

Epistemic Reasons for Action: A Puzzle for Pragmatists

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Pluralist pragmatists claim that there are both practical and epistemic reasons for belief, but should they also claim that there are both kinds of reasons for action? I argue that the pluralist pragmatist faces a puzzle here. If she accepts that there are epistemic reasons for action, she must explain a striking asymmetry between action and belief: while epistemic reasons play a large role in determining which beliefs one all-things-considered ought to have, they don't play much of a role in determining which action one all-things-considered ought to perform. But if the pluralist pragmatist denies that there are epistemic reasons for action, she has trouble explaining why there are no such reasons. After motivating this puzzle, I propose a solution to it. I argue that the pluralist can accept that there are epistemic reasons for action while nonetheless explaining why they don't matter much to how we all-things-considered ought to act because, if there are epistemic reasons for action, they are so ubiquitous that in most choice situations we have equally strong epistemic reasons for doing anything, which makes any action epistemically permitted, but not required.

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1. Pluralist pragmatism and epistemic reasons

What kinds of authoritatively normative reasons are there for or against doxastic attitudes (e.g., belief, disbelief, withholding judgment, and credences)? That is, what kinds of considerations genuinely count in favor of us having these attitudes in a way that matters to what we *just plain ought* to do?

Nihilists think that there are no such reasons and that talk about what one ought to believe is, at best, merely formally normative, akin to talk about how one ought to move their chess pieces around, given the rules of chess, which doesn't imply that one has any genuine normative reason to do so at all.¹ But most of us think that there are some authoritatively normative reasons for doxastic attitudes. We just disagree about what these reasons are.

Alethists insist that the only authoritatively normative reasons for doxastic attitudes are *epistemic* reasons like these:²

¹ For recent discussions of the distinction between merely formal and authoritative normativity, see Maguire & Woods (2020), McPherson (2018), Wodak (2018), and Woods (2018).

² I use examples to illustrate the differences between epistemic and practical reasons rather than offer definitions because what distinguishes epistemic and practical reasons is highly controversial and theory laden. And as will become clear later, what exactly epistemic reasons are is precisely what is at issue in this paper.

- (1) The fact that Lily counted 100 roses in the garden is a reason to believe that there are 100 roses in the garden.
- (2) The fact that Anne's fingerprints are on the murder weapon is a reason against believing that Beth is the murderer.
- (3) The fact that more evidence about whether p is soon forthcoming is a reason to withhold from believing p.³

As (1) and (2) illustrate, the paradigm instances of epistemic reasons for doxastic attitudes are evidence. But (3) illustrates that the aletheist may take there to be some epistemic reasons that are not evidence: the fact that more evidence is soon forthcoming about p isn't itself evidence because it doesn't bear on whether p is true, but it may nonetheless be an epistemic reason for withholding belief with respect to p (Schroeder, 2012). Importantly, the aletheist insists that reasons like these genuinely count in favor of anyone having the relevant doxastic attitude regardless of whether having some doxastic attitude toward the relevant proposition has any practical import.⁴

Robust pragmatists, on the other hand, claim that the only authoritatively normative reasons there are for or against doxastic attitudes are *practical* ones like these:

- (4) The fact that believing in an afterlife would alleviate your crippling anxiety is a reason to believe there's an afterlife.
- (5) The fact that believing that your friend will fail in her endeavors neglects your duties of friendship is a reason against believing she will fail.⁵
- (6) If it would be beneficial for me to know how much money I can make from selling all my roses at the market, the fact that Lily counted 100 roses in my garden is a reason for me to believe there are 100 roses in the garden.

As (4) and (5) illustrate, the robust pragmatist takes considerations that indicate that having some doxastic attitude would be beneficial or harmful in some way to be authoritatively normative reasons for or against having that attitude regardless of whether one has any evidence that the relevant proposition is true. But as (6) illustrates, the robust pragmatist claims that evidential considerations can be genuine normative reasons for belief but only if and because believing the

³ This example is a bit more controversial because it implies that not all epistemic reasons are evidence (see Schroeder (2012) for discussion).

⁴ See especially Kelly (2002), Shah (2006), Thomson (2008), Parfit (2011), and Whiting (2014).

⁵ Cf. Stroud (2006) and Keller (2004).

truth about the relevant proposition would be beneficial in some way. So, the robust pragmatist allows that (1)-(3) may be true with respect to a particular person but only if there's some benefit to her believing the truth with respect to the relevant proposition.⁶

In between these two extremes lies *pluralist pragmatism*: the view that practical and epistemic reasons for doxastic attitudes are both authoritatively normative. The pluralist pragmatist agrees with the alethist that (1)-(3) are true for anyone regardless of whether there would be any benefit to their believing the truth about the relevant propositions, but the pluralist agrees that (4)-(6) are true as well, and that (4) and (5) are true regardless of whether the relevant proposition is true. The pluralist pragmatist simply takes there to be two distinct kinds of authoritatively normative reasons for doxastic attitudes.⁷ This is the view that I find most plausible. But my aim here is not to defend it. Instead, my aim is to discuss an unrecognized puzzle for pluralist pragmatism.

In order to see the puzzle, we need to first appreciate an important upshot of pragmatism. In accepting that there are practical reasons for doxastic attitudes, pragmatists thereby admit that one significant domain of reasons—practical reasons—includes reasons for action and doxastic attitudes (and presumably non-doxastic attitudes too). So, the important upshot of pragmatism is that practical and epistemic reasons are not individuated by their objects (i.e., what they are reasons *for*) but must be individuated by something else. But then the following question arises: if there are practical reasons for both action and doxastic attitudes, are there also *epistemic* reasons for both action and doxastic attitudes? In other words, does whatever it is that individuates epistemic reasons from practical reasons allow for the existence of epistemic reasons for action? Since the pluralist pragmatist takes epistemic reasons to be authoritatively normative, this question amounts to whether there are epistemic reasons for action that matter to what we just plain ought to do.

This question does not amount to whether the facts themselves that constitute epistemic reasons for doxastic attitudes can also constitute authoritatively normative reasons for action. The answer to that question is obviously “yes”: e.g., the fact that the soil is dry may be an epistemic reason to believe that it didn't rain last night and an authoritatively normative reason to water the garden today. But this only shows that one and the same fact may be an epistemic reason for belief and a *practical* reason for action. It doesn't suggest that there are distinctively *epistemic* reasons for action.

⁶ See Stich (1990), McCormick (2015), Rinard (2019) and Maguire & Woods (2020).

⁷ See James (1897/1979), Feldman (2000), Marušić (2013), Reisner (2008), (2009), Howard (2020), and Leary (2017, 2020). While all these authors defend the view that there are both practical and epistemic reasons for belief, some of them disagree about whether these two kinds of reasons are comparable in the first place, and if so, how exactly they together determine what one all-things-considered-ought to believe (more on this in §2).

