi$ , since there might be a stronger instrumental reason to  $\psi$ , if  $\psi$ -ing is an overall better way of achieving A. So in the above schema, ‘S has hypothetical instrumental reason to  $\phi$  in pursuit of aim A’ should be understood as indicating an *overall* hypothetical instrumental reason, i.e. that  $\phi$ -ing is the best available way to pursue A. Under this assumption it might be observed that the normative force attaching to the consequent ought-statement carries over from the normative force of the reason for pursuing the relevant aim: if the reason for pursuing the relevant aim is a mere pro tanto reason, the consequent ought-statement should be qualified to state that S ought to  $\phi$  in the absence of opposing reasons not to pursue aim A. Finally, a comment is needed to dispel any worries about the scope of the consequent ought in the embedded conditional. In discussions about instrumental rationality, i.e. the rationality of taking the means to one’s aims, it is often assumed that instrumental rationality gives rise to *wide-scope* oughts, rather than *narrow-scope* ones. On the narrow-scope account, if S has some aim A, and  $\phi$ -ing is necessary in pursuing A, S ought to  $\phi$ . But this has the counterintuitive result that one ought to take the

means to aims that one does not have reason to pursue. For example, if an arsonist has the aim of burning down his neighbour's house, he ought to pour some gasoline on it if that is necessary to burn down the house. Proponents of the wide-scope account suggest instead that the central demand of instrumental rationality should be phrased in terms of an ought that takes the entire conditional as its scope, in the following way: S ought to ensure that *if* S has aim A, and  $\phi$ -ing is necessary in pursuing A, S  $\phi$ s. According to wide-scopers, this avoids the counterintuitive result since it is silent as to whether one should comply with it by giving up the aim, or by taking the means to it. Given this, however, it should be clear that none of these worries are relevant to the above schema concerning hypothetical instrumental reasons. In the schema, the embedded conditional moves from S having an all-things-considered reason to pursue A, to it being the case that S ought to take the means. So it never demands that one take the means to an aim one does not have reason to pursue.

With this explication of hypothetical instrumental reasons in place, we can return to the issue of epistemic reasons. If we interpret reasons to form beliefs about propositions as reasons to pursue a certain aim involved with believing (for the present purposes we need only identify this as the aim of forming a belief as to whether some proposition is true), and interpret believing particular propositions as ways of pursuing that aim, such that one forms a belief in a particular proposition in order to form a belief about or as to whether that proposition is true, the above schema for hypothetical instrumental reasons (HI) is structurally identical to schema (T) describing the relationship between epistemic reasons to believe that  $p$ , reasons to form beliefs about  $p$ , and whether one ought to believe that  $p$ . Both schemas state a conditional relationship between the obtainment of a certain kind of reason and the truth of another conditional, moving from the obtainment of a different kind of reason to an ought-statement. Furthermore, in both schemas, the normative force of the consequent ought-statement is carried over from the reason in the embedded conditional, and the content of what one ought to do is carried over from the reason on the left hand side of the overall conditional. This structural identity suggests that one possible explanation of the relationship outlined in section 1.4 is that epistemic reasons are simply special cases of what we have called 'hypothetical instrumental reasons'. To be precise, they are instrumental reasons for believing particular propositions in pursuit of the hypothetical (i.e. present or non-present) aim of forming beliefs about those propositions. It is this fact that explains the special relationship between epistemic reasons, reasons to form beliefs about certain propositions, and ought-statements,

explicated in the previous section. This claim obviously stands in need of further clarification. A helpful way of doing so will be to test it against a number of objections.

### 1.6 OBJECTIONS

Perhaps the most influential objection to standard instrumentalist accounts of epistemic reasons is that it would make epistemic reasons hypothetical in a sense they are clearly not. As mentioned in the previous section, on the standard version of the instrumentalist account, epistemic reasons depend on the contingent aims of the believer. In an influential discussion, Kelly has pointed out that epistemic reasons are not hypothetical in that sense. Most importantly, epistemic reasons are usually considered to be *intersubjective* in a way that they could not be if they depended on the particular aims of agents. When we offer evidence to someone, we take the evidence to provide epistemic reason for that person to believe a particular proposition, regardless of whether she happens to have the relevant cognitive goal (Kelly 2003: 621).

The present account avoids this objection in two distinct ways. First of all, it does not make what one ought to believe depend on the aims or desires of agents, but rather on the reasons agents have to form beliefs about certain propositions or subject matters. As mentioned above, it seems that such reasons are value-based in a relatively straightforward sense: whether one has reason to form beliefs about some subject matter depends on the value of doing so. I have left it open whether such reasons might be categorical in certain instances, but there is no principled reason why they couldn't be on the present account. Secondly, on the proposed account *epistemic* reasons are not hypothetical in the problematic sense that Kelly has in mind. Whether someone has epistemic reason to believe a particular proposition depends on the evidence available concerning the truth of that proposition. As such, epistemic reasons are intersubjective – providing evidence to someone is equivalent to providing that person with an epistemic reason, regardless of the particular aims and desires of that person. Epistemic reasons are hypothetical only in the sense that *whether one ought to form a belief in accordance with them* depends on an additional factor, namely whether one has reason to form beliefs *about* the relevant propositions in the first place. And it is fully compatible with the present account that these additional reasons might be categorical.

Another possible objection is that the present proposal downplays the normative significance of epistemic reasons to an implausible extent. The

proposal would in effect assimilate epistemic reasons to the infinite number of conditional statements about instrumental reasons that are true of us all the time. For example, whether or not I have reason to go to London, it is true of me right now that *if* I have all-things-considered reason to go to London, *then* I ought to go to the airport. This conditional truth follows from the fact that going to the airport is necessary in order for me to go to London. Countless other such conditional statements are true of me at all times. It is true of me that if I have reason to call my mother, then I ought to turn on my phone, and so on *ad infinitum*. Can it really be true that epistemic reasons are as normatively insignificant as that?

