



ARTICLE

Should we respond correctly to our reasons?

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Abstract

It has been argued that rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons. Recent defenses of the normativity of rationality assume that this implies that we always ought to be rational. However, this follows only if the reasons rationality requires us to correctly respond to are normative reasons. Recent meta-epistemological contributions have questioned whether epistemic reasons are normative. If they were right, then epistemic rationality wouldn't provide us with normative reasons independently of wrong-kind reasons to be epistemically rational. This paper spells out this neglected challenge for the normativity of epistemic rationality by connecting the two bodies of literature. Moreover, it generalizes this challenge to the rationality of desire, intention, and emotion. The upshot is that we can only answer the normative question about rationality if we debate about blame and accountability for holding different kinds of irrational attitudes, as well as about the sources of mental normativity.

Keywords: Rationality; reasons; responsibility; normativity; epistemic blame

1. Introduction

Rationality has been prominently understood as mental coherence (see esp. Broome 2007; 2013; 2020). Benjamin Kiesewetter (2017) calls the norms that correspond to this kind of rationality “requirements of *structural* rationality,” because they are concerned with the relation among, or structure of, our mental states. Structural rationality is supposed to require, for example, to intend what one believes one ought to do; or not to believe what one believes one lacks sufficient evidence for. These are norms to avoid certain combinations of attitudes. It has been pointed out at length that, if we want to save the idea that these *structural* requirements are normative – that is, if we want to say that we always have a *normative reason* or *ought* to follow these requirements – then we face several problems that seem unsolvable.¹

¹Here is a rough sketch of the debate. A main worry with the normativity of structural requirements of rationality is that they would, *if they were normative*, give rise to unacceptable *bootstrapping* (Kolodny 2005: 514–542): we could make it the case that we ought to believe or intend something just by adopting the antecedent attitudes without any reason for them. According to the first requirement mentioned above, for example, it would be true that I ought to intend not to save your life if I now just arbitrarily adopt the belief that I ought not to save your life. This seems implausible. In reply, it has been suggested that structural

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This paper spells out a challenge for the normativity of rationality that has been neglected in this literature. It arises from recent discussions in meta-epistemology about the normativity of epistemic reasons, and it calls into doubt the normativity of so-called reasons “of the right kind” for attitudes. The challenge applies even if we adopt an account of rationality that is more promising for preserving the normativity of rationality than rationality as coherence, such as rationality as responding correctly to reasons. It is just as pressing as other central challenges that have received more attention in the literature – such as showing that irrational incoherences guarantee a failure to respond to reasons or defending subjectivism about normative reasons. The first aim of this paper is to show that the literature on rationality should seriously engage with legitimate worries about the normativity of reasons. The second aim is to show that relevant epistemological discussions must extend to cover the normativity of reasons for attitudes other than belief to better inform the theory of rationality.

I begin by explaining the structure and relevance of this challenge (section 2). I then show that the challenge is well-motivated by recent works in meta-epistemology that doubt the normativity of epistemic reasons for belief: defenses of the normativity of epistemic reasons fail to erase these legitimate doubts (section 3). Next, I show that worries about the normativity of epistemic reasons should be *generalized* to create worries about the normativity of “right-kind” reasons for attitudes other than belief – in particular, desire, emotion, and intention (section 4). Finally, I propose that to meet this generalized challenge, defenders of the normativity of rationality must develop an account of personal criticizability or blameworthiness for irrational attitudes, as well as debate the sources of mental normativity (section 5).

2. The challenge

Kiesewetter (2017, 2020) defends a view according to which rationality consists in responding correctly to one’s (possessed or available)² reasons. The argument for the normativity of rationality seems straightforward once such a view is established:

requirements take wide-scope rather than narrow-scope form. Wide-scope versions of structural requirements would be, for example, and roughly, ‘you ought to [not believe that you have sufficient evidence for p or believe that p]’, ‘you ought to [not believe that you ought to ϕ or intend to ϕ]’, and ‘you ought to [not believe that you ought to ϕ or not believe that ψ ing is a necessary means to ϕ ing or intend to ψ]’. What is peculiar about these norms is that they can be satisfied in more than one way – i.e., by giving up or adopting one of the attitudes. However, it has been argued that the wide-scope versions of the structural requirements also give rise to unacceptable bootstrapping (Kiesewetter 2017: chs. 4.4–4.7). Furthermore, they seem to implausibly imply that each way of satisfying the standard is rationally on a par (Kiesewetter 2017: chs. 6.4–6.5). Another problem for the normativity of coherence is what the reason *is* that coherence provides us with (Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 5; Kolodny 2005: 547–551): is coherence non-derivatively normative, or does its normativity derive from some other value? For a recent account, see Worsnip’s (2021) proposal that coherence provides us with right-kind reasons for structuring deliberation so as to exclude certain incoherent combinations of attitudes as results of our deliberation. I explain the relevance of this paper for the normativity of coherence towards the end of section 2. For more on this debate, see Kiesewetter and Worsnip (2023).

²Kiesewetter employs the notion of *availability*, while Lord (2018) favors the notion of *possession* to characterize these reasons, which in turn presupposes *access* to reasons. I will ignore the subtle differences. What matters is that *rationality supervenes on the mental* (see Wedgwood 2017: ch. 7): two subjects with identical (non-factive) mental states cannot differ in their rationality (say, because one subject is systematically deceived). Rationality, maybe in contrast to justification, is an essentially *internalist* concept. Reasons that a subject cannot be aware of cannot make a difference to their rationality.

If rationality consists in responding correctly to reasons, then rational requirements could be understood as inheriting both their content and their authority from the content and authority of the relevant reasons. (Kiesewetter 2017: 160)

That is, if we always ought to respond correctly to our reasons, then what rationality (on this conception) requires of us is just what we ought to believe, desire, feel, or intend:

(RO) Rationality requires of us to ϕ if and only if we ought to ϕ .

One objection to this conception of rationality comes from objectivism about “ought”: sometimes we cannot know whether we ought to ϕ , but we are still rational if we respond correctly to our possessed or accessible reasons while ignoring reasons that are unavailable to us (Broome 2007: 253). Defenders of rationality as reasons-responsiveness argue that we should reject the first assumption of this “quick objection”, as Broome calls it: we can always know what we ought to do, because what we ought to do is determined by the reasons that are *possessed* by us or *available* to us (Lord 2018: ch. 8, Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 8). This is subjectivism about “ought” and reasons. It is in line with the idea that not doing what we ought to do normally implies personal criticizability. For if one could have known that ϕ ing was impermissible, then one is, at least when one lacks an excuse, criticizable for ϕ ing.³

I stay neutral about whether we can successfully defend (RO) against the quick objection by endorsing subjectivism, as Kiesewetter and Errol Lord do. The challenge I spell out here arises from a more fundamental assumption in the debate about the normativity of rationality:

(RC) We always ought to respond correctly to our reasons.

How can anyone reasonably call (RC) into question? It might be argued that (RC) is an obvious analytical truth. Doing what you ought to do just *means* that you give the response (or one of the responses) that your reasons favor most, and to give this response *for* those reasons that favor it. To give this response for these reasons is to respond “correctly” to them. Thus, to do what you ought to do just means that you respond correctly to your reasons. However, note that, if we spell out how the claim is understood by its main proponents, then it is not trivial anymore:

(RC*) We always ought to respond correctly to our *right-kind* reasons.