So, what does the question of whether there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action amount to? Epistemologists sometimes talk about cases in which there are reasons to engage in inquiry, or to gather more information when the evidence is incomplete, or to take certain steps to ensure that one's belief forming processes aren't corrupted by bias. These examples seem more like distinctively epistemic reasons for action because they are reasons for doing actions that help us get at the truth and avoid error. But in these cases, there's usually an implicit assumption that the relevant subject matter has some practical import. So, these cases too may plausibly be interpreted as examples of practical reasons for action similar to the practical reason for belief in (6). The controversial question is whether there are authoritatively normative reasons to do actions that help us get to the truth and avoid error—e.g., engage in inquiry, gather evidence, take bias-correcting steps—even if doing so has *no* practical import. For example, even if my knowing how many roses are in the garden would have absolutely no benefit to anyone, is there an epistemic reason for me to gather evidence about it, which matters to what I just plain ought to do? This is the controversial question that arises for the pluralist pragmatist.^{8,9}

The pluralist pragmatist is certainly not committed to claiming that there are epistemic reasons for action. But we can see how she may be led down that path. As I suggest elsewhere (Leary, 2020), if practical and epistemic reasons are not individuated by their objects, they might instead be individuated by their grounds: practical reasons may be facts that are reasons in virtue of one sort of fact (e.g., facts about value, or facts about an agent's desires), while epistemic reasons are facts that are reasons in virtue of something else (e.g., some truth-involving fact). And the grounds of epistemic reasons might allow for the existence of epistemic reasons for action. To illustrate, consider the following view:

Truth-Commitment View R is an epistemic reason for S to ϕ with respect to p in virtue of the fact that R indicates that S's ϕ ing with respect to p on the basis of R would show commitment to believing the truth and avoiding error with respect to p (regardless of whether doing so is beneficial).¹⁰

⁸ This question doesn't arise for the robust pragmatist because she presumably takes all apparent epistemic reasons for action to be simply practical reasons for action similar to the practical reason for belief in (6).

⁹ Whether there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action is hardly discussed in the literature because most philosophers seem to simply assume that all epistemic reasons (whether they're authoritatively normative or not) are reasons for doxastic attitudes. Booth (2006) and Aronowitz & Singer (forthcoming) explicitly defend the view that there are epistemic reasons for action, but it's unclear whether they take them to be authoritatively normative.

¹⁰ I float this view in Leary (2020, p. 148) without committing myself to it. I take it to be at least an initially appealing view of epistemic reasons because it allows that some epistemic reasons are not evidence (like (3) above) and it doesn't imply that all epistemic reasons are reasons in virtue of promoting true beliefs and thus avoids Berker's (2013) criticisms of teleological accounts of epistemic reasons.

Of course, actions don't take propositions as objects in the way that doxastic attitudes do. But certain actions like gathering evidence about whether p can fit this formula, since many actions can be ways of doing something with respect to a proposition: going to the library can be a way of *gathering evidence about p* , performing a scientific experiment can be a way of *inquiring about p* , and reflecting on one's implicit biases can be a way of *self-correcting one's belief-forming processes with respect to p* . So, consider the fact that going to the library will give you evidence about whether p . This fact indicates that you going to the library and gathering evidence about p (on that basis) would show commitment to believing the truth and avoiding error with respect to p . The Truth-Commitment View thus entails that this is an epistemic reason for you to go to the library.¹¹

But *should* the pluralist pragmatist go down this path? Herein lies the puzzle. It takes the form of a dilemma: either the pluralist pragmatist accepts that there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action, or she denies it, but either way she incurs a very difficult explanatory challenge.

If she accepts that there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action, then she needs to explain a striking asymmetry between belief and action. As I'll argue in §2, epistemic reasons seem to be fairly weighty in determining what we all-things-considered ought (*ought*_{ATC}) to believe, especially when there are only weak or no competing practical reasons, but epistemic reasons don't seem weighty at all in determining what action we ought_{ATC} to perform, even when there are little to no competing practical reasons. This asymmetry needs explaining and seems problematic for the pluralist because it suggests that no account of how practical and epistemic reasons weigh against one another could in principle deliver the right results with respect to both belief and action.

On the other hand, if the pluralist denies that there are epistemic reasons for action, she must explain why there are no such reasons. In §3, I consider some salient potential explanations: (i) that epistemic reasons are so-called *right-kind reasons* for doxastic attitudes, (ii) that epistemic reasons arise from the constitutive standards of belief, and (iii) that what it is for a consideration to be an epistemic reason for ϕ ing is for it to raise the probability of whether ϕ is true. But I argue that each of these explanations for why there are no epistemic reasons for action are problematic:

¹¹ I make this point elsewhere (Leary, 2020, p. 148). My aim here is not to commit to the Truth-Commitment View, but to instead show how epistemic reasons for action might be possible. In what follows, I don't assume any definition of epistemic reasons for action, but instead simply assume that epistemic reasons for action are reasons to do some action that have something to do with getting at the truth and avoiding error, even when the relevant subject matter has no practical import. I do this because, if epistemic and practical reasons are individuated by their grounds, then what exactly epistemic reasons for action are in the first place depends on what the grounds of epistemic reasons are, which is a substantive, controversial question about which I wish to remain as neutral as possible.

(i) is question-begging, (ii) undermines the pluralist's claim that epistemic reasons are authoritatively normative, and (iii) rules out the existence of epistemic reasons for withholding belief and credences.

But I call this a puzzle, rather than a dilemma, because I ultimately think there's a way out. I argue in §4 that the pluralist can accept that there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action but give the following explanation for why epistemic reasons for action nonetheless don't matter much to what we ought_{ATC} to do: it's because epistemic reasons for action are so ubiquitous that, in most choice situations, we have equally strong epistemic reasons for doing just about anything, which makes it so that we are epistemically permitted, but not required, to do anything we like.

2. Accepting epistemic reasons for action

In this section, I argue that accepting that there are epistemic reasons for action requires that the pluralist explain a striking asymmetry regarding how epistemic reasons weigh against practical reasons in cases of action and belief.

Let's start with belief. Some pluralists like Reisner (2008) and Howard (2020) are motivated by a core set of intuitions about particular kinds of cases. Specifically, they think that (a) in no-stakes cases where there are sufficient epistemic reasons to believe p and no competing practical reasons, one ought_{ATC} to believe p ; and (b) in low-stakes cases where there are sufficient epistemic reasons to believe p , but some weak practical reason against believing p , one still ought_{ATC} to believe p ; but (c) in high-stakes cases where there are sufficient epistemic reasons to believe p , but very strong practical reasons against believing p , one ought_{ATC} to *not* believe p .

First, consider a no-stakes case that involves only epistemic reasons:

Roses_{Belief} Knowing how many roses are in the garden has no practical benefit or cost for Lady Olenna. But her handmaiden tells her that she counted 100 roses in the garden.