But setting it up this way makes the situation seem worse than it really is. Two considerations should make it appear decidedly more palatable. First of all, if I *did* have a reason to go to London, it *would* be normatively significant that a necessary step for me to do so is to head out to the airport. The same goes for epistemic reasons, and we *do* have reason to form beliefs about a rather large number of propositions and subject matters. So very often, it *is* of normative significance to be such that *if* one has reason to form beliefs about some proposition, *then* one ought to believe that proposition. Secondly, it does seem true that we have much more evidence available than we have reason to respond to by forming the appropriate beliefs. If epistemic reasons are generated by evidence available to us, we have a large, perhaps infinite, number of epistemic reasons all the time, and far from all of them are about matters worth forming beliefs about. It would be absurd for an account of epistemic reasons to entail that we are at fault for failing to respond to all those epistemic reasons, so *any* account of epistemic reasons must be able to explain why we are quite justified in not caring about the vast majority of them. The proposed account does just that, by making the normative import of epistemic reasons depend in a systematic way on a different kind of value-based reasons.

In this way, the account may also help to resolve a current dispute over the normative status of evidence. In his original criticism of instrumentalism about epistemic reasons, Kelly (2003) argued that the instrumentalist cannot explain how we can have epistemic reasons for believing propositions that we have neither reason nor desire to form beliefs about, such as propositions about the ending of a movie we are about to watch. Adam Leite (2007) has objected to this that we ought to distinguish between *having epistemic reason* to believe some proposition, and *having evidence* suggesting that proposition to be true. While having an epistemic reason is a normative property of some person, having evidence is a purely descriptive property. So having evidence doesn't necessarily imply having an epistemic



reason. But in his reply to Leite, Kelly (2007) argues that there is no clear non-normative sense of evidence.<sup>20</sup> As the argument goes, evidence cannot be understood save as something that makes a difference to what one is justified in believing. Kelly even suggests that ‘evidence’ might be more or less synonymous with ‘reason to believe’, at least as long as this latter term is understood in the epistemic sense (2007). If that is correct, the instrumentalist cannot rely on a sharp distinction between those two terms in answering Kelly’s initial challenge, as Leite has suggested. It seems, however, that the account proposed here can accommodate the intuition that evidence must be understood in normative terms, and even that ‘evidence’ is synonymous with ‘epistemic reason’, without thereby committing to the view that having evidence requires that one form a belief in accordance with it. For suppose that we accept the equivalence between having evidence and having an epistemic reason. On the current account, none of these terms would then be understandable in non-normative terms, since they (necessarily) entail a conditional statement about what one ought to believe. But since the ‘ought’ in question is embedded in a conditional, Kelly’s initial challenge is avoided. The embedded conditional can be true without the consequent ought-statement of that conditional being true. One can thus have evidence, and therefore epistemic reason to believe some proposition, without it being the case that one ought to form a belief in that proposition, as in Kelly’s problematic movie case.

A further possible objection is that the account fails to explain why one can be rationally unassailable in holding an evidentially supported belief in a proposition that one has no reason to have or form beliefs about in the first place. It seems, for example, that even if I have no reason to have or form a belief about the ending of the movie I am about to watch (even, in fact, if I have all-things-considered reason *not* to), if I inadvertently were to acquire evidence about the ending and form a belief accordingly, that belief would be rationally unassailable. The most plausible answer to this objection, I think, is to point out that even if the belief in question is unassailable in the sense that the believer cannot be blamed for having formed it, the belief is nonetheless regrettable. It is regrettable for someone to form a belief about the ending of a movie he or she is about to watch, especially if the enjoyment of the movie depends partly on not knowing how it ends. This point seems to generalize to all beliefs that we have reason not to form. We routinely withhold evidence from people because we judge that they have reason not to form the belief in question, and

<sup>20</sup> Kelly attributes this point to Jaegwon Kim (1988).

this seems a perfectly justifiable practice. So if the beliefs in question are ‘rationally unassailable’, this must be in a specific sense rather than *tout court*. But if that is the case, the present account can explain the rational unassailability of such beliefs in a perfectly straightforward way. On the present account, if S has epistemic reason to believe that *p*, S is such that, *if* she has all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about *p*, S ought to believe that *p*. A belief can thus be rationally unassailable for S from an epistemic point of view (supported by epistemic reason, that is), *without* S being such that she ought to believe that *p*.

### 1.7 CONCLUSION

I have proposed that epistemic reasons be regarded as a species of what I called *hypothetical instrumental reasons*. The arguments came in two stages. First it was argued that, necessarily, if S has epistemic reason to believe that *p*, then S is such that *if* she has all-things-considered reason to form beliefs about *p*, S ought to believe that *p*. It was then argued that this relationship between epistemic reasons, reasons to form beliefs about certain propositions, and normative statements about what a person ought to believe, could be explained by supposing that epistemic reasons are hypothetical instrumental reasons. The main virtue of this account is that it provides a sense in which epistemic reasons are teleological, or value-based, without commitment to epistemic properties being valuable in a general sense, or to there being a sense in which every epistemically well-founded belief is valuable. In this way, the account avoids the perhaps most pertinent problem faced by teleological accounts in recent years, namely what I termed the ‘value problem’. Furthermore, the account avoids problems typically associated with purely instrumentalist variants of the teleological account, since it avoids making epistemic reasons aim- or desire-dependent, while at the same time explaining why epistemic reasons do not in themselves require that a belief be formed. Needless to say, the account must be clarified and developed further before its merits can be assessed fully. But I hope to have shown that the teleological account may be more resilient than is often supposed.<sup>21</sup>

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