

Clutter Avoidance, the Epistemic Ought, and the Unity of Normativity

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Abstract: On a widely held view, we ought to perform an action just in case and because it is the one most strongly supported by reasons. When coupled with the thought that normativity is unified, this view commits us to the claim that we ought to adopt a doxastic attitude just in case and because it is the one most strongly supported by reasons. The problem, it has been said, is that this has implausible implications: that if one ought to believe *p*, one ought to believe any of the countless trivialities entailed by *p*. I argue that existing approaches to solving this problem fail and propose my own solution. It consists in arguing that, on said view of the epistemic ought, we ought to believe trivialities only once we have considered them. More broadly, the paper explains why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities while nonetheless sometimes being required to believe them. It thereby highlights an underappreciated connection between norms of inquiry and norms of belief, as well as a way in which evidence for *p* can fail to constitute a reason to believe *p*.

Keywords: Clutter Avoidance, Unity of Normativity, Balancing View, Epistemic Ought, Evidence, Reasons

1. Introduction

Many philosophers working on practical normativity endorse the

Balancing View of the Practical Ought (BVP) You practically ought to perform an action φ just in case, and because, for any action μ that is a relevant alternative to φ , the practical reasons for φ outweigh the practical reasons for μ .¹

At the same time, a popular thought in the theory of normativity is:

Unity of Normativity We can provide unified accounts of normative notions that pertain to both the practical and the epistemic domain.²

‘Ought’ is such a normative notion, one pertaining to both the practical and the epistemic domain. Just as there are things we practically ought to do, it seems plausible that there are propositions we epistemically ought to believe: that bachelors are unmarried, that the earth is not flat, that $1+1=2$, etc. So, endorsing BVP and Unity of Normativity commits us to the

Balancing View of the Epistemic Ought (BVE) You epistemically ought to have a doxastic attitude X just in case, and because, for any doxastic attitude Y that is a relevant alternative to X , the epistemic reasons for X outweigh the epistemic reasons for Y .³

BVE allows for a unified picture of an important normative notion. However, this view has been said to face a serious problem, as it appears to stand in tension with

¹ Among many others, see, e.g., Parfit (2011), McHugh and Way (2022), and Schmidt (2024).

² For authors who seem to endorse this claim, see, e.g., Cuneo (2007), Raz (2011: ch. 5), and Schroeder (2021).

³ The ‘relevant alternatives’ to believing p are commonly taken to be believing not- p and withholding belief about p . Proponents of BVE are Schroeder (2015), and McHugh and Way (2022).

Clutter Avoidance One ought not clutter one's mind by believing countless trivialities.⁴

There are countless trivialities for which we have decisive evidence, and so on the face of it, countless trivialities that we have most epistemic reason to believe. But if this is so, BVE entails that there are countless trivialities we ought to believe, and in turn, that we ought to clutter our minds with these trivialities. Call this the *Problem of Clutter*.⁵ While this problem specifically plagues proponents of BVE, it also raises more general questions about the normative principles governing our belief-formation: despite the truth of Clutter Avoidance, there are situations in which it seems we ought to believe trivialities, for example when we are asked whether they hold (Harman 1986: 15). Thus, even those who reject BVE will have to provide an explanation for why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities while nonetheless being required to believe them under certain circumstances.

In this paper, I will tackle both these issues: I will advance a solution to the Problem of Clutter for BVE, and I will thereby elucidate why, independently of BVE, we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them. This will bring out interesting analogies between practical and epistemic normativity, emphasize an underappreciated connection between norms of inquiry and norms of belief, and highlight a way in which evidence for *p* can fail to constitute a reason to believe *p*.

⁴ This principle goes back to Harman (1986: 12). For other authors who are inclined to accept it, see, e.g., Christensen (1994) and Friedman (2018). For authors who think that a clutter-avoidance norm is best understood as governing inquiry rather than belief, see Balcerak Jackson *et al.* (2022).

⁵ For authors who have identified and discussed the Problem of Clutter for BVE see, e.g., Schroeder (2015: 163, 165–66), and McHugh and Way (2022: 167–69).

After introducing the Problem of Clutter in greater detail (§2), I will argue that existing approaches to solving this problem are unsatisfying (§3). Then, I will advance my own solution and anticipate potential objections (§4).

2. The Problem of Clutter

Since your reasons for believing that bachelors are unmarried outweigh your reasons for disbelieving this proposition, as well as your reasons for withholding belief about it, on BVE, you ought to believe that

P: Bachelors are unmarried.

So far, so good. But note that there are countless propositions entailed by *P*. Many of these are uninteresting trivialities such as

Q: Bachelors are unmarried *or* the moon is made of cheese.

Since we have decisive evidence for *P*, and *P* entails *Q*, we also have decisive evidence for *Q*. Moreover, evidence for a proposition is, *prima facie*, a reason to believe this proposition. So, the balance of reasons seems to be the same with regards to believing *Q* than with regards to believing *P*, which would entail that on BVE we also ought to believe *Q* (McHugh and Way 2022). However, we are limited beings who should spend their cognitive resources on interesting propositions, rather than on uninteresting trivialities such as *Q*. Most of us do not believe *Q*, at least not explicitly, and we would not want to say that we thereby commit a rational mistake or display an epistemically bad behaviour. The claim that we ought to believe *Q* is thus highly counterintuitive.