In **Roses_{Belief}**, Lady Olenna has sufficient epistemic reason to believe that there are 100 roses in the garden and no practical reasons for or against believing it. And it seems that she ought_{ATC} to believe it. This illustrates (a).

Now consider a low-stakes case involving competing epistemic and practical reasons:

Spoiler_{Belief} I want to be surprised by the Game of Thrones finale, but I accidentally read a blog post that spoils the ending before I get the chance to watch it.¹²

In **Spoiler_{Belief}**, I have decisive epistemic reason to believe that Game of Thrones will end as described by the blog, but I have some practical reason against doing so, since having this belief would ruin the surprise. But it still seems that, despite this practical reason, I ought_{ATC} to believe the show will end as described. That illustrates (b).

But now consider a high-stakes case that involves competing epistemic and practical reasons:

Torture_{Belief} An evil demon will torture me and my loved ones if I believe that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik, but I recently took a Game of Thrones tour in Dubrovnik where I saw all the filming locations.

In **Torture_{Belief}**, I have decisive epistemic reason to believe that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik, but a decisive practical reason against doing so. And it seems that I ought_{ATC} to not believe that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik.¹³ This illustrates (c).

Howard (2020) develops an account of how epistemic and practical reasons for belief weigh against one another that is specifically tailored to deliver these results. On his account, there's some threshold for the balance of practical reasons such that, if the practical reasons are above the threshold, the practical reasons are lexically prior to the epistemic ones; and if the practical reasons are below the threshold, the epistemic reasons are lexically prior. In other words, if the practical stakes are high enough, then I ought to have the epistemically-best doxastic attitude that is among the practically-best; and if the practical stakes are not high enough, then I ought to have the practically-best attitude that is among the epistemically-best.¹⁴ Let's call this the *Lexical Priority Account* (LPA).

To illustrate, consider each of the above cases. In **Torture_{Belief}**, the practical reasons are above the threshold and are thus lexically prior: I ought_{ATC} to have the epistemically-best attitude that is among the practically-best. Since there are two ways of not believing something— withholding belief and disbelieving—in this case there are actually two practically-best options:

¹² This case is inspired by Kelly (2002).

¹³ Many will dispute this all-things-considered verdict, but pluralist pragmatists like Reisner (2008) and Howard (2020) accept it.

¹⁴ Howard's (2020) account is a modification of a weighing account considered and rejected by Berker (2018). Reisner (2008) offers a different account to which Berker (2018) also raises objections.

withholding belief about whether *Game of Thrones* was filmed in Dubrovnik and believing that it was *not* filmed there. So, the LPA says that I should have whichever of these attitudes is epistemically best. Since I have decisive epistemic reason against believing that *Game of Thrones* was not filmed in Dubrovnik, withholding seems epistemically better. So, the LPA entails that I ought_{ATC} to withhold.¹⁵

But when it comes to Spoiler_{Belief}, assuming that the balance of practical reasons is below the threshold, the LPA implies that, in this case, I ought_{ATC} to have the practically-best attitude that is among the epistemically-best. Since I have decisive epistemic reasons to believe that *Game of Thrones* will end as the blog post describes, this is the uniquely epistemically-best attitude for me to have. And so, this is what I ought_{ATC} to believe. But if it's possible to have a case in which there are multiple doxastic alternatives that are epistemically-best, then the LPA implies that one ought_{ATC} to have whichever of those is practically-best. For example, suppose it's possible for my evidence to be such that I'm epistemically permitted to believe that *Game of Thrones* will end in a certain way, but I'm also epistemically permitted to withhold belief altogether. In that case, then, the LPA would imply that I ought to withhold, since it is the practically-best doxastic alternative that is among the epistemically-best.

Finally, in the case of Roses_{Belief}, since there are no relevant practical reasons whatsoever, the LPA implies that the epistemic reasons alone determine which doxastic attitude Lady Olenna ought_{ATC} to have. So, she ought_{ATC} to believe that there are 100 roses in the garden.

But now let's consider some structurally parallel cases involving competing practical and epistemic reasons for action. As explained in §1, a prime candidate for epistemic reasons for action are cases in which doing some action will yield evidence about whether some proposition is true. So, those are the kinds of cases that I'll appeal to here. First, consider an analogue of the high-stakes case:

Torture_{Act}: I'm about to perform a scientific experiment that will result in my learning many facts that have no practical import whatsoever for the scientific community or society at large. But an evil demon threatens to torture me and my loved ones unless I sabotage the experiment.

In Torture_{Act}, there may be a strong epistemic reason for me to perform the experiment, but there's a very strong practical reason against it. And it seems that I ought_{ATC} to sabotage the experiment. The overall verdict in this case is thus the same as that in Torture_{Belief}: the practical reasons win.

¹⁵ Following Howard (2020), I don't consider credences as relevant doxastic alternatives in these cases, but it seems like his account could easily be applied to credences too.

But now consider an analogue of the low-stakes case:

Spoiler_{Act} I want to be surprised by the Game of Thrones finale, which I haven't watched yet, and I come across a blog post that has a spoiler alert at the top that notifies me that if I scroll down and continue reading I'll see how the show ends.

In **Spoiler_{Act}**, I may have an epistemic reason to read the blog post, since it will give me evidence about how Game of Thrones ends, but I have a practical reason against doing so because I want to be surprised. And the practical reasons are equally weighty in **Spoiler_{Act}** and **Spoiler_{Belief}**. Nonetheless, it seems that while the epistemic reasons win in **Spoiler_{Belief}**, the practical reasons win in **Spoiler_{Act}**: in **Spoiler_{Act}**, I ought_{ATC} to *not* read the blog.

Similarly, consider an analogue of the no-stakes case:

Roses_{Act} There's no practical benefit or cost to Lady Olenna's knowing how many roses are in the garden, but she could easily know by counting them. Since there are only 100, doing so would only take a couple minutes, and there's nothing else that she wants or needs to do right now that she would be prevented from doing if she were to count them.

In **Roses_{Act}**, Lady Olenna has an epistemic reason to count the roses, since doing so will give her evidence about how many roses there are, and she has no practical reason for or against counting them. But even so, unlike **Roses_{Belief}**, it seems that the epistemic reasons in **Roses_{Act}** still don't tip the scales and make it so that Lady Olenna ought_{ATC} to count the roses. Maybe she's permitted to, but it's not the case that she *ought* to.