Recent discussions in epistemology call (RC*) into doubt. For they question the normativity of epistemic reasons – which are right-kind reasons when it comes to *belief*. Moreover, I will argue in section 4 that this challenge can be generalized to *all* right-kind reasons.

Let us begin by characterizing right-kind reasons. None of the features I describe in what follows are uncontroversial, as I mention in the footnotes at the end of each paragraph. However, they still allow us to get a good grip on this category of reasons.

³More precisely, one will either be criticizable for not doing what one thinks one ought to have done (that is, for *akrasia*), or for not having known what one ought to have done (that is, for culpable ignorance). It is important to note that the “ability to know” that is necessary for blameworthiness needs to be adequately specified. The fact that we can *in principle* know something that is important to know does not always make us criticizable for failing to know it, for there may still be no *reasonable* way to come to know it.

First, right-kind reasons are those reasons that bear on the distinctive rationality of an attitude. Beliefs, for instance, are subject to *epistemic* rationality. Epistemic reasons are those reasons that bear on this kind of rationality. Beliefs might also be subject to *practical* rationality: it might be practically, but not epistemically, rational to believe that your friend will get the job, if this belief allows you to boost your friend's self-confidence by being more supportive, while you lack sufficient evidence that they will get it (say, you don't know who else has applied). However, practical rationality is not distinctive for belief, because actions and maybe other attitudes are also subject to practical rationality. Reasons bearing *only* on the practical rationality of belief, but not on its epistemic rationality, are thus "of the wrong kind" in this specific sense: they don't bear on belief's distinctive rationality, which is epistemic.⁴

Second, epistemic reasons and other reasons of the right kind (for other attitudes) are characterized by the fact that they are reasons *for which* you can clearly adopt an attitude: they are those normative reasons that can also clearly be your motivating reasons. For instance, it is clearly possible to believe that your friend will get the job *for the reason* that your friend is the best candidate (and the application system is fair), but it is not clearly possible to believe that your friend will get the job *for the reason* that this belief would make you more supportive. It seems somehow *difficult* to adopt your belief for such practical reasons. This is why they seem to be, intuitively, "of the wrong kind" and not bearing on belief's *epistemic* rationality.⁵

Finally, right-kind reasons are sometimes conceived of as being co-extensive with *object-given reasons* for an attitude (see Parfit 2001: 21–22). Object-given reasons for an attitude are reasons that indicate (or constitute) facts about the attitude's object rather than about the attitude itself. For example, object-given reasons for *beliefs* are (or are provided by) evidence, because evidence indicates the truth of the object of the belief, i.e., the truth of the belief's propositional content. Scientific reports on climate change are thus object-given reasons for belief: they indicate that human-induced climate change takes place. By contrast, that I feel less existential angst if I do not believe in climate change is a (wrong-kind) *state-given* reason not to believe in climate change. It is not evidence against climate change. This fact does not indicate that the belief is false, and so does not bear on belief's constitutive aim of truth. By contrast, object-given reasons support the attitude, or make it rational to have the attitude, by indicating that or making it likely that the attitude fulfills its constitutive aim.⁶

To see how we might doubt (RC*), note first how it is denied by *pragmatists* about what we ought to believe. For pragmatists, there will be cases where our right-kind

⁴Recent discussions question whether epistemic rationality is distinctive of belief by arguing that actions are also evaluable in terms of epistemic rationality (see Flores and Woodard 2023; but see Arpaly 2023 for some pushback). I do not deny this. Importantly, evaluating attitudes such as desire or intention and *most* actions doesn't primarily happen in terms of epistemic rationality. At the very least, epistemic rationality is distinctive of belief and maybe *intellectual* actions, such as assertion and inquiry, which constitutively aim at epistemic goods (Simion 2018).

⁵Schroeder (2021) counts these two features among the "earmarks" of right-kind reasons, thereby avoiding a commitment to the controversial motivational constraint on reasons (i.e., the claim that R is a reason to ϕ only if you can ϕ for R). This is partly because one might worry that one cannot respond to all right-kind reasons, such as in the famous surprise-party cases (Schroeder 2007). But see Shah (2006) and Way and Whiting (2016) for defenses.

⁶Schroeder (2021) argues that some right-kind reasons are state-given, such as the availability of further evidence or the stakes of error, and Eva Schmidt (2023; 2024) argues that incoherence can be a state-given yet right-kind reason to suspend judgment (see Knoks 2023, McHugh 2023, Singh 2023, and Schmidt 2023 for criticisms of the latter view). I won't commit to any view about whether some state-given reasons are of the right kind, after all, but merely note that intuitively, paradigmatic right-kind reasons are object-given.

reasons all favor a specific response but in which it is not true that we ought to give the response. For example, our epistemic reasons might be insufficient to justify believing in God's existence, but since – as we can stipulate – it would be better for us to believe in God than not to believe in God (no matter whether God actually exists), our practical or wrong-kind reasons for belief favor believing in God (see Pascal 1670: §233; James 1896). It might be true, according to pragmatists, that we ought to believe in God, even though the correct response to our *right-kind* reasons (here: the *epistemic* reasons) would be not to believe in God. Currently, there is a debate about whether we can weigh or compare right- and wrong-kind reasons to determine what one ought to believe, all-things-considered, in such cases (for proposals, see Howard 2020; Meylan 2021; Reisner 2008; forthcoming). If we sometimes ought all-things-considered to believe what is favored by our practical or wrong-kind reasons, rather than by our epistemic or right-kind reasons, then there is a sense in which (RC*) is false. So, pragmatists will deny (RC*) in this sense.

One could object that pragmatists must grant that there is *another sense* in which (RC*) is true: one ought *epistemically* not to believe in God if one's epistemic reasons for belief in God are insufficient. So, epistemic reasons are normative for *epistemic* rationality (Paakkunainen 2018). I don't think this response should convince pragmatists yet. I agree that, if this is all that defenses of the normativity of rationality wish to defend, then (RC*) cannot be doubted. However, they in fact wish to defend more, and moreover, I think that they *should* aim to defend more. For defenses of the normativity of rationality endorse the idea that irrationality is *personally criticizable* (Kiesewetter 2017: ch. 2; Kauppinen 2021: 540–542; Lord 2018: 4; Parfit 2011: 123; Way 2009: 1). Importantly, the criticism that is appropriate when someone is irrational is supposed to be different from merely criticizing a system for malfunctioning and from criticizing a bad move in a game. The idea is that one doesn't merely fail *relative to the game of rationality* when one violates rational requirements. Rather, one fails independently of whether one cares about being rational and independently of whether one has practical reason to be rational. Regarding epistemic rationality, what the debate asks is whether epistemic rationality is an independent source of normative reasons, such as prudence or morality, rather than merely a standard according to which we can rank beliefs. For such standards might lack significance independently of our prudential or moral reasons for scoring high in the relevant ranking. Asking for the normativity of epistemic rationality is to ask whether criticizing a belief as "irrational" has more significance than criticizing a move in chess as bad, relative to the standards of good chess. This is why arguing that one always ought *epistemically* to respond correctly to epistemic reasons isn't yet sufficient for defending the normativity of rationality.⁷

Importantly, this challenge doesn't depend on the controversial view that we can weigh or compare epistemic and practical reasons, or right-kind and wrong-kind reasons, to reach an all-things-considered verdict about what to believe.⁸ This view would only serve to doubt the *pro toto* normativity of epistemic rationality – that is, whether we always *ought* to be epistemically rational. In spelling out the challenge, I instead follow the *radical pragmatists*: they doubt whether epistemic reasons are normative reasons at all (McCormick 2020; Rinard 2017; 2022). They doubt even the *pro tanto* normativity of rationality, i.e., whether we always have a *normative reason* to be rational. If epistemic reasons aren't normative, then wrong-kind reasons are the only candidates for normative reasons for belief. According to radical pragmatists, if there is

⁷Cf. Côté-Bouchard (2017: 412–413), who argues on similar grounds that appeals to *epistemic value* don't suffice to defend the authority of epistemic norms. The same goes for reasons-based conceptions of epistemic norms.

