Against the newer evidentialists

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Abstract

A new wave of evidentialist theorizing concedes that evidentialism may be extensionally incorrect as an account of all-things-considered rational belief. Nevertheless, these *newer evidentialists* maintain that there is an importantly distinct type of epistemic rationality about which evidentialism may be the correct account. I argue that natural ways of developing the newer evidentialist position face opposite problems. One version, due to David Christensen (forthcoming), may correctly describe what rationality requires, but does not entail the existence of a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. Another version, due to Barry Maguire and Jack Woods (forthcoming), characterizes a normative concept that is both distinct and epistemic, but struggles to explain why this concept should be classified as a type of rationality. I conclude that the newer evidentialist strategy of extensional compromise may be less favorable to evidentialism than previously supposed.

1   Introduction

When Roderick Firth (1956; 1959) introduced the notion of epistemic rationality, he argued on extensional grounds.[1] Firth claimed that if we did not introduce a distinctively epistemic sense of rationality, we would make false or misleading claims about what agents ought to believe. We would say that agents should believe what will make them happy or well off, rather than what their evidence supports.

Epistemic purists follow Firth in maintaining that there is a distinct type of epistemic

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[1]Firth also argued that epistemic rationality was needed to capture the correct grounds for claims about what we ought to believe. Here too, skeptics have claimed to have the advantage (Côté-Bouchard forthcoming; Cowie 2014).

rationality which should figure centrally in normative epistemology.[2] *Skeptics* follow Chisholm (1956; 1961) in denying the need to posit a new type of epistemic rationality. Skeptics hold that the notion of epistemic rationality is unparsimonious (Papineau 2013; Rinard 2019b); potentially ill-defined (Cohen 2016a,b; Chisholm 1991); and a distraction from the most important normative phenomena (Dotson 2019).

As time went on, Firth's extensional argument began to be challenged. Skeptics discovered that they could mimic most of the purist's judgments on Cliffordian grounds without positing a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. The debate shifted to edge cases where Cliffordian arguments break down. But here, skeptics claimed, it is the skeptic, and not the purist, who has the right of it. Sometimes we may believe against the evidence in order to be good friends (Keller 2004; Stroud 2006); maintain confidence and psychological health (McKay and Dennett 2009; Rinard 2019b); avoid racism and bias (Basu 2019; Dotson 2019; Gendler 2011); show faith in humanity (Preston-Roedder 2013); or respond to external incentives for holding particular beliefs (Reisner 2009; Rinard 2019a). As a consequence, the extensional debate between purists and skeptics ground to a stalemate.

The 'new evidentialists' (Rinard 2015) held their ground on extensional questions. They argued that there could not, even in principle, be non-epistemic reasons for belief. Non-epistemic reasons could not exist because they would not be motivating reasons (Kelly 2002, 2003); would play the wrong role in doxastic deliberation (Shah 2003, 2006); or would be wrong kinds of reasons for belief, and hence really reasons for action rather than belief (Way 2012). These arguments were promising, but they met with resistance, and again the debate ground to a stalemate.[3]

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[2]I use this terminology in contrast to the common distinction between evidentialists and pragmatists. I prefer 'purist' to 'evidentialist' because on my reading, purism is the meta-epistemological claim that epistemic rationality exists, whereas evidentialism is one among many first-order views about what epistemic rationality requires. Similarly, I put 'skeptic' for 'pragmatist' because although pragmatism is sometimes used to denote the meta-epistemological denial of purism, it is also used to label first-order views, especially instrumentalist views, from which I want to distance myself. My own views tend closer to consequentialism than instrumentalism.

[3]Contra Kelly and Shah, see Comesaña (2015), Leary (2017) and Rinard (2019a). On wrong kinds of reasons, see Howard (2016) and Reisner (2009).

A group we might call the *newer evidentialists* takes a new tack (Christensen forthcoming; Maguire and Woods forthcoming). The newer evidentialists cede extensional ground to the skeptic, admitting the possibility and existence of non-epistemic reasons for belief, and suggesting that in edge cases it may be the skeptic, rather than the purist who delivers extensionally correct judgments about rational belief. Nevertheless, the newer evidentialists have claimed that there remains a distinctively epistemic type of rationality, and that the study of epistemic rationality is an important topic for normative epistemology.

These concessions are welcome, but I think that the newer evidentialists may have given away too much ground. Once we recognize that the skeptic has given a correct account of rational belief, it is hard to see why a distinct notion of epistemically rational belief is needed at all.

In this paper, I survey two newer evidentialist views in detail, and argue that they face opposite challenges. The first, due to David Christensen (forthcoming), may correctly describe what rationality requires but fails to posit a *distinctively epistemic* type of rationality. The second, due to Barry Maguire and Jack Woods, posits a distinctively epistemic type of reasons and rationality, but struggles to explain why epistemic reasons are *normative* reasons and why epistemic rationality is a type of *rationality* (Maguire and Woods forthcoming; Woods 2016, 2018).

Here is the plan. Section 2 presents Christensen's view. Section 3 argues that this view is a repackaging of a familiar claim about deontic modals: that deontic modals are evidence-sensitive. Section 4 argues that the evidence-sensitivity of deontic modals is plausible, but does not posit a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. Indeed, I suggest, Christensen's view is best described as a type of global consequentialism. Section 5 presents Maguire and Woods' view. Section 6 argues that this view commits us to denying a series of near-platitudes about normative reasons and rationality. I suggest that we should save the platitudes by redescribing Maguire and Woods' view using other normative categories, unless Maguire and Woods can provide significant support for their view. Section 7 argues that this support has not been provided. Section 8 concludes.

2   Christensen's evidence-relative view

David Christensen (forthcoming) aims to show that the concept of epistemic rationality is indispensable, not only to the evaluation of rational belief, but also to the rationality of action. Christensen does this by criticizing two candidate skeptical views and arguing that their failure pushes us towards a third view, which involves a type of epistemic rationality.