What these structurally analogous cases reveal is that, if there are epistemic reasons for action, there's a striking asymmetry between epistemic reasons for action and epistemic reasons for belief:

The Action-Belief Asymmetry Epistemic reasons don't usually play a role in determining what action one ought_{ATC} to perform, even in cases where there are weak or no competing practical reasons, whereas epistemic reasons usually do play a big role in determining what doxastic

attitudes one ought_{ATC} to have, especially in cases where there are weak or no competing practical reasons.¹⁶

This asymmetry needs explanation. It also seems to suggest that, in principle, there can't be an account of how practical and epistemic reasons weigh against one another that is equally applicable to both belief and action. To illustrate, consider Howard's LPA. While this account may deliver the right intuitive verdicts about the belief-cases, it does a poor job of delivering the right verdicts about the action-cases. Specifically, it yields the wrong results about Spoiler_{Act} and Roses_{Act}. With respect to Spoiler_{Act}, the account suggests that I ought_{ATC} to read the blog and spoil the ending of Game of Thrones, since the practical stakes are low and reading the blog is the practically-best option that is among the epistemically-best; and with respect to Roses_{Act} the account suggests that Lady Olenna ought_{ATC} to count the roses, since there are no competing practical reasons in play, in which case she ought_{ATC} to do simply what is epistemically-best.

The pluralist might respond that it's neither surprising nor problematic if there can't be a principled, unified account of how practical and epistemic reasons weigh against one another. After all, ethical pluralists who take there to be multiple fundamental kinds of considerations that matter to what we ought_{ATC} to do have long insisted that there are no true, general principles about how these different kinds of considerations weigh against one another. For example, Ross insists that the relative strengths of different "prima facie duties" is always determined by the context: while it's often the case that the duty to keep promises is stronger than the duty to benefit others, sometimes the reverse is true, and the same goes for all the other fundamental prima facie duties (Ross 1930, ch. 2). And Ross takes this aspect of his view to be a feature, not a bug: it's what allows his view the flexibility to account for all the right intuitive verdicts about cases, thereby capturing the data of ethics. Similarly, the pluralist pragmatist might claim that we should not expect there to be true, general principles about how practical and epistemic reasons for belief weigh against one another, let alone an account that is unified across belief and action.¹⁷

I'm sympathetic to this response, but it doesn't entirely evade the burden of explaining The Action-Belief Asymmetry. Even if there are no true, general principles about how practical and epistemic reasons compare, it's puzzling why epistemic reasons don't tip the scales and

¹⁶ One might think that there are many cases in which this asymmetry doesn't hold because there are plenty of cases in which one ought_{ATC} to gather more evidence about some important subject matter. But recall that in cases where the relevant subject matter has some practical import, there are presumably *practical* reasons to gather evidence too. So, while it might be that one ought_{ATC} to gather evidence in such cases, this is plausibly because of one's practical reasons for doing so. Even in these cases, then, the epistemic reasons are playing no role in determining what one ought_{ATC} to do. This is why I focus on cases in which one has *no* practical reasons to do the relevant action that there are allegedly epistemic reasons to do, so that we can more clearly see the asymmetry.

¹⁷ Thanks to Caroline Monahan for raising this point in my seminar.

determine how one ought_{ATC} to act even in cases where there are no competing practical reasons. This seems to suggest that epistemic reasons carry no weight at all with respect to how we ought_{ATC} to act. But that is tantamount to claiming that there are no authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action in the first place. So, what's puzzling about the pluralist accepting that there are epistemic reasons for action, while admitting The Action-Belief Asymmetry, is that this conjunction seems to amount to saying both that epistemic reasons carry some weight and play some role in determining what we ought_{ATC} to do, but they don't by themselves determine what we ought_{ATC} to do in the absence of competing practical reasons. Why would that be?

An alternative response to this explanatory challenge is for the pluralist pragmatist to insist that practical and epistemic reasons are simply incomparable. That is, while Howard (2020) and Reisner (2009) are both *inclusivist pluralists* insofar as they take practical and epistemic reasons to together determine what one ought_{ATC} to believe, Feldman (2000) offers an *exclusivist pluralist* view according to which practical and epistemic reasons for belief each govern distinct authoritatively normative 'ought's and there simply is no such thing as what one ought_{ATC} to believe, which takes into account both practical and epistemic reasons. An exclusivist pluralist might then accept that there are epistemic reasons for action but simply deny the all-things-considered verdicts about both the action-cases and the belief-cases. This would amount to denying The Action-Belief Asymmetry altogether and insisting that there's no difference between the action-cases and belief-cases at all: in both sets of cases there's simply what one practically-ought to do and what one epistemically-ought to do, and there's no such thing as what one all-things-considered-ought to do.

By my lights, this exclusivist view seems implausible when the practical stakes are quite high. Consider Torture_{Belief} and suppose that I could easily get myself to withhold from believing that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik (perhaps by exposing myself to some misinformation about how the Dubrovnik Game of Thrones tours are a conspiracy created to drive up tourism). The exclusivist pluralist view suggests that, no matter what doxastic attitude I have, I'm criticizable in one sense but not the other, and there's just no comparison to be made about which is worse. If I believe that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik, I'm practically-criticizable, and if I withhold from believing it, I'm epistemically-criticizable, but neither kind of criticism is worse than the other. That seems wrong. Given the high stakes—all my loved ones and I will be tortured—it seems that I would be much more criticizable if I were to believe that Game of Thrones was filmed in Dubrovnik than I would be if I withheld this belief. This suggests that the practical 'ought' and the epistemic 'ought' are comparable after all and so too are the practical and epistemic reasons that govern them.

But even if there is no all-things-considered-ought, I think there's still an asymmetry that remains between epistemic reasons for belief and epistemic reasons for action that the pluralist pragmatist needs to explain. Consider the purely epistemic verdicts about Spoiler_{Act} and Roses_{Act}. In Spoiler_{Act}, even if I have epistemic reason to read the blog post, is it the case that I epistemically-ought to read it? And in Roses_{Act}, even if Lady Olenna has epistemic reason to count the roses, is it the case that she epistemically-ought to? It seems odd to think that if I forgo reading the blog post and Lady Olenna chooses not to count the roses we're both failing to do what we ought to do, even in a purely epistemic sense of 'ought'. Rather, it seems to me that there's just no sense in which we're failing to do what we ought to do. So, even if there's no all-things-considered-ought, there's still an asymmetry between epistemic reasons for action and belief that the pluralist pragmatist needs to explain: epistemic reasons for action don't seem to make it the case that we ought to do anything (in any sense of ought), whereas epistemic reasons for belief do.

3. Denying epistemic reasons for action

Of course, one explanation for why epistemic reasons don't seem to play a role in determining how we ought to act is simply that there are no epistemic reasons for action. So, the pluralist pragmatist may simply take The Action-Belief Asymmetry to show that, while there are practical reasons for both doxastic attitudes and action, there are only epistemic reasons for doxastic attitudes. But then a new explanatory challenge arises for the pluralist pragmatist: to explain why there are no epistemic reasons for action. After all, if practical reasons can be reasons for many different kinds of responses, including action and doxastic attitudes, why can't epistemic reasons be reasons for these different kinds of responses too?