⁸For recent criticism of this view, see Berker (2018), Kauppinen (2023), Schmidt (forthcoming a).

no practical value in holding an epistemically rational belief, then epistemic reasons for this belief have no normative force.⁹ On this view, epistemic rationality can only be *derivatively normative* whenever there are practical reasons to be rational, or – as I put this view – only when epistemic reasons have some practical “backup.” In themselves, epistemic reasons aren’t normative – or so the challenge from radical pragmatism claims.¹⁰

In their extensive defenses of rationality as responding correctly to reasons, Kieseewetter and Lord devote much space to engaging with two challenges:

- (a) Showing that any irrational incoherence between one’s attitudes guarantees a failure to respond to reasons (Kieseewetter 2017: chs. 9 and 10; Lord 2018: ch. 2), and
- (b) Arguing that the notions of “ought” and “reason” are subjective or perspective-dependent (Kieseewetter 2017: ch. 8; Lord 2018: ch. 8).

Neither author considers the normativity of right-kind reasons within these books, however. Yet if the doubts about their normativity are well-motivated, then the current literature on the normativity of rationality neglects an important challenge. Indeed, the challenge seems *at least as important* for defending the normativity of rationality as are (a) and (b).¹¹

Indeed, the whole modern debate, beginning with works from Parfit, Scanlon, and Kolodny, takes for granted the normativity of epistemic reasons and right-kind reasons for intention and desire. Yet pragmatist accounts of epistemic evaluation are older than the recent debate on rationality (see Stich 1990; Meiland 1980). Nevertheless, such views never informed this debate. As Laura Callahan (2023: 6) observes, the literature on rationality assumed that the normativity of epistemic reasons just doesn’t fall within the scope of their discussions. However, asking the normative question about rationality (“why be rational?”) is to ask about the broader significance of epistemic and other kinds of rational evaluation to our lives – just as asking the normative question about morality (“why be moral?” see Korsgaard 1996) is to ask about the broader significance of morality to our lives. The challenge coming from radical pragmatism should therefore fall within the scope of the debate on the normativity of rationality.

One might object that the challenge arising from pragmatism has already been met. For instance, Kieseewetter (2022) defends the normativity of epistemic reasons. However, the features of normative reasons he identifies – providing partial justification, being premises in good reasoning, and being good bases for responses – are unlikely to convince someone with pragmatist inclinations. Pragmatists would just deny that

⁹Next to McCormick and Rinard, see especially those epistemic instrumentalist or teleologist views according to which epistemic reasons derive their normativity from our *practical* aims, reasons, or value, such as Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018), Cowie (2014; 2019), Grimm (2009), Mantel (2019), Papineau (2013), as well as Steglich-Petersen and Skipper (2019; 2020).

¹⁰Kieseewetter (2022) distinguishes two readings of this view: *epistemic anti-normativism*, according to which epistemic reasons are reasons, but not normative reasons (which gives rise to the challenge of explaining what kind of reasons epistemic reasons are), and *epistemic nihilism*, according to which epistemic reasons aren’t reasons at all (which Kieseewetter takes to be too revisionist). I won’t be concerned here with which of the views would be more plausible. The distinction is also explicit in the work of Olson, who has earlier defended nihilism (Olson 2011; 2014) but later anti-normativism (Olson 2018).

¹¹Wedgwood (2017; 2023) defends the view that rationality is a virtue – a claim which could explain why we have *reason to care* about rationality (see Kieseewetter *forthcoming*), and why irrationality is criticizable. Yet Wedgwood also doesn’t explicitly employ his account to meet the pragmatist worries that I spell out in sections 3–4.

epistemic reasons provide partial justification in the absence of a wrong-kind reason to comply with your right-kind reasons. And they would argue that the fact that right-kind reasons are good for reasoning or basing doesn't imply that we *ought* always to conform to the verdict of right-kind reasons. It isn't obvious how to meet such pragmatist replies, without ending up throwing intuitions at each other.

Before moving on, let me highlight why structuralist views about rationality should also care about this challenge. As Alex Worsnip (2021) has recently argued, the view that there is a *substantive* kind of rationality – that is, one that consists in a kind of reasons-responsiveness – is compatible with the view that there is also a separate *structural* kind of rationality that consists in a kind of coherence. To illustrate the difference between both kinds of rationality, Worsnip (2021: 5–6) contrasts a case in which a person, Tom, believes against his evidence that he is Superman, that Superman can fly, but that he (Tom) cannot fly, with another case in which another person, Tim, believes against his evidence that he is Superman, that Superman can fly, and that he (Tim) *can* fly. According to Worsnip, Tim is structurally more rational yet substantively more irrational than Tom. For Tim seems consistent in his beliefs while harboring two beliefs against his evidence, whereas Tom is inconsistent in his beliefs albeit merely harboring one belief against his evidence. So, intuitively, there are two distinct kinds of rational failure.

Philosophers who are interested in the normativity of coherence should also be interested in the normativity of right-kind reasons. This is because if coherence is normative, it is plausibly normative because it provides us with *right-kind* reasons for certain responses. According to Worsnip (2021), coherence provides us with right-kind reasons for structuring our deliberations, and according to Eva Schmidt (2023; 2024), incoherence provides us with right-kind reasons for suspending judgment. If right-kind reasons weren't normative reasons, then such defenses of the normativity of coherence wouldn't do. Any theorist of rationality will thus have an interest in the normativity of right-kind reasons, for any defense of the normativity of rationality, whether understood as reasons-responsiveness or as coherence, must appeal to the idea that rationality provides us with normative right-kind reasons.¹²

I conclude that, if right-kind reasons weren't normative, then neither of the two dominant approaches to rationality – as reasons-responsiveness and as coherence – would vindicate the normativity of rationality. Since the normativity of right-kind reasons can no longer be taken for granted, given recent meta-epistemological discussions, we need to make the normative force of right-kind reasons *intelligible*. That is, we need to consider the normative question about rationality as reasons-responsiveness: “Should we respond correctly to our reasons?”

I now present a main argument¹³ for doubts about the normativity of right-kind reasons that motivate this question while also defending it against the most intuitive objections (sections 3–4). I then discuss how drawing on specific debates in meta-epistemology can allow us to engage seriously yet critically with this argument (section 5).

¹²Of course, it could in principle be argued that coherence always provides us with wrong-kind reasons to be rational. But this is implausible because wrong-kind reasons paradigmatically indicate the *practical value* of an attitude – and holding coherent attitudes isn't always practically valuable.