First, skeptics might adopt a subjectivist view on which rationality is determined by agents' background beliefs. On a consequentialist reading, that view holds:

> **Belief-Relative Value (BRV):** It is rational for an agent to believe that P just in case believing P (as opposed to suspending belief about P or disbelieving P) would have the best expected consequences, given the agent's beliefs.

However, Christensen argues, BRV gets the wrong answer when agents hold evidentially unsupported beliefs. Consider:

> **Good Ol' Charlie:** Every morning, Charlie eats a bar of soap. Without fail, it tastes terrible and makes Charlie sick. Today, Charlie is faced with an identical bar of soap. Charlie believes that from today onwards, the soap will taste great and improve his health. Charlie concludes that the soap will taste great today and eats it.

The problem is that BRV seems to imply that Good Ol' Charlie is rational in believing that the soap will taste great today, because based on his background belief that soap will taste good from today onwards, it will have the best consequences to believe that the soap will taste good today. And that does not sound like the right result.

Skeptics might respond by holding that rationality is determined, not by an agent's actual beliefs but by the beliefs it would be rational for her to hold.

> **Rational Belief-Relative Value (RBRV):** It is rational for an agent to believe P

just in case it would be rational for that agent to believe that no alternative is a more effective means to their ends.

On this view, Good Ol' Charlie's beliefs about soap are irrational. Although these beliefs have the best expected consequences relative to Charlie's actual beliefs, they do not have the best expected consequences relative to what it would be rational for Charlie to believe, which is precisely the opposite.

However, Christensen argues, RBRV threatens circularity since RBRV helps itself to a prior notion of rational belief, but the skeptic also uses RBRV to determine the rationality of beliefs. The skeptic can retreat from circularity by allowing RBRV to go vacuous, or at least mostly vacuous, ruling out for example some patterns of attitudes which would come out as irrational on any application of RBRV. But this gives us only a relatively thin notion of rational belief, analogous to accounts of structural rationality, whereas many skeptics have wanted to develop a more robust positive account broadly analogous to theories of substantive rationality.

Christensen suggests we instead adopt an evidence-relative view on which rationality is determined by the beliefs that the total evidence supports:

> **(Evidentially Supported Belief-Relative View (ESBRV):** It is rational for an agent to believe P just in case their evidence supports the belief that no alternative attitude toward P is a more effective means to their ends.

However, Christensen suggests that this view would involve recognizing a type of epistemic rationality.

> It would go against fundamental motivations of avoiding reliance in our theorizing on a distinctive evidentially-based, non-pragmatic dimension of normativity. The rationality of a given belief, while not directly dependent on this evidential dimension of evaluation, would depend on it indirectly: the rationality of any belief would crucially turn on the purely evidential support for other beliefs. (Christensen forthcoming, p. 13).

Here I break from Christensen. I think that there may be good reasons for adopting a view like ESBRV. But I do not think that ESBRV should be viewed as encompassing, or even committing us to the existence of a distinctively epistemic type of rationality.

In the next section, I show how ESBRV has arisen before, in a context that would not usually be associated with epistemic rationality. Then in Section 4, I argue that this ESBRV should not be understood as committing us to a distinct type of epistemic rationality.

3   Evidence-sensitivity for action

Consider the question of how evidence bears on right action. Objectivists hold that evidence has no special bearing on right action.

> **(Objectivism)** What agents ought to do is determined by the totality of relevant facts.[4]

For example, an objective consequentialist might hold:

> **Maximizing Objective Consequentialism (Right Action):** For all agents S, actions X and times t:
>
> > **Maximizing Criterion of Rightness:** S may (ought to) X just in case S's X-ing at t is at least as good as (better than) any alternative to X-ing available to S at t.
> >
> > **Objective Value:** The value of S's X-ing at t is the value of the actual consequences that S'x X-ing will have at t. That is, $V(X) = V(X, @)$, where @ is the actual world and $V(X, @)$ is the value of the consequences of X-ing in @.

Many have worried that objectivism does not give evidence its normative due. For example, consider:

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[4]Readers who think that reasons are not facts, but rather propositions or some other object are invited to rephrase accordingly.

> **(Lucky Charlie):** Today, unbeknownst to Charlie, a genie has enchanted his soap so that it will taste great and contain many vitamins and minerals.

Should Charlie eat the soap today? Objectivists think that Charlie should eat the soap today, since eating the delicious soap would have better consequences than not eating it. But as in the discussion of Good Ol' Charlie, you might think that there is an important sense in which given Lucky Charlie's evidence, he should not eat the soap.

Historically, subjectivism has been proposed as a way of giving evidence its normative due:

> **(Subjectivism)** What agents ought to do is determined by their background beliefs.

For example, Maximizing Subjective Consequentialism (for right action) would result from replacing Objective Value with:

> **(Subjective Value)** The value of S's X-ing at t is the expected value of its consequences, where the expectation in question is taken relative to the agent's beliefs at the time of action. That is, $V(X) = \Sigma_w C(w)V(X,w)$, where C is the agent's credence function at t.

However, subjectivism may fail to give evidence its normative due when an agent's beliefs are not supported by her total evidence. For example, although subjectivism implies that Lucky Charlie should not eat the soap today, it implies that Good Ol' Charlie should eat the soap. That is because Good Ol' Charlie expects against all evidence that eating the soap will be best. But letting Good Ol' Charlie's evidentially unsupported beliefs drive what Good Ol' Charlie ought to do is hardly a means of giving evidence its normative due.