One might think that there are no epistemic reasons for action simply because epistemic reasons are right-kind reasons for doxastic attitudes. That is, the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons for belief is often taken to be an instance of the broader distinction between *right-kind reasons* (RKR) and *wrong-kind reasons* (WKR). RKR are considerations that seem to count in favor of, or against, having an attitude because they bear on whether the attitude is fitting; whereas WKR are considerations that seem to count in favor of, or against, having some attitude because they bear on whether the attitude would be beneficial or harmful, regardless of whether the attitude is fitting. For example, RKR to admire x are considerations that have to do with whether x is admirable and thus fitting to be admired, RKR to desire x are considerations that have to do with whether x is desirable and thus fitting to be desired, and RKR to believe p are considerations that

have to do with whether p is true and thus fitting to be believed.¹⁸ Whereas WKR to admire x , desire x , or believe p , are any considerations that have to do with whether these attitudes would be beneficial or harmful, regardless of whether they are fitting. Practical reasons for belief are thus paradigm WKRs, whereas epistemic reasons for belief are paradigm RKR. So, one might think that there are no epistemic reasons for action simply because epistemic reasons are RKR for doxastic attitudes: they're facts that bear on whether doxastic attitudes are fitting.

But this explanation implicitly assumes the very thing that it's trying to explain. The claim that epistemic reasons are RKR for doxastic attitudes assumes that *all* epistemic reasons are reasons for doxastic attitudes. But the question for the pluralist pragmatist is why can't the category of epistemic reasons include both RKR for doxastic attitudes and some reasons for action? After all, the pluralist pragmatist admits that the category of practical reasons includes RKR, WKR, and reasons for action. For example, the pluralist pragmatist claims that the fact that believing in an afterlife would alleviate your crippling anxiety is a wrong-kind practical reason to believe there's an afterlife, a right-kind practical reason to desire to believe it (since this fact bears on whether believing that there's an afterlife is desirable), and a practical reason to do whatever actions will bring this belief about. So, the explanatory challenge for the pluralist pragmatist is to explain why epistemic reasons include only RKR for doxastic attitudes.

One might attempt to explain this by claiming that epistemic reasons arise from the constitutive standards of belief. Since belief is the kind of mental state that aims to represent the way the world is, it's part of what a belief is that it's correct if and only if it's true. And one might think that it's this constitutive standard of correctness from which epistemic reasons derive. So, there can't be epistemic reasons for action simply because actions don't have this same constitutive standard of correctness – indeed, actions aren't even capable of being true or false.

My main worry with this explanation, though, is that it threatens to undermine a core commitment of pluralist pragmatism: that epistemic reasons are authoritatively normative. This is because reasons that derive from constitutive standards of correctness are often not authoritatively normative. For example, the reasons I have to move my chess pieces in certain ways, given the constitutive standards of correctness for chess, aren't reasons that by themselves bear on what I just plain ought to do. If playing chess would not satisfy my desires or ends or provide any value whatsoever, so that I have no normative reason to play chess in the first place, let alone to try to win, then these chess-reasons don't matter at all to what I ought to do. So, similarly, if epistemic reasons derive from the constitutive standards of belief, but I don't have any normative reason to have any belief at all with respect to p , let alone to try to believe the truth about whether p , why

¹⁸ I follow Howard & Leary (forthcoming) in characterizing RKR in terms of fittingness.

would evidence that p alone give me any authoritatively normative reason to believe p ?¹⁹ Indeed, Maguire and Woods (2020) use this very analogy to articulate and defend robust pragmatism and deny that epistemic reasons are authoritatively normative. The pluralist pragmatist who offers this explanation for why there are no epistemic reasons for action thus faces the new challenge of reconciling this explanation with her pluralism.¹⁹

Alternatively, the pluralist pragmatist may hold that epistemic reasons derive not from constitutive standards of correctness but simply from objective facts about probability:

Probability View For epistemic reasons, R is a normative reason for S to Φ in virtue of the fact that R raises the (objective²⁰) probability that Φ is true.

The Probability View seems more in line with the pluralist's claim that evidence generates epistemic reasons that are authoritatively normative, even when one has no practical reason to believe the truth with respect to the relevant proposition. And this view is stated in an object-neutral way (Φ could be believing, desiring, acting, or any other object of a reason), so it's not question-begging. But the Probability View entails that, while there are epistemic reasons for believing, there can't be epistemic reasons for acting, since no fact can raise the probability that an action is true. Indeed, actions can't be true in the first place.²¹

My main worry with the Probability View, though, is that it also rules out epistemic reasons for withholding belief and credences, since neither withholding nor credences can be true. One might think that this is not a problematic result, so long as we are talking about *objective* epistemic reasons. That is, reasons enthusiasts often distinguish between *objective* normative reasons—i.e., the reasons that are just “out there”, regardless of whether one is aware of them, which matter to what one objectively ought to do—and *subjective* normative reasons, which are the reasons that one *has* in a sense that makes them relevant to what it's rational for one to do.²² My focus here has been objective normative reasons, though this may have been obscured by the fact that some of the cases I appeal to in §2 involve reasons that are also subjective normative reasons. And the Probability View is intended to be an account of objective normative reasons, which is why the

¹⁹ This sort of worry is what motivates Howard & Leary (forthcoming) to argue that the best defense of the view that RKR are authoritatively normative is to claim that RKR have to do with fittingness and that fittingness is distinct from constitutive correctness.

²⁰ By an “objective” probability, I mean the probability that something is true, given some set of background facts, which doesn't depend on any particular agent's subjective perspective.

²¹ Booth (2006) considers this sort of explanation for why there are no epistemic reasons for action, which he takes to be inspired by Moser (1989) and offers a very different sort of worry than the one I develop here.

²² This terminology originates from Schroeder (2007, ch. 1). What it is to have a reason in this sense is controversial (cf. Lord, 2010 and Schroeder, 2008) and I am neutral about this here.

relevant sort of probability involved in the Probability View is an objective one. So, when I claim that the Probability View rules out epistemic reasons for withholding and credences, I mean that it rules out *objective* epistemic reasons for withholding and credences. But this may seem unproblematic because one might think that all epistemic reasons for withholding and credences are subjective. Consider common examples:

- (7) If the evidence you have suggests that it's equally likely that p and not- p , this is an epistemic reason to withhold with respect to whether p .
- (8) If your evidence suggests that there's a .7 chance that it's going to rain today, this is an epistemic reason to have a credence of .7 that it will rain today.