¹³Other arguments concern the ontology of reasons for belief and the availability of non-normative conceptions of epistemic justification (see Glüer and Wikforss 2018). A full account of normative epistemic reasons must engage with these issues as well. I here put them aside just to keep the content of the paper manageable.

3. Motivating the doubts

I first discuss the argument against the normativity of epistemic reasons before generalizing it to all right-kind reasons in section 4. Here is an early statement from the epistemic instrumentalist literature on how *cases of trivial belief* cast doubt on the normativity of epistemic reasons:

Suppose, for example, that the subject matter is whether there is an even number of dust specks on S's desk. Let us also suppose that S has excellent evidence, and thus epistemic reason to believe in the sense defined, that there indeed is an even number of dust specks on his desk. In spite of this epistemic reason, it does not seem to be the case that S ought to form the belief that there is an even number of dust specks on his desk. It may be that S as a matter of fact cannot avoid forming that belief, since we are psychologically disposed to form beliefs that are supported by consciously considered evidence. But it is nonetheless not the case that S ought to form that belief. If S failed to form the belief, we wouldn't fault him or regard him as normatively worse off for that reason. (Steglich-Petersen 2011: 23)

The argument seems to run, roughly, as follows:

The Argument from Trivial Belief

- (1) Sometimes, S has decisive (accessible) epistemic reason¹⁴ to believe that p but S wouldn't be criticizable if they failed to believe that p.
- (2) If such cases as described in (1) are possible, then epistemic reasons aren't normative.
- (3) Thus, epistemic reasons aren't normative.¹⁵

The conclusion (3) means that epistemic reasons aren't normative *on their own*: they're normative only if one has a practical reason to form a true belief about p, i.e., if there's some practical "backup".¹⁶ This is precisely what radical pragmatists claim. There are various ways of replying to this argument. However, as I will show now, the common replies are unlikely to convince a pragmatist. My point is *not* that, if we're pragmatists, then we wouldn't be convinced by these replies. After all, what kind of argument could convince a committed pragmatist?¹⁷ Rather, my point is that the replies shouldn't even convince someone who is *inclined* toward pragmatism.

The first reply is to doubt (1) by arguing that S is criticizable for failing to form a belief in light of decisive epistemic reasons: sufficient evidence provides reasons for belief, and it can even create a *duty* to believe (see Simion 2024a; 2024b). We might

¹⁴I use 'decisive (accessible) epistemic reason to believe p' as meaning that you *ought epistemically* to believe p. In this premise, the argument is still neutral about whether the epistemic 'ought' is a normative kind of 'ought' (on the distinction between normative and non-normative 'ought's, see Broome 2013: 22–25).

¹⁵Related lines of argument are employed by Buckley (2022), Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018), Cowie (2014; 2019), Hazlett (2013), Mantel (2019), Maguire and Woods (2020), McCormick (2020), Papineau (2013), and Rinard (2022). Triviality cases are also employed to argue that epistemic normativity isn't *value-based* (Côté-Bouchard 2017). For a recent reply that epistemic norm compliance is *always good* (although epistemic normativity isn't *based* on value), see Kiesewetter (*forthcoming*). For a value-based view, see Wedgwood (2017; 2023).

¹⁶In later works, Steglich-Petersen reserves the notion of an epistemic reason for *normative* ones – i.e., for truth-indicators that are backed up by practical reasons for forming a true belief about whether p (Steglich-Petersen 2018; Steglich-Petersen and Skipper 2019; 2020). For ease of presentation, I stick to his earlier use.

¹⁷For an ambitious recent attempt, see Logins (2024).

further support this by appealing to recent accounts of epistemic blame to defend the idea that there is a sense in which we might fault S for failing to respond correctly to their epistemic reasons (Boult 2021; forthcoming a; Brown 2020; 2020a). If there are positive epistemic obligations, then we're normally criticizable for not believing p when our evidence sufficiently supports p, at least when we *consider* whether p or *attend* to whether p (Kiesewetter 2017: 184–185). It's not necessary for epistemic criticizability that there's a reason to form a true belief about p. This would allow us to say that S is, after all, criticizable for not forming a trivial belief.¹⁸

While I think that this strategy must be part of a promising overall reply to the argument from trivial belief, I don't think it's convincing without a specific theoretical backup (to which I return in section 5). Without such backup, a pragmatist may remain unconvinced.

The pragmatist can argue that any talk of positive epistemic obligations merely reflects the fact “that S's general psychological disposition did not make him form the belief” (Steglich-Petersen 2011: 22) but that “we would not regard S as having failed to do something he ought to have done” (ibid. 23). The proper functioning of our cognitive system might well involve that we believe p in response to sufficient evidence for p when we consider whether p. However, this need not give rise to a *normative* “ought” to believe. Indeed, functionalist accounts of epistemic normativity have been proposed to *doubt* the normativity of epistemic reasons (Olson 2018: 114–116; Papineau 2013). These views are therefore unlikely to convince someone with pragmatist inclinations that epistemic reasons are normative. What is lacking from these accounts is some deeper explanation of why a person is normatively at fault for improper functioning. Moreover, even if this view is further backed up by an argument that the person is *epistemically blameworthy* for improper functioning, the pragmatist can legitimately doubt whether such blame is directed *at the person*: it's more akin to “criticizing” an organ or sub-personal system for malfunctioning. Contrast blame, which paradigmatically comes as resentment or indignation. Such responses seem out of place in response to mere epistemic failings (see Piovarchy 2021; Smartt 2023). This is especially plausible when it comes to not forming *trivial* beliefs. Yet if we never seriously criticize people for distinctively epistemic mistakes, epistemic reasons don't seem to be normative.

I wish to emphasize that, ultimately, I think that there is a good reply to such skepticism about positive epistemic duties and the possibility of epistemic blame: I think that we can be genuinely blameworthy for improper functioning. However, my aim in this paper is to spell out a neglected challenge to the normativity of rationality, and what kind of response this challenge calls for. So I postpone my own reply for another occasion.¹⁹

Next, one might doubt (2). Why would the possibility of blameless trivial belief that is supported by excellent epistemic reasons imply that epistemic reasons aren't normative? One might look for other explanations why S is blameless that are compatible with the claim that epistemic reasons are genuinely normative reasons.

First, one might argue that there are only epistemic prohibitions, but no positive epistemic obligations. That is, if you lack sufficient epistemic reasons for believing p,

¹⁸See Hofmann (2023) for a reply along these lines to Buckley's (2022) critique of “epistemic minimalism” (of which the view sketched in the paragraph above is an instance). See Buckley (2024) for a reply to Hofmann.

¹⁹See Schmidt (forthcoming b) for a comprehensive reply. My main arguments are that we hold each other directly responsible for irrationality (Schmidt 2020a; 2020b), in particular for epistemic irrationality (2024 a; forthcoming a; forthcoming c), and that our practice of apology and forgiveness implies genuine moral blameworthiness for holding irrational attitudes that we couldn't reasonably avoid by prior actions and omissions (Schmidt 2024b).

then you aren't permitted to believe that *p*. This is compatible with saying that there are *permissions* to believe what is sufficiently supported by epistemic reasons, but no obligations to hold specific beliefs. Indeed, it seems that we don't have an obligation to *clutter our minds* with all of the trivial implications of our beliefs that are well-supported by epistemic reasons (Harman 1986: 12). In response to this, Steglich-Petersen (2018) himself suggests a permissivist view: as long as *p* is a wholly trivial issue, there's no obligation to believe *p*, *even if we consider whether p*; nevertheless, we're still prohibited from holding beliefs that aren't evidentially backed.