Now consequentialism is not merely an account of right action. Consequentialists have long had global ambitions, expanding their account to handle normative terms beyond rightness, including virtue and blame, as well as evaluands beyond action, such as systems

of rules, dispositions and character traits.(Kagan 2000; Parfit 1984; Pettit and Smith 2000). A cousin of Christensen's BRV follows from Maximizing Subjective Consequentialism for consequentialists who are willing to make two changes. First, put 'rationally required to' for 'ought' and 'rationally permitted to' for 'may' in the Maximizing Criterion of Rightness. Second, allow X to range over doxastic attitudes as well as actions. This gives:

> **Maximizing Subjective Consequentialism (Rational Belief):** For all agents S, doxastic attitudes X and times t:
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> > **(Maximizing Criterion of Rationality)** S is rationally permitted to (rationally required to) hold X just in case S's holding X at t is at least as good as (better than) any alternative to S's holding X at t.
> >
> > **(Subjective Value ∗)** The value of S's holding X at t is the expected value of its consequences, where the expectation in question is taken relative to the agent's prior beliefs. That is, $V(X) = \Sigma_w C(w)V(X, w)$, where C is the agent's prior credence function.

BRV is the special case of this principle when X is the belief that P and alternatives are disbelief and suspension.[5]

Unsurprisingly, BRV fails to respect Good Ol' Charlie's evidence in exactly the same way that subjective consequentialism for action did. BRV implies that Good Ol' Charlie is rationally required to believe the soap will be tasty today, whereas subjective consequentialism for action implies that Good Ol' Charlie ought to eat the soap. Neither verdict seems to capture the sense in which evidence bears on what Charlie is permitted to do and believe.

Recently, it has become popular to hold that information or evidence bears directly on right action (Charlow 2013; Kolodny and MacFarlane 2010; Silk 2014).

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[5]On another reading, BRV deals only with rational permissions and not rational requirements. This weakening will not affect the main thrust of my criticisms.

(Information Sensitive View) What agents ought to do is determined by a relevant body of information.

There are many proposals for what this information could include, for example information held as conversational common ground or evidence that agents should have had (Goldberg 2016). But one natural proposal is that the relevant body of information is the agent's total evidence.

(Evidence Sensitive View) What agents ought to do is determined by their total evidence at the time of action.

For example, a maximizing consequentialist version of the Evidence Sensitive View results from replacing Subjective Expectations with:

(Evidence-Relative Value) The value of S's X-ing at t is the expected value of its consequences, where the expectation in question is taken relative to the evidentially supported credences. That is, $V(X) = \Sigma_w Pr_E(w)V(X, w)$, where Pr_E are the evidential probabilities generated by S's total evidence at t.

The Evidence Sensitive View correctly implies that Lucky Charlie should not eat the soap, because the expected consequences on Charlie's evidence of eating the soap are quite poor.

As before, consequentialists with global ambitions may try to extend the Evidence-Sensitive View to cover the rationality of doxastic attitudes. This would involve modifying (Subjective Value *) so that the credence function in question is the function supported by the agent's total evidence. But now consequentialists face a choice point: how should the value function V be interpreted in its application to belief?

On the one hand, V might be read as a measure of epistemic value, for example a scoring rule where $V(X, w)$ measures the accuracy of credence function X at world w. If V is a strictly proper scoring rule, then expected value will be maximized at the evidentially

supported credence function.[6] Here we recover the evidentialist view that agents are rationally required to hold the credences supported by their total evidence.

However, this is not the view that Christensen considers. Christensen considers a version of the Evidence-Sensitive View which concedes that all consequences of an agent's doxastic attitudes bear on their rationality, and not just the immediate quantities of accuracy or inaccuracy realized by those attitudes. With regard to rational belief, this view holds:

> **Maximizing Evidence-Relative Consequentialism (Rational Belief):** For all agents S, doxastic attitudes X and times t:
>
> > **(Maximizing Criterion of Rationality)** S is rationally permitted to (rationally required to) hold X just in case S's holding X at t is at least as good as (better than) any alternative to S's holding X at t.
> >
> > **(Evidence-Relative Value)** The value of S's holding X at t is the expected value of its total consequences, relative to the agent's evidence at the time of action. That is, $V(X) = \Sigma_w Pr_E(w)V(X, w)$, where Pr_E are the evidential probabilities.

Christensen's ESBRV follows if we identify the claim that X maximizes evidentially-expected value with the claim that S's evidence supports the belief that no alternative attitude toward P is a more effective means to their ends.[7]

Suppose we accept the Evidence-Sensitive View. Does this commit us to recognizing a distinctively epistemic type of rationality? On the one hand, there is some plausibility to this suggestion: after all, the Evidence-Sensitive View involves the notion of evidential support, which has figured centrally in many accounts of epistemic rationality. On the other hand, the Evidence-Sensitive View was developed as an account of right action.

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[6] V is *strictly proper* if for all probability functions X, $argmax_Y \Sigma_w X(w)V(Y, w) = X$.

[7] If these are not identical, then I propose Maximizing Evidence-Relative Consequentialism as an improvement on ESBRV.

In extending this view to cover rational belief, we may seem to be accepting that the rationality of belief is a subtype of the same non-epistemic notion of rationality or rightness that applies to action. This interpretation would allow us to concede the truth of the Evidence-Sensitive View and its proposed application without thereby accepting a distinct type of epistemic rationality. In the next section, I argue in favor of this second reaction.

4   A distinctively epistemic sense of rationality?

There are two ways in which the Evidence-Sensitive View might commit us to recognizing a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. First, ESBRV might itself describe a type of epistemic rationality. Second, the notion of evidential support, which is involved in ESBRV, might be taken as a type of epistemic rationality.

The problem for the first reading is that ESBRV does not look like a *distinct* or *epistemic* type of rationality. On distinctness, Firth's original claim was that we need to posit a notion of epistemic rationality distinct from the ordinary ethical ought. But ESBRV is naturally read as a type of global consequentialism in which a single, unified ought determines what should be done or believed as that with highest evidentially-expected value.

Likewise, ESBRV does not obviously pick out a type of *epistemic* rationality. Certainly ESBRV cannot count as epistemic in virtue of its extensional verdicts. ESBRV is adopted precisely to explain how it can be rational to believe against the evidence that you are a good dancer, your spouse is a saint, and your ventures will succeed. Nor should ESBRV count as epistemic in virtue of denying leading skeptical principles. Christensen's paper is a response to Susanna Rinard, who defends:

> **(Equal Treatment)** The question "what should I believe?" is to be answered in the same way as the question "what should I do?". (Rinard 2019b, p. 1924).