These are clearly subjective epistemic reasons. And one might think that all epistemic reasons for withholding and credences are like this.²³

But while most standard examples of epistemic reasons for withholding and credences are subjective reasons, this is simply because we tend to be more concerned with subjective normative notions in epistemology. There are examples of objective epistemic reasons for withholding and credences too. Recall from §1 that one might take forthcoming evidence to be an epistemic reason to withhold. For example, consider the following:

- (9) The fact that your online purchase confirmation said that you'll later receive an email that confirms whether your item will be delivered by Thursday (as expected) is a reason to withhold judgment about whether your item will be delivered by Thursday.

Suppose that you failed to read and deleted the purchase confirmation that told you about this forthcoming email. The reason in (9) is then not a reason that you *have*. But it's still a reason that is "out there", so to speak, which bears on what doxastic attitude you objectively ought to have. So, it's an objective epistemic reason to withhold.

One may also have objective epistemic reasons to withhold belief or to have certain credences in cases that involve objective chanciness. For example, suppose there's a 50% objective chance that a particular quantum event will occur and a 50% objective chance that it won't. Regardless of whether you are aware of this fact about the objective chances, it's a reason that is "out there" for you to withhold belief about whether the quantum event will occur. Likewise, if there's a 70% objective chance that the quantum event will occur, this fact is an objective epistemic reason to have a credence of .7 that it will occur. So, the fact that the Probability View rules out objective epistemic reasons for withholding and credences is a cost of the view.

One might try to avoid this cost by appealing to a more general notion like accuracy, rather than truth:

²³ Thanks to Jean-Francois Rioux for raising this objection in my seminar.

Probability View* For epistemic reasons, R is a normative reason for S to ϕ in virtue of the fact that R raises the (objective) probability that ϕ ing is *accurate*.

Credences and withholding can be accurate in the sense that they can fit the way the world is (when the world is objectively chancy), but actions cannot be accurate in this same sense. So, the Probability View* rules out epistemic reasons for action while at the same time allowing that there are epistemic reasons for credences and withholding.²⁴

But accuracy is too general a notion that applies to non-doxastic attitudes too. Desires and fears, for example, can be accurate insofar as they are aimed at desirable and fearsome things. So, the Probability View* misclassifies any fact that raises the (objective) probability that desiring x or fearing x is accurate (namely, RKR for desiring or fearing x) as *epistemic* reasons.

We can now see the full scope of the explanatory challenge for the pluralist pragmatist who denies the existence of epistemic reasons for action: she must give an account of the grounds of epistemic reasons that is (a) stated in an object-neutral way that nonetheless entails that there are no epistemic reasons for action, (b) compatible with her claim that epistemic reasons are authoritatively normative, and (c) doesn't allow for too few or too many epistemic reasons. That's a tall order. The claim that epistemic reasons are RKR for doxastic attitudes fails with respect to (a), while the claim that epistemic reasons arise from the constitutive standards of correctness for belief arguably fails (b), and the Probability View fails with respect to (c).

I'm skeptical that any view about epistemic reasons can rise to this challenge, but my aim here is not to definitively show that no view can do the job. My aim is only to motivate this challenge as one side of the puzzle. Perhaps there's a better strategy for denying that there are epistemic reasons for action that I haven't considered, or perhaps there's a way of assuaging the worries I've expressed about the strategies I have considered here. Setting this aside, in the following section I propose an alternative solution to the puzzle that embraces epistemic reasons for action and attempts to explain The Action-Belief Asymmetry. My goal in what follows is thus to show that it may not be so puzzling for the pluralist pragmatist to admit that there are epistemic reasons for action after all.

4. A solution: the ubiquity of epistemic reasons for action

²⁴ Thanks to Bob Beddor for suggesting this line of response.

Just a reminder: the challenge for the pluralist pragmatist who embraces epistemic reasons for action is to explain why epistemic reasons don't seem to play a role in determining how one ought_{ATC} to act, even in cases where there are weak or no competing practical reasons, whereas epistemic reasons play a big role in determining what one ought_{ATC} to believe, especially in cases where there are weak or no competing practical reasons. That's The Action-Belief Asymmetry. In other words, the pluralist pragmatist needs to explain why there's a difference between what one ought_{ATC} to believe in low-stakes and no-stakes cases like Spoiler_{Belief} and Roses_{Belief} and what one ought_{ATC} to do in structurally analogous action-cases like Spoiler_{Act} and Roses_{Act}. I argue here that the pluralist pragmatist can explain this once we do some theorizing about epistemic reasons for action—namely, how they arise, what determines their weights, and how they balance against one another.

First, it's important to notice that, by the pluralist's lights, objective epistemic reasons for belief are cheap and abundant: for any proposition *p*, any fact that bears on the truth of *p* is an epistemic reason for or against one to believe *p*, regardless of whether one is aware of it, and even if one's having some doxastic attitude with respect to *p* has absolutely no practical import. So, there are plethora of objective epistemic reasons for or against us to believe any proposition. (But, importantly, not all of these reasons are relevant to what it is rational for us to believe, since what's rational for us to believe depends on what epistemic reasons we *have*—i.e., our subjective reasons.)

Similarly, then, if there are epistemic reasons for action, they should be just as cheap and abundant. Recall our prime candidate for an epistemic reason for action: the fact that some action *A* would give one evidence about whether *p* is an epistemic reason for one to *A* (even if having some doxastic attitude with respect to whether *p* has no practical import). If this is an epistemic reason for action, then there are epistemic reasons for us to do just about anything. That's because just about any action gives one evidence—even decisive evidence—about something. Walking outside gives you decisive evidence about the weather and your surroundings, doing jumping jacks gives you decisive evidence about how many jumping jacks you're doing and the sensations in your body, and even sitting still and thinking silently to yourself gives you decisive evidence about what you're thinking about and that you're a thinking thing.

Moreover, it seems that any body of evidence is evidence for an infinite number of propositions. This is what Nelson (2010) calls the *fecundity of evidence*. To illustrate, Nelson gives an example of a simple visual experience: as you walk outside and look up at the sky, your visual experience can give you evidence that there are birds flying above you, that there are jackdaws in the sky, that three jackdaws exist, that there are three jackdaws or three crows, that there are things moving through the air in front of you, and so on ad infinitum (Nelson, 2010, p. 99). So, not only

can just about every action yield decisive evidence about some proposition, but just about every action can yield decisive evidence about an infinite number of propositions.

The abundance of epistemic reasons together with the fecundity of evidence thereby seems to imply that, if there are epistemic reasons for action, there are equally strong epistemic reasons for doing any action whatsoever. This is because the collective strength of the epistemic reasons for doing some action is presumably a function of how strong the evidence is that the action would provide and how many propositions it would provide evidence for. To see this, ignore the fecundity of evidence for a moment, and consider two libraries A and B. Suppose A and B both contain a lot of information about the world and fictional stories, but A is a much bigger library with many more books than B. If there are epistemic reasons to do actions that provide us with evidence, then it seems that there is much stronger epistemic reason to go to library A than to go to library B because library A provides stronger evidence about the same things as B and also provides evidence about a lot more things than B. But now consider the fecundity of evidence: every body of evidence supports an infinite number of propositions. This seems to entail, then, that library A and library B actually provide evidence about the same number of things, and thus that the epistemic reasons for going to each library are actually equally strong.²⁵

This is the first piece to put in place in order to solve the puzzle. If there are epistemic reasons for action, they are *ubiquitous* in the following sense:

Ubiquity In just about any choice situation between incompatible alternative actions, there are equally strong epistemic reasons for each relevant alternative.