However, appealing to permissivism in this way again doesn't amount to a satisfactory defense of the normativity of epistemic reasons. This is because there are also trivial cases of *holding a belief without sufficient evidence*. Suppose you have sufficient evidence about the latest celebrity gossip, but you nevertheless jump to the conclusion that, say, Leonardo DiCaprio was seen in Santa Monica yesterday. Let's stipulate that this belief lacks sufficient evidential support and that holding this belief would never cause any problems (e.g., you will never tell anyone about it, and it will never come in handy for, say, solving a crime). From a pragmatist point of view, saying that such a trivial belief is prohibited is *just as implausible as* saying that lacking a trivial belief that is sufficiently supported by evidence is prohibited. For, again, the pragmatist will ask: what would be the point of criticism or blame for holding a belief that we know has no practical disvalue or bad consequences whatsoever? In this scenario, permissivism implies an epistemic prohibition. Yet the pragmatist's intuition that one isn't criticizable for violating this prohibition remains in place. So permissivism, on its own, isn't a satisfying reply to our challenge: it rightly doesn't convince someone with pragmatist inclinations.

Second, we might reject (2) by saying that *S* is *excused* for not responding correctly to their epistemic reasons in trivial cases. That is, an excusing factor explains *S*'s blamelessness, but *S* still failed to respond correctly to normative epistemic reasons. However, we might wonder why *S* would be excused. Is it because *S*'s (lack of) belief has no bad practical consequences? If this is so, then wrong-kind reasons would be relevant for epistemically excusing a person for belief. This kind of excuse would be quite different from, say, being excused due to non-culpable ignorance, which is the common kind of epistemic excuse in externalist accounts of epistemic justification (Littlejohn [forthcoming](#); Williamson [forthcoming](#)). Introducing this type of epistemic excuse would thus require substantial argument. Moreover, why should the fact that a (lack of) belief isn't *practically* bad count as an *epistemic* excuse? More intuitively, the absence of wrong-kind reasons for complying with epistemic norms affects whether you're normatively obligated or prohibited to believe in the first place, rather than providing an excuse.

Third, we could try to preserve the normativity of right-kind reasons by retreating to a view that merely endorses the *pro tanto* normativity of rationality. This would commit one to the more moderate pragmatist position mentioned in section 2 according to which both right- and wrong-kind reasons determine what one ought to believe. However, it is difficult to see how this could help in replying to Steglich-Petersen's case, given that there aren't any wrong-kind reasons against belief and decisive right-kind reasons in favor. It seems that, epistemically, *S* ought to believe that the number of dust specks is even – it is just that this epistemic “ought” is normatively insignificant if there is no wrong-kind reason to be rational. It could be argued that the epistemic demand to believe that *p* in trivial cases is just a *pro tanto* normative epistemic demand that is *very easily* outweighed by practical reasons. However, as Charles Côté-Bouchard and Clayton Littlejohn (2018: 162–163) have pointed out, an analogous argument could be made about the rules of etiquette in cases where there's no prudential or moral reason to comply with etiquette. Yet such an argument would hardly convince someone who

doubts whether etiquette by itself provides us with normative reasons. So in the present dialectical context, the argument wouldn't amount to a satisfactory response to the radical pragmatist.

Finally, one might doubt (2) by saying that it implausibly imposes a condition on genuine normativity from the practical domain which just doesn't apply in the epistemic domain.²⁰ On such a view, blame and personal criticism are at home in ethics, but not in epistemology. Again, such a reply shouldn't yet convince the pragmatist. For they take prudential and moral reasons to be paradigmatic reasons with genuine normative significance. Substantial disanalogies between practical reasons and epistemic reasons, such as the impossibility of personal epistemic criticism or blame, would call into doubt whether epistemic reasons are normative. A reply that is helpful *dialectically* must instead defend important analogies between epistemic and practical reasons. This would allow one to defeat the pragmatist at their own game, as it were. Alternatively, one might challenge the assumption that practical reasons are paradigmatic cases of normative reasons. The difficulty with this reply, however, is that it just rejects the pragmatist's starting point. It is therefore unlikely to meet the pragmatist's concerns.²¹

It's not feasible to discuss all possible replies to Steglich-Petersen's argument. There surely is an intuition that subjects in trivial belief cases aren't criticizable. As Susanne Mantel puts it, they do not "deserve the interesting kind of criticism that is warranted when they fail to conform to substantially normative reasons" (Mantel 2019: 223). Yet *if* there is some appropriate connection between criticizability or blameworthiness and normative reasons, then it follows from such cases that epistemic reasons aren't normative. We might try to reply to this argument by weakening the link between criticizability and normative reasons – say, by committing to permissivism, allowing for certain kinds of epistemic excuses, endorsing a weighing account, or by rejecting parallels to practical reasons. Yet none of these strategies seems very promising within the current dialectic. Each of them fails to challenge the pragmatist at their own game. There might be other strategies that I am unaware of. What matters here is that such appeals to criticizability are intuitively powerful to motivate our challenge insofar as epistemologists who deny the normativity of epistemic reasons *and* those who defend it *both* support their views by appealing to personal criticizability.²²

Hille Paakkunainen (2018) has argued that doubts about the normativity of epistemic reasons aren't well-motivated: any argument against the normativity of epistemic reasons must employ a dubious distinction between normative reasons and 'genuinely' normative reasons. However, the challenge I spell out here need not assume such a distinction. First, it could be read as arguing that epistemic reasons aren't normative at all, thus committing to nihilism about normative epistemic reasons (see footnote 10).

²⁰I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this possible reply.

²¹Epistemic reasons might be normative *in a different sense* than practical reasons. But if so, then this should be reflected in the different ways we hold each other accountable for not responding correctly to the different kinds of reasons (see Kauppinen 2018; 2023). This is compatible with my claim that a response to the pragmatist that is dialectically fruitful must start off with practical reasons as the paradigmatic case for normative reasons.

²²For defenders' statements of a connection between criticizability and the normativity of (epistemic) reasons, see, e.g., Boulton (forthcoming a: ch. 1.4), Kauppinen (2018; 2023), Kelly (2003: 628), Kiesewetter (2017: ch. 2), Paakkunainen (2018: 135), and for deniers' statements, see, next to Steglich-Petersen's and Mantel's statements quoted above, esp. Côté-Bouchard and Littlejohn (2018: 155–157), Grimm (2009: 253–255), McCormick (2020), Rinard (2022: 7), as well as Maguire and Woods's (2020) distinction between mere "operative criticizability" that is compatible with failing to do what one (authoritatively) ought to have done (as when one makes a wrong chess move) and "robust criticizability" that presupposes, in their terminology, the violation of decisive 'authoritatively normative' reasons.