But ESBRV is naturally read as a version of Equal Treatment on which the rationality of both belief and action is determined in the same way: by computing evidentially expected values.

So far, we have seen that ESBRV cannot be epistemic in virtue of positing a new species of rationality distinct from the ethical ought; in delivering extensionally epistemic verdicts; or in contradicting key skeptical principles. Might we nonetheless hold that ESBRV is epistemic because it involves the notion of evidential support?

The problem with this reply is that the existence and importance of a normative category of evidential support is not, and has never been at issue between purists and skeptics. Indeed, Firth introduced the concept of epistemic rationality in response to a paper by Chisholm which analyzed the phrases '*S* ought to (refrain from) accepting *p*' and 'It would be (un)reasonable for *S* to accept *p*' in terms of the phrase '*S* has adequate evidence for *p*' (Chisholm 1956). Many modern skeptics follow Chisholm in giving pride of place to evidence in their accounts. For example, one of the best-known instrumentalist accounts of how to weigh epistemic and non-epistemic reasons for belief proposes that the rationality of belief and action is determined by two factors: our reasons to pursue aims, and the likelihood that our beliefs or actions will fulfill those aims (Steglich-Petersen and Skipper 2019). Steglich-Petersen and Skipper hold that likelihoods are determined exclusively by evidence in the standard way, but argue that purists err in refusing to countenance a second factor, the importance of aims themselves. This account gives pride of place to a normative notion of evidential support. In fact, it is very naturally read as an instrumentalist version of ESBRV.

Moreover, if we count theories as epistemic in virtue of the importance they accord to evidential support, then we risk mis-classifying traditional theories of epistemic rationality as non-epistemic. Views such as coherentism, reliabilism, and truth norms do not obviously give pride of place to evidential support. So if the centrality of evidential support is taken as the mark of epistemic rationality, we may misclassify modern instrumentalism as a type of epistemic rationality while classifying many non-evidentialist theories of epistemic rationality as non-epistemic views.

So far, I have argued that ESBRV itself cannot be the distinctively epistemic type of rationality that the purist is after. A second option for Christensen would be to say that

a belief is epistemically rational if it is evidentially supported, and to take ESBRV as evidence for the existence and importance of this type of normative assessment.

The problem with this view is that Christensen has not argued for it. The purist does not deny that there is a well-defined normative category called evidential support, any more than she denies that there is a well-defined normative category called coherence. Evidentialists may well hold that a belief is rational in some sense just in case it is evidentially supported, just like coherentists may hold that a belief is rational in some sense if it is part of a maximally coherent set. But the skeptic does not deny that these views are well-formulated. She denies that they are true. She thinks that the purist has confused rationality for other normative categories such as evidential support, coherence and fittingness. So the purist owes us an argument, not for the claim that evidential support is a coherent or important normative notion, but that it tracks a type of rationality.

Here it is productive to consider how we would respond to a parallel argument for objectivism about rationality. Suppose an objectivist noticed that the second component of the Evidence-Sensitive View, a value function, can be used to define an objectivist notion of rationality. Could she argue, on this basis, that the Evidence-Sensitive View is committed to recognizing a distinct type of objectivist rationality? This argument has not been attempted, and for good reason: the fact that the objectivist's favored notion figures in a full account of rationality is not itself an argument for positing a distinct species of objectivist rationality, and indeed it may seem to tell agains this move insofar as it suggests that the value function tracks only one ingredient of rationality rather than a new type of rationality in its own right. But if this argument on behalf of objectivism does not work, then why should the purist fare any better by noting that her favorite normative notion, evidential support, is the first component of the Evidence-Sensitive View? This insight does not, in itself, commit us to recognizing a distinct type of rationality tracking evidential support, and it may seem to suggest that the purist has mistaken a single component of rationality for a type of rationality in its own right.

In this section, I have argued that the ESBRV is plausible, but that it does not commit

us to recognizing a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. ESBRV cannot itself be a distinctively epistemic type of rationality, for it is not distinct, delivers extensionally non-epistemic verdicts, and is compatible with key skeptical principles. Nor does ESBRV support the claim that there is a distinct sense in which beliefs are rational if they are evidentially supported. Although ESBRV does recognize the existence and importance of a normative notion of evidential support, ESBRV at best gives us no reason to treat evidential support as tracking a distinct type of rationality, and perhaps gives us some reason to resist this move.

5   The game of belief

Barry Maguire and Jack Woods try a different tack (Maguire and Woods forthcoming; Woods 2016, 2018). Maguire and Woods begin with a sharp distinction between two questions: what we *just plain ought* to believe, and what it is *correct* to believe according to the standards of correctness for belief.

For Maguire and Woods, what we just plain ought to believe is determined by authoritative normative reasons. These reasons determine what we ought to believe through weighing explanations of a standard type. Maguire and Woods hold that the authoritative normative reasons which determine what we just plain ought to believe are all and only our practical reasons for belief. We have standing practical reason against holding any belief, due to the need to avoid cognitive clutter. We often have stronger practical reasons for holding evidentially supported beliefs, such as the need to guide action. These practical reasons can be outweighed by other practical reasons, such as the desire to think the best of ourselves and our kin. But importantly, for Maguire and Woods it is only practical reasons which determine what we just plain ought to believe. Epistemic reasons do not weigh against practical reasons and hence have no impact on what we just plain ought to believe.

However, we can also ask when a belief counts as correct according to the standards

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of correctness for belief. This need not be a practical question. Although practical considerations play a role in explaining why standards are in force and why the standards have the shape that they do, the standards of correct belief may themselves make mention only of evidence and other epistemic considerations. And indeed, Maguire and Woods hold that the standards of correctness for belief constitute an autonomous epistemic domain to which only epistemic considerations, and perhaps only evidence is relevant.