This is something I overlooked when originally considering the action-cases in §2 that helped illustrate The Action-Belief Asymmetry. First, revisit Spoiler_{Act}. In this case, there are alternative actions that I could do instead of reading the Game of Thrones blog post: I could read the news,

²⁵ I'm assuming here that the total strength of one's epistemic reasons to do some action depends on the mere number of propositions that the action would yield evidence about either directly or indirectly via logical inferences. An anonymous reviewer suggested that one might think, instead, that the total strength of epistemic reasons to do some action depends on the number of propositions that the action would yield *direct* evidence about. For example, even if library A and library B ultimately yield evidence about an infinite number of propositions, one might think that there's nonetheless stronger epistemic reason to go to library A because, since it contains more books than B, going to library A would yield evidence that directly supports a greater number of distinct propositions. I think this alternative model of the strength of epistemic reasons for action is less plausible because its practical analogue is implausible. When some action would cause some good (or bad) consequences to be brought about, the total strength of these consequence-based practical reasons in favor (or against) doing the action does not depend solely on the immediate good (or bad) effects of the action, but it depends on both the immediate and long-term effects of the action. So, similarly, if epistemic reasons for action are generated by the fact that the action would yield evidence about some propositions, both propositions that are directly and indirectly supported by the relevant evidence should be relevant to the weight of those epistemic reasons.

take a walk, do some jumping jacks, etc. Given the abundance of epistemic reasons and the fecundity of evidence, I have equally strong epistemic reasons for doing all those alternative actions too, since they would all give me decisive evidence about a seemingly infinite number of propositions. And the same goes for $Roses_{Act}$: there are alternative actions that Lady Olenna could do instead of counting the roses, each of which would give her decisive evidence about an infinite number of propositions, and so, Lady Olenna has equally strong epistemic reasons for doing each available alternative.

The second piece to put in place in order to solve the puzzle is recognizing that, if there are epistemic reasons for action, they balance out differently than epistemic reasons for belief. When there are equally strong epistemic reasons for believing p as there are for disbelieving p , one (epistemically) ought to do neither and withhold belief about whether p instead. One might think that this is a phenomenon of subjective epistemic reasons for belief, rather than objective ones, since such cases are usually understood to be cases in which one has incomplete evidence. But we can imagine such a case involving objective epistemic reasons for belief: suppose that the true fundamental physical theory entails that there's a .5 objective chance that some quantum event will occur at t_1 . This is some reason to believe that the event will occur at t_1 but it's also an equally strong reason to disbelieve it. And it seems that one (epistemically) ought to withhold.

But epistemic reasons for action balance out differently. Suppose you can only go to one of two libraries C and D, which contain all the same books, and there's no other alternative actions you can do. If there are epistemic reasons to do actions that provide us with evidence, then there are equally strong epistemic reasons to go to library C as there are to go to library D. So, what (epistemically) ought you to do? You shouldn't go to neither. You ought to go to one or the other—either one is permitted. So, this is the second crucial observation about epistemic reasons for action:

Permissive Balancing When there are equally strong epistemic reasons for doing each relevant alternative action, one is epistemically permitted to do each of them.²⁶

²⁶ I borrow the term “permissive balancing” and the above library example from Berker (2018, p. 458), which he uses to point out that epistemic reasons for action balance like practical reasons for action, rather than epistemic reasons for belief. Berker points out that this is something that the pluralist ultimately needs to explain. So, one might worry that the explanation of The Action-Belief Asymmetry I'm offering here ultimately just moves the explanatory bump in the rug. But I think there's a good explanation of Different Balancing on offer. As I argue in Leary (2020), it can be explained by the fact that epistemic reasons for belief are *interdependent*, while epistemic reasons for action are not: i.e., epistemic reasons for believing p are necessarily reasons *against* believing not- p , while epistemic reasons for doing an action A are not necessarily reasons against doing not- A . And the Truth-Commitment View can even explain this further difference between epistemic reasons for belief and epistemic reasons for action: it's because “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... can simultaneously show commitment to the truth regarding p ”(Leary, 2020, p. 149). Moreover, explaining the different

Ubiquity and Permissive Balancing together yield a simple explanation for The Action-Belief Asymmetry. Epistemic reasons don't play much of a role in determining how one ought_{ATC} to act because, in just about any choice situation, there are equally strong epistemic reasons for an agent to do each relevant alternative action. And when there are equally strong epistemic reasons for doing each relevant alternative action, one is epistemically permitted to do each of them. So, even when there are little or no competing practical reasons, the epistemic reasons do not determine a particular action that the agent ought_{ATC} to do because the epistemic reasons simply permit the agent to do anything.

To illustrate, return to the low-stakes and no-stakes action-cases. In Spoiler_{Act}, I have epistemic reason to read the blog post, but I also have just as much epistemic reason to do any alternative action I could do instead (read the news, take a walk, do jumping jacks, etc.). So, I'm epistemically permitted to read the blog, but I'm also epistemically permitted to do anything else instead. And since there's some practical reason against me reading the blog post, and presumably some practical reason in favor of me doing some of the relevant alternatives, I ought_{ATC} to do something else instead. Similarly, in Roses_{Act}, while Lady Olenna does have an epistemic reason to count the roses, she has just as much epistemic reason to do any alternative actions she could do instead, so that she's epistemically permitted to count the roses, but she's also permitted to do anything else. So, even though there are no practical reasons for or against the relevant alternatives, it's still only the case that she's permitted_{ATC} to count the roses—it's not the case that she ought_{ATC} to.

On the other hand, while epistemic reasons for belief are also cheap and abundant, they are not ubiquitous in the relevant sense: we do not have equally strong epistemic reasons to have each doxastic attitude with respect to every proposition. And this is why epistemic reasons play a much larger role in determining what one ought_{ATC} to believe. For example, in Spoiler_{Belief}, there's decisive epistemic reason for me to believe the show will end in the way described by the blog and decisive epistemic reason *against* disbelieving it or withholding. So, I epistemically ought to believe that the show will end in the way described. And in Roses_{Belief}, there's a strong epistemic reason for Lady Olenna to believe that there are 100 roses in the garden and a strong epistemic reason

balancing behaviors of different kinds of reasons is everyone's problem (not just the pluralist's). As Berker and I note, even if there are no epistemic reasons for action and no practical reasons for belief, we still need to explain why, when there are equally strong epistemic reasons for believing *p* as there are for disbelieving *p*, both are prohibited and one ought to instead suspend judgment, but when there are equally strong practical reasons for doing action *A* as there are for doing not-*A*, both are permitted and one ought to do one or the other. So, I don't think it's a problem that my solution here appeals to a further difference between epistemic reasons for action and belief that requires further explanation.

against disbelieving it or withholding. So, she epistemically ought to believe that there are 100 roses in the garden. In these cases, then, the epistemic reasons determine a particular doxastic attitude that the agents epistemically-ought to have and thereby play more of a role in determining which doxastic attitude the agent ought_{ATC} to have.