According to the radical pragmatist view, the overall verdict of epistemic reasons or epistemic rationality is at best like the verdict of game rules: as long as I have some practical reasons to play proper chess, the rules of chess provide me with normative reasons to move the pawn only in certain ways; but in the absence of a practical reason to engage in the game, the rules of the game don't provide me with normative reasons at all. All normative reasons are practical, on such a view.²³

Furthermore, Paakkunainen herself appeals to the idea that one is *criticizable* and *fails as an epistemic agent* if one doesn't respond correctly to one's epistemic reasons in her reply to Steglich-Petersen's trivial belief case (cf. *ibid.* 135). She thus grants some connection between personal criticizability and normative reasons. This makes her view vulnerable to Steglich-Petersen's argument. Thus, any argument that shows that we aren't criticizable (*in the sense relevant to identifying normative reasons*) in virtue of failing to respond correctly to our epistemic reasons is a serious threat to the very idea of epistemic normativity.²⁴

What my discussion shows is that Steglich-Petersen's argument has some initial plausibility, and so should be taken seriously, at least if one doesn't yet assume a full-blown theory about the normativity of epistemic reasons. I conclude that doubts about the normativity of epistemic reasons are well-motivated and call for a comprehensive reply.

4. Generalizing these doubts

In this section, I argue that our challenge can be generalized to right-kind reasons for desires, emotions, and intentions. If I am right, then we cannot take the normativity of right-kind reasons for granted in defending the normativity of rationality. Rather, we need an account of blameworthiness and criticizability for not responding correctly to right-kind reasons. My argument is that there are cases analogous to those of trivial belief when it comes to other attitudes that give rise to an argument analogous to the argument from trivial belief.

Consider, first, desires. There is some initial difficulty in finding cases of wholly trivial desires. My desire to scratch my neck because it is itching is not clearly a desire that does not matter. The fact that my neck is itching can be an excellent reason both of the right kind *and* of the wrong kind to desire to scratch my neck. This is because the desire to scratch is both directed at a desirable action *and* might itself have the good consequence that I scratch my neck, thereby getting rid of an unpleasant sensation of itching. One

²³Kiesewetter (2022) argues that such nihilism about epistemic reasons is too revisionist, mainly because it cannot make our ordinary talk about epistemic reasons or evidence as "reasons" intelligible. However, this is too quick. In particular, Steglich-Petersen and Skipper (2020) have argued that our talk about epistemic reasons is 'elliptical' in that we don't mention that *normative* epistemic reason must be backed up by practical considerations, which is the case most of the time insofar as we most of the time have a reason to aim at forming true beliefs.

²⁴As an anonymous reviewer has pointed out, I have largely focused on the negative side of criticism and blame, rather than on positive appraisals of epistemic conduct. Defenders of the normativity of epistemic reasons could argue that it would be *rational* or *fitting* to believe that there's an even number of dust specks on the desk, which indicates that the epistemic reasons provide some normative support: believing *p* is at least *permissible*. However, a likely reply by the pragmatist is that these evaluations just reflect that we *cannot normally avoid* forming beliefs on the basis of our perceived evidence, since forming beliefs on the basis of sufficient evidence is part of our cognitive system's *function* (Olson 2018; Papineau 2013): due to this function, we're disposed to form beliefs in this way, and so we're normally *blameless* for responding correctly to our epistemic reasons; but we aren't *praiseworthy*. See my discussion at the beginning of section 3 on functionalist accounts of epistemic normativity.

might think that it *always* matters whether I have desires that are supported by right-kind reasons because desires with desirable content help us to achieve what is desirable. It would follow that we cannot construct a case of a trivial desire as we have constructed cases of trivial belief, and thus right-kind reasons for desire might more plausibly be genuinely normative reasons. For it seems that we cannot formulate the same challenge for the rationality of desire as we can formulate for the rationality of belief.

However, note first there are clearly *counterproductive yet rational* desires. Suppose that your itching neck provides you with a reason to desire to scratch your neck (it would be pleasant for a moment), but that you should resist acting on this desire because scratching would just make the itching worse in the long run. Although your desire to scratch is rational (after all, the momentary pleasure *is* a good consequence of scratching your neck), it might be rational for you *to desire not to desire* to scratch your neck. It could even be rational *to get rid of this desire* by telling yourself (falsely) that momentary pleasure is *completely* worthless. Would you be blameworthy if you were successful in getting rid of the desire? Intuitively, it does not seem so. And yet your right-kind reasons to desire to scratch your neck were decisive: the desire is a fitting response to the momentary pleasure of scratching. Therefore, it seems that right-kind reasons for desire are normatively irrelevant when there are wrong-kind reasons not to have the desire. Thus, even if there were no truly trivial desires, we could still doubt the normativity of right-kind reasons for desire by constructing conflict cases.

Furthermore, there *are* truly trivial desires – desires that do not matter *at all* – which are supported by right-kind reasons for desire. Suppose that X is desirable but that what you desire is *impossible*. In such a case, your right-kind reasons are still decisive for desiring X. Suppose, for example, that you know that it is desirable to walk on Pluto: you could enjoy an awesome otherworldly landscape while walking there. Yet, for some reason, you do not desire to walk on Pluto. Are you blameworthy for lacking this desire? After all, you *cannot* walk on Pluto. What, then, is the point of desiring it? Not desiring it might rob you of the pleasure of imagining how nice it is to walk there. But we might well stipulate that you have better things to do than engaging in such imaginative projects, or that they just aren't fun for you. In cases where your desire does not have any benefit, it is unclear why anyone should regard you as criticizable for lacking the desire. Thus, intuitively, right-kind reasons for desire don't seem to matter independently of a practical reason to pursue desiring what is supported by right-kind reasons (that is, desiring what you know to be desirable). This is analogous to the challenge for the normativity of epistemic reasons from the last section, where it seemed that epistemic reasons do not matter independently of a practical reason to comply with one's epistemic reasons.

Next, consider intentions. Initially, we face a similar difficulty as we did with desires. The intention to brush your teeth this morning is not wholly trivial: without it, you would not have brushed your teeth. Similarly, my intention to scratch my neck because it is itching matters to some degree (assuming in this case that scratching isn't bad in the long run, but it is rather also what I should do all things considered). I might plausibly be prudentially criticizable for not having such intentions. It thus might seem that right-kind reasons for intention always matter, and so there are no trivial cases when it comes to intention: right-kind reasons for intention always indicate that having the intention contributes to performing a good action.

To get a truly trivial intention into focus, consider an action that you ought to perform *in the future*. Suppose that attending a conference *in a year* would be the right action for you. The reasons for attending might include, for example, the opportunity for rich academic exchange, for presenting your ideas, and for making important contacts. It is rational for you to intend *now* to attend the conference *in a year*. Yet there is *nothing*

lost if you do not yet intend to go to the conference. You might be *akratic* right now: you know you should attend the conference, but you do not intend to attend. However, it is still a year until the conference takes place, and thus another year until it *matters* whether you intend to attend the conference. You have plenty of time to overcome this akrasia. Since it does not yet matter whether you intend to attend the conference, it seems that you are not blameworthy for being akratic. That is, you are not blameworthy for not intending what you ought to do – that is, for not having an intention that seems to be decisively supported by right-kind reasons. Again, it seems, intuitively, that the right-kind reasons for intention only matter if there is some wrong-kind reason to comply with the right-kind reasons – which is often absent in the case of future-directed intentions.

Is it plausible that you have decisive right-kind reasons for intending to attend the conference that only takes place in a year? Kieseewetter (2017: 190–192) argues that your right-kind reasons are not decisive in this case. He argues that you do not *yet* have decisive right-kind reasons to intend to attend the conference. Rather, intending to attend *becomes* decisively supported by right-kind reasons as soon as you *must* intend to attend in order to ensure that you *will* attend. At some point, you must form an intention, or else you won't attend the conference.