Because epistemic reasons do not participate in weighing explanations of what we just plain ought to believe, they cannot be authoritative normative reasons. Nevertheless, Maguire and Woods suggest, we can posit a new type of *non-authoritative* normative reasons, of which evidence for belief is a paradigmatic example. Evidential considerations are not authoritatively normative, because they do not bear on what we just plain ought to believe. But they are still normative reasons, insofar as they participate in an explanation of which beliefs count as correct under the standards of correct belief.

How do standards of correctness for belief come to be in force for us, if these standards are distinct from the question of what agents just plain ought to believe? Woods offers two versions of what he calls a *quasi-conventionalist* account, although we will see later that Maguire demurs.

Woods (2018) holds that systems of norms are in force for a community when the community adopts what H.L. Hart (1961) called the internal point of view towards them, treating norms as rules to guide practical deliberation and hence as grounds for obligation and criticism. Woods holds that communities have respect-based reason to obey standards which are in force for them. Individuals within those communities will have derivative respect-based reasons to obey communal standards, insofar as they are appropriately related to the fact that the community accepts these standards. And individuals will have instrumental reasons to obey the specific requirements of norms that are in force for them, because that is a necessary means to complying with their respect-based reasons.

Woods (2016) offers a different version of the same story. Woods holds that normally constituted individuals desire to avoid the *liability* to sanction, and not only its imposition.

There is, Woods thinks, a Footian oddity to agents who are desire only to avoid punishment for their transgressions, and are unmoved by the fact that they are liable to sanction (Foot 1972). This means that agents have desire-based reasons to obey communal standards, in order to avoid the liability to sanction under communal standards. As before, these desire-based reasons generate instrumental reasons to take the specific actions required by communal standards.

Summing up, Maguire and Woods concede that what agents just plain ought to believe is a practical matter, but maintain that there is also a distinctively epistemic standard of correctness which applies to belief. Evidence and other epistemic considerations are not authoritative normative reasons, but rather non-authoritative normative reasons, bearing on the correctness conditions for belief but not on what agents just plain ought to believe. Woods offers two related quasi-conventionalist accounts of how epistemic standards of correctness could come to be in force for us.

This account improves on Christensen by carving out a *distinctively epistemic* type of rationality. However, because it appeals to a new class of non-authoritative normative reasons answering to conventional standards of correctness, we might worry that the account has not described a type of epistemic *rationality*, or a genuine class of *normative reasons*. In the next two sections, I show how this criticism could be developed.

6   Three platitudes about reasons and rationality

Skeptics do not deny that purists are talking about *something*. Purists are hardly talking nonsense. Nor do skeptics deny that purists are characterizing a *normative* notion. Purists are not doing descriptive theorizing. What skeptics deny is that purists have characterized a type of rational belief.

Skeptics think that purists may have confused rationality for one of several neighboring normative notions. Rather than positing a new type of epistemic rationality answering to non-authoritative normative reasons, skeptics suggest we should redescribe the purist's

view using familiar normative notions. Most obviously, purists could be characterizing the normative notion of evidential support, which is determined by weighing items of evidence. Purists could also be characterizing the notion of fitting belief, which is determined by fit-making facts. Indeed, several authors already defend a fittingness analysis of standards of correctness for belief (Berker ms; McHugh 2014). Finally, an increasing number of philosophers distinguish between justification and rationality, taking many traditional epistemological theories to characterize the notion of justified rather than rational belief (Littlejohn 2012; Lyons 2016; Siscoe forthcoming).[8] In principle, purists need have no quarrel with this move; in fact, they may take some of the remarks below to motivate it.

These salvage proposals may seem like inconsequential semantic quarrels, but Maguire and Woods' proposal reminds us why they are important. By positing a new class of non-authoritative normative reasons, Maguire and Woods commit themselves to denying a series of claims about normative reasons and rationality which are often treated as platitudes. Given enough encouragement, we could be induced to give up on the platitudes. But there is significant pressure to save the platitudes by relocating the purist's theories away from normative reasons and rationality, and towards fittingness, evidential support, justification or another normative category, where the platitudes are no longer in force. Here are three examples of near-platitudinous claims that Maguire and Woods may have to deny.

First, many authors hold that rationality is authoritative (Kauppinen forthcoming; Kiesewetter 2017). Indeed, the need to explain the authority of rationality has been wielded as an argument for and against a variety of epistemological theories (Côté-Bouchard 2016; Nolfi forthcoming). Maguire and Woods deny that epistemic rationality is authoritative, insofar as authoritative normative reasons determine the separate question of what agents just plain ought to believe, while epistemic rationality is determined by an

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[8]Isn't this move enough to vindicate the purist? Perhaps it would be enough if I appealed to a distinctively epistemic type of justification, which contrasts to justification simpliciter. But there is nothing wrong with appealing to justification simpliciter. Even Chisholm did that.

autonomous domain of non-authoritatively normative reasons.

Now a vocal minority of epistemologists do indeed deny that rationality is authoritative. Many theories of structural rationality follow John Broome (2013) in holding that rationality is one among many sources of requirements which together determine what agents ought to do and believe. But these theorists have fought tooth and nail to preserve a second claim that *reasons* of rationality are authoritative, and that reasons of rationality participate in weighing explanations of what we ought to do and believe.[9] Despite significant pressure against the claim that reasons of structural rationality are authoritative reasons which participate in weighing explanations of facts about the just plain ought (Kolodny 2005), many defenders of structural rationality have felt that it would be going too far to deny that reasons of rationality are authoritative and weigh on oughts. Here Maguire and Woods are distinguished by their willingness to take a step which participants in the structural rationality debate have seen as off limits.