Not only does this explain The Action-Belief Asymmetry but it also shows that a unified account of how epistemic and practical reasons weigh against one another can give the right results in both cases of action and belief. Indeed, it suggests that the Lexical Priority Account (the LPA) does deliver the right results about the action-cases after all. In Spoiler_{Act}, since the balance of practical reasons is below the threshold, the epistemic reasons are lexically prior: I ought_{ATC} to do the practically-best action that I am epistemically permitted to do. But since I have equally strong epistemic reasons for all of my relevant alternative actions, I'm epistemically permitted to read the blog post or do anything else instead. So, I ought_{ATC} to do whatever is practically-best: something else besides reading the blog. And with respect to Roses_{Act}, since there are no practical reasons in play, the LPA implies that Lady Olenna ought_{ATC} to do simply whatever is epistemically-best. But since Lady Olenna has equally strong epistemic reasons to do any of her relevant alternative actions, no particular action is epistemically-best, so there's no particular action that she ought_{ATC} to do. Rather, she's permitted_{ATC} to do anything.

Of course, one might object that we can modify Roses_{Act} so that counting the roses is literally the only thing that Lady Olenna can possibly do that will give her any evidence about anything (since the powers of evil demons abound). The solution that I've offered here would not apply to such a case, and so, it would seem that the pluralist pragmatist who accepts my solution would need to accept that in this version of the case Lady Olenna both epistemically-ought and ought_{ATC} to count the roses.

More generally, one might think that it's at least possible to conjure up some far-fetched cases in which a particular action does yield evidence for a much greater number of propositions than the relevant alternative actions the agent could perform (despite the fecundity of evidence). For example, we might imagine a case in which my only relevant alternatives are to execute some scientific research project in which I would gain evidence about an immense number of propositions about the entire universe or spend my time counting all the flowers in the Montreal Botanical Garden. And to isolate the epistemic reasons, assume that my knowing the relevant facts about the universe or the botanical garden would have no practical import and each project would have the very same opportunity costs. Here, too, my solution would not apply and the pluralist pragmatist would have to admit that epistemic reasons for action sometimes do single out a particular action that one ought_{ATC} to do.

But in these far-fetched cases it seems much more palatable to admit that the agent ought_{ATC} to do the relevant action. If counting the roses is literally the only thing that Lady Olenna can do that will give her any evidence about anything and there's nothing better for her to do during that time, then it doesn't seem so absurd to say that she ought_{ATC} to count the roses. Likewise, it doesn't seem so implausible to say that if the scientific research project and counting all the flowers in the Montreal Botanical Garden would have the very same practical benefits and costs, but the former would give me a lot more evidence about the world, I ought_{ATC} to perform the scientific research project. So, I think this is not too big of a bullet to bite.

This helps clarify exactly what the solution that I'm offering amounts to. I'm claiming that, in *almost all* circumstances, epistemic reasons for action don't determine a particular action that one ought_{ATC} to do because of the ubiquity and permissive balancing of epistemic reasons for action. But this is compatible with thinking that in some rare cases epistemic reasons for action can tip the scales and make a particular action what one ought_{ATC} to do. This is enough for the pluralist pragmatist to explain The Action-Belief Asymmetry, while still maintaining that epistemic reasons for action are authoritatively normative.

5. Conclusion

I've argued here that whether there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action provides a puzzle for the pluralist pragmatist: if she accepts that there are epistemic reasons for action, she faces the challenge of explaining The Action-Belief Asymmetry, but if she denies that there are epistemic reasons for action, she faces the challenge of explaining why there are no such reasons in a way that is not question begging, extensionally adequate, and compatible with her own pluralism. I then proposed a solution to this puzzle: the pluralist can accept that there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action while appealing to the fact that epistemic reasons for action are ubiquitous and permissively balance in order to explain the Action-Belief Asymmetry.

But I haven't defended pluralist pragmatism here nor have I considered every possible alternative solution to the puzzle. So, I don't take my argument here to show that there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action or even that the pluralist pragmatist must accept as much. But my hope is that I've done enough here to motivate the pluralist solution that I've offered and thereby encourage more discussion about whether there are authoritatively normative epistemic reasons for action and what such reasons would be like.

One issue that I haven't discussed here is whether there are epistemic reasons against doing certain actions that have to do with avoiding error: for example, are there epistemic reasons against

reading conspiratorial websites or fake news on social media, since doing so risks forming false beliefs?²⁷ According to my argument here, there are strong epistemic reasons in favor of doing these actions because they give us decisive evidence about some truths: that certain people are touting certain conspiracies, and so on. But one might think that there are also epistemic reasons against doing these actions because doing so risks forming false beliefs. I'm inclined to reject that. This is because what beliefs a body of evidence would actually cause a particular person to have (given their prior background beliefs) seems irrelevant to their objective epistemic reasons for *belief*: e.g., even if scientific testimony about the existence of climate change would actually cause me to disbelieve that testimony because I'm distrusting of scientists, this scientific testimony is nonetheless an objective epistemic reason for me to believe in climate change. So, similarly, the mere fact that doing some action might cause someone to form false beliefs, given their prior background beliefs, should not imply that they have an objective epistemic reason to not do that action. Instead, in order for there to be an objective epistemic reason against doing an action, it would have to be the case that doing the action exposes one to a body of evidence that is *objectively* misleading in the sense that it makes some false proposition probable independently of anyone's prior background beliefs or evidence. The unreliable testimony of conspiracy peddlers doesn't do that, and I find it hard to imagine other cases that fit this bill.

But perhaps I'm wrong and there are some cases like this. If so, a further question arises about how these epistemic reasons against doing an action weigh against the epistemic reasons in favor of it and whether there are some cases in which the epistemic reasons against doing the action make it so that one ought_{ATC} *not* do it (and instead do some alternative action). That wouldn't undermine the solution I've proposed in §4, since this solution ultimately allows that there are some rare cases in which epistemic reasons do determine what one ought_{ATC} to do. But it would suggest that things are a bit more complicated than what I've let on here. This just goes to show how many questions about epistemic reasons for action are yet to be explored.

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²⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing up this question.

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