The main problem with Kieseewetter's view is that it doesn't explain why the intention suddenly becomes decisively supported by right-kind reasons when you must intend in order to perform the right action. Let us assume that, as the conference draws nearer, and you need to take steps to ensure that you attend, nothing relevant to the deontic status of your *attending* has changed. *No further reasons to attend have appeared on the horizon*. Nevertheless, you now have, according to Kieseewetter, decisive right-kind reasons to intend to attend the conference. You would be blameworthy if you fail to intend this, now that you must. But how can right-kind reasons *become* decisive while remaining the same set of reasons? Kieseewetter's view implicitly assumes that right-kind reasons for intention gain their normative force only when there is some wrong-kind reason to comply with them – here, the wrong-kind reason that you must form an intention to ensure that you attend. This amounts to granting that right-kind reasons for intention have no such force *on their own*. I thus conclude, *pace* Kieseewetter, that the future-intention case is analogous to the trivial belief case in relevant ways.

Furthermore, there are conflicts between right-kind and wrong-kind reasons for intention. Gregory S. Kavka's (1983) toxin puzzle is such a case that involves a beneficial intention that lacks support by right-kind reasons. Conversely, there are also cases in which it would be bad to intend to do something, but where doing it *is* decisively supported by right-kind reasons. For instance, you might have decisive reason to go to the beach tomorrow. But suppose that, if today you intend to go to the beach tomorrow, then you will suffer immensely. This doesn't affect your reasons to go to the beach tomorrow, since you won't suffer in virtue of going there, but rather in virtue of your intention today. You can safely adopt the intention only tomorrow (if you can) and thereby avoid the harm today. Plausibly, you should actively *ignore* your right-kind reasons for intention when you ask what you ought to intend today.

Here the normative import of the right-kind reasons for intention is intuitively unclear. If there are no wrong-kind reasons to comply with your right-kind reasons, then right-kind reasons seem to be normatively insignificant. In some cases, there might still be some wrong-kind reasons to comply with your right-kind reasons, but these will often be outweighed by the wrong-kind reasons against compliance. Again, the right-kind reasons don't seem to have any normative significance independently of the wrong-kind reasons to comply with the right-kind reasons. The challenge for the normativity of

epistemic rationality seems to carry over to the normativity of the rationality of desire and intention.

Finally, consider cases of various emotions. There can be conflicts between right-kind and wrong-kind reasons for emotion. Sometimes fearing a danger can be rational but counterproductive. In these cases, it seems that rationality is normatively relevant only insofar as there is something good about being rational. If there is nothing good about being rational – say, one’s rational fear would not help one to avoid the danger, and it is rather just disturbing and distracting – then it seems that the mere fact that your fear would be rational does not have any normative significance in the situation at hand. Again, it seems that the rationality of fear is only normative if there is a wrong-kind reason to fear rationally.

Things are a bit trickier with emotions that imply pleasure, like happiness. Although here conflict cases can arise (e.g., when rationally feeling happy is counterproductive), it is hard to see how feeling happy can lack *any* support by wrong-kind reasons, thus being truly trivial happiness. It seems that one always has a wrong-kind reason to (cause oneself to) feel happy because feeling happy is pleasurable. However, we might imagine a person who is in a depressed mood. For this person, it is *impossible* to make themselves feel happy. If you only have a normative reason to do something if you *can* do it, then this person has no normative reason to make themselves feel happy – that is, they don’t have any wrong-kind reason to (cause themselves to) be happy. Now suppose that they experience a joyful event that rationally requires them to feel happy. In this case, it seems the person has decisive reasons of the right kind to be happy without having any wrong-kind reason to (cause themselves to) be happy. Again, it seems that the person is blameless. Note that this is not because the person is exempted from responsibility. A depressed mood does not exempt you from rational requirements to be happy in the face of happy events (only depression would). Rather, the person seems blameless because they have no wrong-kind reason to make themselves happy. Again, right-kind reasons seem to be normatively irrelevant in the absence of a wrong-kind reason to comply with them.

I have argued that there are cases of desires, intentions, and emotions that are structurally analogous to cases of trivial belief or at least analogous to conflict cases: there can be decisive right-kind reasons for attitudes that are not favored by any wrong-kind reasons (trivial attitude cases), and there can be cases in which the right-kind reasons for an attitude seem to be rendered normatively irrelevant by decisive wrong-kind reasons not to comply with them (counterproductive rational attitudes). Thus, the relevant cases can be generalized to all attitudes, and every time it seems that only the wrong-kind reasons do the normative work, while the right-kind reasons are normatively irrelevant by themselves.

Since a mere failure to comply with right-kind reasons for attitudes doesn’t seem to make a person blameworthy or personally criticizable in the way we would expect from normative reasons, they don’t seem to be normative reasons. That is, if rationality was normative, then subjects would often be blameworthy or personally criticizable when they lack trivial attitudes that are supported by decisive right-kind reasons, and when these subjects comply with their wrong-kind reasons but not with their decisive right-kind reasons in conflict cases. The challenge assumes a connection between normative reasons and blameworthiness:

Normativity and Blameworthiness (NB). Reasons of kind K are normative reasons only if we can be blameworthy or personally criticizable merely in virtue of failing to respond correctly to decisive reasons of kind K (which we possess, or which are available, or accessible).

(NB) is compatible with the view that right-kind reasons aren't normative although we are *often* blameworthy when we don't respond correctly to them. This blameworthiness would then just derive from not complying with wrong-kind reasons that decisively favor compliance with right-kind reasons in these cases (cf. Kauppinen 2023: 141). In such cases, one wouldn't be blameworthy *merely* for not responding correctly to right-kind reasons. Cases of trivial and counterproductive attitudes seem to show that we cannot be blameworthy *merely* for violating the requirements of rationality. It seems false that we should comply with rational requirements for their own sake. Rather, it seems that we should only comply with them if there is some wrong-kind (or practical) reason to (ensure that we) comply with them.²⁵

Thus, the challenge for the normativity of rationality is a challenge not only for the epistemic rationality of belief but also for the rationality of attitudes more generally. I will now return to the question of what a satisfactory reply to this challenge would involve.

5. How to reply?

Replying to the challenge for the normativity of rationality spelled out in this paper is beyond its scope. However, I wish to point out which debates we must lead for developing such a reply. This will allow us to see how theorists of rationality can engage in a fruitful exchange with pragmatists, and how recent debates must develop to inform the theory of rationality.

Most importantly, we might be able to defend the normativity of rationality against the radical pragmatist's challenge by appealing to the possibility of *blameworthiness or criticizability for mere rational failure*. This would require us to spell out how we can be blameworthy when we hold trivial and practically beneficial attitudes that are nevertheless irrational. Blameworthiness for a mere rational failure in such cases would plausibly reveal the normativity of right-kind reasons, and thus give us a more complete account of the normativity of rationality. Theorists of rationality can here appeal to the literature on epistemic blame (Boult 2021; [forthcoming a](#); Brown 2020; 2020a; Schmidt 2024a; [forthcoming a](#)) and epistemic accountability (Kauppinen 2018) in order to develop a more general notion of *blameworthiness for irrationality*. It could already be sufficient to argue that a serious kind of *personal criticism* is appropriate for distinctively rational mistakes, if the label "blame" is meant to be reserved for reactions like resentment and indignation. For instance, it might be sufficient to argue, in the spirit of the works of Boult and Kauppinen, that we are appropriate targets of *reducing epistemic trust* and other *modifications of our epistemic relationships* in virtue of our failures to respond correctly to epistemic reasons (but see Smartt 2023 for criticism of the view).