A final platitude is that rationality has significant value (Horowitz 2014). The claim that rationality is valuable is often taken for granted, and used to support or attack theories throughout epistemology (Horowitz and Dogramaci 2016; Steglich-Petersen 2011). But it is not easy for Maguire and Woods to recover this claim. Maguire and Woods express sympathy for a value-based approach on which we just plain ought to do what is best. But because epistemic reasons have no bearing on what we just plain ought to believe, epistemic reasons cannot in isolation indicate that a belief is valuable or disvaluable, or else epistemic reasons would weigh on just plain oughts by way of indicating what it is best to believe. So it looks like epistemic rationality will have no value of its own, and that when epistemic rationality comes apart from the just plain ought, it would be better to be irrational than to be rational.[10]

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[9]For example, Broome defines two types of normative reasons: a *pro toto* reason for (agent) *N* to *F* is "an explanation of why *N* ought to *F*", and a *pro tanto* reason for *N* to *F* is "something that plays the for-F role in a weighing explanation of why *N* ought to *F*" (Broome 2013, p. 50; p.53). Here Broome preserves the claims that reasons of rationality are authoritative and participate in weighing explanations of oughts.

[10]Now of course, we could say that there is a distinctively epistemic type of value possessed by epistemically rational beliefs which fails to participate in weighing explanations of what is best. But this new specialized notion of value will conflict with deeply-held claims about the weighting of value, for example

So far, we have seen that skeptics accuse purists of mistaking rationality for related normative categories such as fittingness and evidential support. Maguire and Woods lend plausibility to this charge by denying three nearly platitudinous claims about reasons and rationality: that rationality is authoritative; that normative reasons are authoritative and participate in weighing explanations of just plain oughts; and that rationality has significant value. Because these claims are not platitudinous when rationality and reasons are swapped for notions such as fittingness and fit-making facts, it is tempting to save the platitudes by claiming that Maguire and Woods' real target is one of these other normative notions.

If Maguire and Woods want to retain their view and deny the platitudes, they need to offer a weighty argument in its defense. Maguire and Woods advance several arguments in favor of their view. Are these arguments substantial enough to save the view?

7   Motivating the view

Woods' approach is grounded in a more general conventionalist story about most or all types of normativity, including promising (Woods 2016), etiquette and morality (Woods 2018). If true, that is an account with enough generality and explanatory payoff to justify bending a few platitudes. But is it true? In Sections 7.1-7.2, I argue against Woods' conventionalism and in 7.3 I argue that a more plausible conventionalism may not preserve an autonomous domain of epistemic norms. Section 7.4 considers an argument which does not appeal to conventionalism.

7.1   Against bare conventionalism

Woods' conventionalism is a species of what we might call *bare conventionalism*. It takes the very fact that society has adopted a convention to be sufficient for the convention

the view that all types of value participate in weighing explanations of what is best.

to be in force. Bare conventionalism is often thought to suffer from serious challenges (Nieswandt 2019; Scanlon 1990). Here is one such challenge.

Suppose that society adopts a truly heinous convention. This convention requires kicking puppies, maintaining apartheid, or working to destroy humanity. Bare conventionalism says that this convention will be in force, grounding a type of obligation and criticism for members of society. We would have, for Woods, desire- or respect-based reasons to maintain apartheid; would count as violating normative obligations if we do not; and be criticizable as a result. Call this the *objection from heinous conventions*.

To his credit, Woods is admirably clear in his desire to bite the bullet.

> A referee complains that [my view] suggests Rosa Parks was obliged, in some
> subscripted sense, to sit in the back of the bus (and that she was criticizable
> for not doing so). This, again, is a feature, not a bug. Rosa Parks is liable to
> criticism for violating a norm presumably in force then. (Woods 2018, p. 217).

We saw in Section 6 that Maguire and Woods bite a number of normative bullets by denying platitudes about rationality and reasons. But I think that Woods may have bitten one bullet too many here. This opinion is shared by Maguire, who jumps ship and takes such examples to show that bare conventionalism is false (Maguire and Woods forthcoming, p. 229).

What is wrong with claiming that Rosa Parks was obliged to sit in the back of the bus and liable to criticism for failing to do so? Besides its intuitive implausibility, this claim serves as a breakdown point for both of Woods' views about how normative conventions come to be in force for us once they are adopted.

Woods (2018) holds that when communities adopt norms, individuals within the community inherit respect-based reasons to comply with those norms. But I don't think we would like to claim that Rosa Parks had a respect-based reason to comply with Jim Crow norms. Parks' act was an act of civil disobedience. The entire purpose of her disobedience was to convey symbolic disrespect for Jim Crow norms by publicly refusing

to comply with them. Parks did this because what she had reason to do was to disrespect Jim Crow norms. If Woods is to capture this fact, he will have to say that Parks had decisive reason to disrespect Jim Crow norms, but nevertheless had a respect-based reason to respect Jim Crow norms. But this is a mouthful. And in virtue of what have Jim Crow norms earned Parks' respect? Merely by being mistakenly adopted by society as norms? Even if we grant that societal adoption gives society, qua group agent, reason to respect the norms that it adopts, it is not clear why Parks would inherit that reason. Since Parks was not consulted in the adoption of Jim Crow norms, and since the whole purpose of these norms was to oppress Parks, it is hard to see how the mere adoption of Jim Crow norms could give Parks reason to respect them.

Woods (2016) holds that individuals desire to avoid the mere liability to sanction, and not just its imposition. This gives us a desire-based reason to comply with the norms in force in our community, in order to avoid sanction-liability. Woods' claim is plausible when norms are just and fairly adopted. There would indeed be a Footian oddity to agents who cared only about the actual imposition of sanctions for promise-breaking, and not about the fact that their promise-breaking made them liable to sanction. But there is no oddity in failing to care about sanction-liability under unjust norms. Parks was doubtless concerned about the actual imposition of sanctions, in the form of arrest, imprisonment or worse. But did she desire to avoid the mere liability to sanction under Jim Crow norms? Why would she? You do not have to be a Footian moral monster to be unconcerned with liability to sanction under unjust norms. All you must do is to reject the norms.

So far, we have seen that bare conventionalism encounters the objection from heinous conventions. Bare conventionalism says that heinous conventions are in force for us when they are adopted by society. I suggested that this is the wrong consequence, and also that it puts pressure on Woods' explanations for how conventions come to be in force by generating respect- and desire-based reasons. In Section 7.3, I consider the prospects for revised forms of conventionalism. But first, I want to raise a weaker worry for bare conventionalism.

7.2 Weakening the complaint

Suppose you disagree. You think that the mere adoption of conventions is enough to ground a type of normative obligation and criticism-liability. Would that be enough to salvage epistemic normativity? Only in a weak sense.

Consider Jim Crow norms. There are two stances that conventionalist philosophers at the time could adopt towards these norms. On the one hand, they could adopt the stance of the cultural anthropologist, describing what contemporary norms required. The cultural anthropologist faithfully describes a type of normative criticism that is aptly directed at Rosa Parks. On the other hand, philosophers could adopt the stance of the conceptual engineer. The conceptual engineer refuses to take normative concepts and practices as fixed, focusing instead on the question of how they could be improved. The conceptual engineer describes, and then works to implement systems of norms on which Parks would be praiseworthy, not blameworthy, for sitting on the bus.

For all that Woods and Maguire have said, contemporary theories of epistemic rationality might occupy the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, and not the conceptual engineer. Woods and Maguire grant the skeptic's claim that what we just plain ought to believe is a practical matter, and express sympathy for the claim that epistemic norms can come apart from the just plain ought in requiring us to be bad friends, to perpetuate systemic racism, and darken our final days with the belief that death is on its way. Insofar as we just plain ought to do the opposite of this, one wonders why epistemologists are meant to continue devoting significant attention to the study of epistemic norms. Wouldn't it be better to study the cases in which these norms steer us wrong, to understand what we are required to do instead, and to advocate new normative conventions which require us to do that?

It is precisely this line of criticism which recently drove Kristie Dotson (2019) to declare herself an epistemic apostate. Dotson holds, for example, that prevailing epistemic norms can perpetuate oppression by suppressing black rage at state-sanctioned violence, allowing police officers to get away with murder in a court of law and in the court of public

opinion (Dotson 2018). In such cases, epistemic norms recommend doing what we just plain ought to avoid. As a result, Dotson professes an attitude which she calls conceptual indifference towards epistemic norms. Dotson simply does not care about what epistemic norms require of us. The stance of the apostate is the stance of a philosopher who goes on theorizing about what we just plain ought to believe, and responds to contrary epistemic claims with indifference at best, or hostility at worse.

Dotson's stance is not the passive stance of a cultural anthropologist, but the active stance of a conceptual engineer, who recognizes that prevailing epistemic norms are sometimes unjust and seeks to change them. The problem with bare conventionalism is that, for all that Maguire and Woods have said, apostasy and conceptual engineering may be exactly the right stances towards prevailing epistemic norms, and indeed that is just what some skeptics have urged. This is a problem, because purists are not satisfied with the weak claim that there is some sense in which their theories are true. Purists want to claim that epistemic normativity should be a central object of normative epistemology, and perhaps should exhaust normative epistemology. [11] But if the apostates are right, then the study of epistemic normativity may be at best an anthropological curiosity, and at worst a way of perpetuating unjust norms which ought to be changed.

7.3 Justified conventionalism

So far, I have argued against the bare conventionalist claim that epistemic norms come to be in force merely in virtue of being adopted by society. But many conventionalists are not bare conventionalists. Many follow Maguire in holding that conventions must be justified in some further way to be in force. For example, here is how Katharina Nieswandt defines conventionalism:

> If the rules of practice *P* say that *X* must ϕ given fact *F*, *and P is a justified*

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[11]For example, here is how Christensen summarizes the traditional view: "Epistemic rationality or justification . . . has been seen as in some sense aimed at truth, the proper subject for epistemology. Pragmatic justification . . . has been seen as outside the purview of epistemology" (Christensen forthcoming, p. 1).

practice, then, given *F*, *X* must ϕ because of *F*. (Nieswandt 2019, p. 17).

Call this view *justified conventionalism*. Justified conventionalism blocks heinous conventions, such as Jim Crow norms, from having any normative force at all, because heinous conventions are unjustified.

Could justified conventionalism save Maguire and Woods' view? Perhaps. It is not my burden to survey all possible forms of conventionalism, nor could I do so in the space allotted. To a large extent, the reply here is that if Maguire wants to develop a more selective conventionalist view, it is incumbent on Maguire to tell us what that view is and how it accounts for epistemic normativity.

However, I do think that justified conventionalism risks taking us out of the frying pan and into the fire. Justified conventionalism purchases plausibility for the conventionalist view at the expense of making it mysterious why the justified conventions would be purely epistemic.

For example, Nieswandt lists four ways in which a convention *P* might be justified:

Promoting impartial good: The greatest good of the greatest number can be better furthered with *P* than without it.

Pareto optimality: *P* maximizes everybody's impartial gains.

Ends, not means: *P* is required in order for us to treat others as ends in themselves.

Good human life: *P* is necessary for a good human life.

But it is not clear that any of these standards justifies adopting purely epistemic conventions. There is no clear argument that epistemic conventions are necessary for living a good human life or treating others as ends in themselves. And although neither camp has a plausible claim to Pareto optimality, you might well think that admitting some non-epistemic considerations into our normative conventions would better promote the impartial good than would adopting purely epistemic standards. After all, Maguire and

Woods take non-epistemic considerations to bear on what it is best to believe. And if the best conventions are not epistemic conventions, then justified conventionalism threatens to support skepticism over purism.