²⁵There are other plausible ways of spelling out the connection between criticizability and normative reasons besides (NB). Boult ([forthcoming a](#): ch. 1.4) suggests a principle according to which one is blameworthy for violating norms with genuine normative significance whenever one isn't exempted or excused. Kauppinen (2023) employs a principle that links 'authoritative' normative domains (according to him, domains like 'the epistemic' or 'the moral') to criticism by saying that the criticism for violating normative demands is fitting, and this fittingness cannot in each case be explained by a normative 'backup' from other normative domains. Both principles can motivate the challenge at issue. I prefer (NB) since it's weaker and so less controversial: it merely requires the *possibility* of criticizability for *mere* failures of reasons-responsiveness for right-kind reasons to be normative. To defend the relevant possibility, the most straightforward strategy is to argue that one can be criticizable in cases of trivial attitudes and cases of beneficial irrational attitudes. For more discussion of (NB) or related principles, see my (2020 a: 158–62), (2024a: 9–13), ([forthcoming a](#): section 3), and ([forthcoming b](#): ch. 4).

Analogously, other forms of reducing trust and relationship modification could be appropriate when we hold trivial or practically beneficial desires, intentions, and emotions because they lack sufficient support by right-kind reasons, even though we might not deserve strong *moral* reactions for such distinctively *rational* mistakes. For instance, there arguably is a sense in which the interpersonal relationship to the emotionally irrational is impaired. Those who don't feel fear when they face danger will sometimes be *reckless*, and so they don't make good partners for adventures; those who don't feel happy at joyous events might make bad friends in good times; those who don't love someone who is loveable don't make good romantic partners; and so on. Such platitudes are, of course, at best starting points for developing *an account of rational criticizability*, which must extend to govern all kinds of attitudes. Intuitions against the possibility of epistemic blame and, more generally, against the possibility of blame for irrational attitudes, are what drives pragmatist doubts about the normativity of rationality. Therefore, a dialectically helpful response to the pragmatist involves an account of personal criticizability or blame for irrational attitudes. Here substantial work is required to develop accounts of epistemic accountability into broader accounts of *rational* accountability.²⁶

Without such an account, appeals to criticizability that are already common in the debate could backfire against the normativist about rationality. To see how, consider Kiesewetter's (2017: ch. 2) argument that the kind of *personal criticizability* implied by ascriptions of irrationality can only be captured by assuming that one has violated decisive normative reasons. Other authors also point out that the criticizability of irrationality motivates the intuition that rationality is normative (see Kauppinen 2021: 540–542; Lord 2018: 4; Parfit 2011: 123; Schmidt 2020b; Way 2009: 1). In light of the present challenge, however, these arguments wouldn't establish that rationality implies responding correctly to *right-kind* reasons. They would only establish that rationality implies responding correctly to *normative* reasons. If right-kind reasons weren't normative, then the only candidates for such normative reasons would be *wrong-kind* reasons for attitudes. Appeals to criticizability would then establish that rationality implies responding correctly to *wrong-kind* reasons. Far from allowing us to defend the normativity of right-kind reasons, these arguments suggest a radical pragmatist account of rationality, as endorsed by Susanna Rinard (2017; 2022). Thus, the traditional arguments from criticizability threaten to backfire and serve to cast further doubt on the normativity of rationality. To avoid such backfiring, they must be supplemented by an account of the kind of personal criticism or blame that is legitimate if we fail to comply with right-kind reasons for attitudes.

Furthermore, a full reply to the challenge for the normativity of right-kind reasons will involve an account of the *source of this normativity*. In epistemology, there is a long-standing debate about why epistemic norms are *authoritative*, or why we ought, in some normatively significant sense of "ought," to comply with epistemic norms and reasons. Accounts roughly divide into *constitutivist accounts*, which argue that the nature of belief and theoretical reasoning give rise to an authoritative epistemic "ought," and *instrumentalist accounts*, which argue that epistemic normativity derives instead from our shared epistemic interests or goals.²⁷

²⁶For a starting point, see my (2024b; forthcoming b: ch. 7), where I present an argument that rational mistakes *can* sometimes warrant moral blame since we engage in practices of apology and forgiveness if rational mistakes cause moral harm.

²⁷For traditional statements of constitutivism, see Wedgwood (2002) and Shah (2003). For recent defenses, see Horst (2022) and Sylvan (2020). For a traditional statement of epistemic instrumentalism, see Kornblith (1993). For recent discussions, see Buckley (2020), Côté-Bouchard (2015), and Sharadin (2022).

More recently, *social epistemological accounts* about the foundations of epistemic normativity are on the rise. They claim, roughly, that epistemic norms have a distinctive kind of normative authority because we depend on each other in our intellectual endeavors, and so we have reason to uphold a valuable practice of epistemic accountability in which we also criticize trivial or practically beneficial beliefs that are epistemically irrational.²⁸

These social accounts could be helpful for replying to the neglected pragmatist challenge for the normativity of rationality – which also constitutes an argument in favor of these views. For they allow us to draw an overall picture of epistemic normativity that reveals how distinctively epistemic norms *matter* for our lives in communities more broadly. Rather than relying on some unconditional value of compliance with epistemic norms in each particular case, social accounts instead highlight the value of a *social epistemic practice* in which we value truth unconditionally (cf. Williams 2002). My suggestion is that a full account the normativity of right-kind reasons requires similar accounts about *the source of the normativity of right-kind reasons more generally*. A social direction might be helpful here as well.

At the moment, we lack both an account of the kind of personal criticism and blame that is appropriate when we fail to comply with right-kind reasons for attitudes, and an account of the source of the normative authority that could make it intelligible why we (should) adhere to a social practice of holding each other accountable for (non-)compliance with right-kind reasons for attitudes. That is, we lack a full account of why we should respond correctly to our reasons. However, we are not without guidance: there is excellent work in epistemology about distinctively epistemic kinds of blame and accountability, as well as on the sources of epistemic normativity. Theorists of rationality must engage in generalized versions of these debates in meta-epistemology. On the other side, epistemologists must make their insightful work fruitful for thinking about norms for attitudes more broadly. This requires them to extend their perspective to our whole mental lives. While tradition has consigned separate spaces to epistemologists and ethicists, it is now time for a broader study of mental normativity in all its facets.²⁹

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²⁸Views along these lines are endorsed by Boulton (forthcoming b), Chrisman (2022), Dyke (2021), Osborne (2021), Wei (2024), Hannon and Woodard (forthcoming), and also suggested by Piovarchy’s (2021) account of epistemic blame as serving to uphold a generally valuable practice of caring about epistemic norm compliance.

²⁹Some recent interesting steps in this direction (taken by philosophers partly or even mainly working in epistemology) include, for instance, by Basu (2022; 2023a; 2023b), Hieronymi (ms), Lasonen-Aarnio (forthcoming), Maguire (2018), McCormick (2017; 2022), Marušić (2015; 2022), and McHugh and Way (2022). See also the contributions in Schmidt and Ernst (2020) and my book on the ethics of mind (Schmidt forthcoming b).

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