There is room for purists to push back here. Although Maguire and Woods concede that it would sometimes be better to form beliefs which violate, rather than respect purely epistemic standards, it does not follow that purely epistemic standards could not be the best standards for promoting the impartial good. Perhaps strict epistemic standards are needed to instill a habit of forming beliefs based on evidence and careful reasoning. But if Maguire and Woods want to make this claim, they need an argument. Skeptics are happy to concede that the best standards to adopt would instill a healthy respect for evidence, but wouldn't it be better if those standards also recognized the importance of other goals, such as friendship and anti-racism? That is not a crazy view to hold.

Now Nieswandt was talking about the justification of *moral* conventions. Could the newer evidentialist hold that conventions for belief are justified in a narrower way? For example, if we could show that epistemic conventions are the best means to the promotion of accurate belief, would that be enough for these conventions to have genuine normative force, even if epistemic considerations are suboptimal for the purpose of promoting overall value? The problem with this move is that it assumes precisely what is under dispute: that standards acquire genuine normative force through their relationship to a restricted type of epistemic value, without regard for their practical, moral or all-things-considered implications.[12]. It is exactly this claim which skeptics deny.

So far, I have argued that Maguire and Woods' view cannot be saved by appeal to conventionalism. Bare conventionalism faces the objection from heinous conventions and threatens to take up the stance of a cultural anthropologist when we would do better to take up the stance of the conceptual engineer or epistemic apostate. Justified conventionalism may be defensible, but struggles to explain why the justified conventions

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[12]Similar remarks may apply to other recent conventionalist views such as Dogramaci (2012), although it is worth noting that many such views already revise many traditional epistemic norms (Dogramaci 2015, 2017)

should be purely epistemic. Is there anything which can be said for purism which does not rely on conventionalism?

7.4 Criticism

Maguire and Woods make one argument which may not depend on conventionalism. This is the argument that there is an important sense in which we are aptly criticizable for violating epistemic norms. If it is apt to criticize us for violating epistemic norms, then it is natural to think that epistemic norms are genuine norms, and perhaps even requirements of rationality.

Now I do not think that skeptics will grant that we are criticizable in any sense for violating epistemic norms.[13] But suppose we grant the datum. Does this require us to posit a new type of epistemic rationality? It does not.

The problem is that many of the skeptic's salvage proposals can also capture the datum. We can be criticized for beliefs which are unfitting or unjustified. And it may be criticism enough to say of a belief that it is evidentially unsupported. So the mere fact that beliefs which violate epistemic standards are criticizable does not imply that they are criticizable for being irrational, rather than unfitting, unjustified, or evidentially unsupported.

Indeed, Maguire and Woods' proposal threatens to overgenerate normative criticism. For example, Maguire and Woods hold that there are chess-specific reasons for chess players to play well, and that there were Nazi party reasons for party members to obey Nazi doctrine. On their view, there is a type of normative criticism aptly directed at chess players who play badly in order to let a child win, or Nazi party members who hide Jews. But the first claim is at best not obvious, and the second threatens to force Maguire back into the bare conventionalist view about Rosa Parks. So I do not think that the skeptic should be quick to concede any explanatory advantage to the purist in her account of apt normative criticism.

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[13]Indeed, this is exactly the stance that Rinard takes in correspondence (Maguire and Woods forthcoming, p. 238).

I do not expect Maguire and Woods to accept the skeptic's salvage proposals. Doubtless each proposal faces some difficulties of its own. But we saw in Section 6 that Maguire and Woods' proposal involves denying a number of near-platitudes about rationality and reasons. These are serious costs, and it takes a strong argument to justify imposing them. If we cannot justify these costs by appeal to metanormative conventionalism, and need not incur these costs in order to explain practices of normative criticism, then it would seem better to side with the purist and avoid positing new normative notions without necessity.

8   Conclusion

My project in this paper was to address the newer evidentialist program. The newer evidentialists concede to the skeptic that there is a coherent all-things-considered notion of rational belief and that the extension of this notion is determined in large part by non-epistemic considerations. But the newer evidentialists maintain that there is still an important role in epistemology for a separate notion of epistemic rationality. I argued that existing newer evidentialists face opposite worries.

Christensen argues for the plausible claim that deontic modals are evidence-sensitive. This claim, however, does not assert the existence of a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. Christensen's view is naturally read as a vindication of the global consequentialist claim that all rationality is a matter of promoting overall value. While Christensen's view does show that rationality makes essential appeal to the normative concept of evidential support, the rational importance of evidential support is not what is in dispute between skeptics and purists.

Maguire and Woods argue that the practical question of what we just plain ought to believe should be distinguished from the epistemic standards of correctness governing belief. I argued that the proposed standards are both distinctive and epistemic, but not best understood as a type of rationality or as determined by a new class of non-authoritative

normative reasons. By redescribing evidentialist standards in other normative terms, such as fittingness or evidential support, we can preserve a series of near-platitudinous claims about rationality which would otherwise be violated by Maguire and Woods' view.

This discussion illustrates the difficulty of the newer evidentialist's attempt to have their cake and eat it too. Once we concede to the skeptic that she is correct about rationality or the just plain ought, it becomes much harder to motivate the need for a separate, purely epistemic type of rationality.

One reaction to this discussion would be to retreat to the new evidentialist position on which there could not possibly be non-epistemic reasons for belief of any kind. Although this view has faced recent pushback, it is far from refuted and it would avoid the difficulties faced by the newer evidentialists.

Another reaction to this discussion could be to concede that the skeptic was right. There were clear reasons why purists thought that a separate notion of epistemic rationality was needed: purists held that there is no coherent all-things-considered notion of rational belief, or that there are no practical reasons for belief, and that skeptics give extensionally incorrect verdicts about what it is rational for us to believe. But once we concede these points to the skeptic, we should be open to the idea that epistemic rationality is theoretically dispensable after all.

These are both excellent reactions. But it remains to be seen whether there is any room to split the difference between them. Once purists begin to cede extensional ground to skeptics, it becomes difficult to describe and motivate the need for a distinctively epistemic type of rationality. As a result, purists who are willing to make extensional compromises with skeptics may have purchased a more wholesale form of skepticism about epistemic rationality than they bargained for.

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