To give a more precise formulation of the Problem of Clutter, we need to clarify two further things: first, the kind of belief to which this problem applies; second, the normative perspective(s) from which we ought not clutter our minds with trivialities. The kind of belief to which the Problem of Clutter applies is the kind of belief the acquisition of which costs cognitive resources and that most of us do not have with respect to propositions like *Q*. To see what kind of belief this is, we must distinguish between *explicit* and *implicit* beliefs. Explicitly believing a proposition involves having a mental representation of that proposition, and one implicitly believes a proposition just when it is swiftly derivable from the propositions we explicitly believe (Harman 1986; Dennett 1987).⁶ Implicit beliefs do not cost us cognitive resources beyond the ones we've spent for the acquisition of our explicit beliefs, and most of us implicitly believe propositions like *Q*, since these are swiftly derivable from ones most of us explicitly believe, such as *P*. The problem under consideration is thus a problem regarding what we ought to *explicitly* believe: it is having a mental representation which costs us cognitive resources, and which most of us do not have with respect to propositions like *Q*.⁷

The normative perspectives from which we ought not clutter our minds by explicitly believing countless trivialities are both the practical and the epistemic one. Cluttering our minds with trivialities will inhibit the fulfilment of our practical aims, as time spent on considering trivialities detracts from relationships, career goals, etc. It will also inhibit the realization of our purely epistemic aims: as *limited beings*, we should rather spend our cognitive resources on propositions that enhance our understanding of the world. Now, even though Clutter Avoidance seems to hold both from the practical

⁶ The distinction between explicit and implicit beliefs differs from other distinctions between kinds of beliefs: explicit beliefs can be dispositional or occurrent, conscious or unconscious, etc.

⁷ Note that we cannot simply dissolve the Problem of Clutter by reading every occurrence of 'belief' in BVE as 'explicit-or-implicit belief'. Formulating BVE in such a disjunctive way would only give us the conditions under which we ought to explicitly *or* implicitly believe a proposition. What we want, however, is an account giving us the conditions under which we ought to *explicitly* believe a proposition, full stop. For epistemic deliberation is about what to explicitly believe, and so these are the kind of beliefs to which ought- and reason-norms apply.

and the epistemic perspective, it is the purely epistemic perspective that is central to the Problem of Clutter for BVE, since the latter is conceived as an account of what we ought to believe from the point of view of epistemic normativity. In sum, the Problem of Clutter can be summarized as follows:

Problem of Clutter: It seems that any evidence for P is a reason to believe P . And any evidence for P is also evidence for the propositions entailed by P . Thus, it seems that according to BVE, if one ought to explicitly believe P , then one ought to explicitly believe any of the propositions entailed by P . This would mean that on BVE we ought to clutter our minds by believing countless trivialities, which is counterintuitive, even from a purely epistemic point of view.

One easy way to avoid this problem, of course, is to reject BVE. But, for one thing, given the plausibility of BVP, doing so would come at the cost of rejecting Unity of Normativity. Solving the Problem of Clutter instead of avoiding it would allow us to hold onto a unified explanation of ought in terms of reasons, which is an aim worth pursuing. For another, there is still the question of why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them, for example when we are asked whether they hold. This calls for an explanation, even for those who reject BVE.

3. Why existing approaches are unsatisfying

In principle, there are two general routes one could take to solve the Problem of Clutter: first, one could argue that despite initial appearance to the contrary, BVE does *not* entail that if one ought to believe P , one ought to believe every pointless proposition entailed by P . Second, one could argue that even if BVE has this implication, it is not as bad as it looks. Mark Schroeder (2015: 165–66) went for the

former. Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way (2022: 167–69) took the latter. Let me assess their approaches in turn and explain why they are both unsatisfactory.

Schroeder notes that, given that we already believe P , there is ‘little further good’ in believing Q , since Q does not really convey anything beyond what P already conveys: believing Q would just clutter our mind. From that, Schroeder seems to conclude that there are reasons not to believe Q (Schroeder 2015: 165–66).⁸ And according to him, these reasons are *not* outweighed by the reasons for believing Q . Then, it would indeed *not* follow from BVE that we ought to believe Q , even though we *do* ought to believe P .

Schroeder is right that Q is an uninteresting disjunction that would just clutter our mind. However, I do not think that his approach is successful. I see three ways of understanding having a reason not to believe Q , and on none of these can Schroeder’s approach solve the Problem of Clutter and answer the question of why we are sometimes required to believe trivialities.

On a first way to understand having a reason not to believe Q , this means having a reason for the mere absence of any attitude toward Q . On such an understanding, however, there might not be such thing as a reason not to believe Q in the first place. If, as a non-negligible number of authors think, r is a reason for you to X only if r can be a premise of good reasoning to X , then there are no reasons for the mere absence of attitudes, because plausibly, one can only reason to an attitude, not to the absence of any attitude (Hieronymi 2005; McHugh and Way 2022: ch. 6).⁹ The Problem of Clutter

⁸ Schroeder also speaks of a reason *against* believing Q . On his view, however, this is equivalent to a reason *not* to believe Q .

⁹ One might wonder: but why, then, do we often say there are reasons *not* to act, such as a reason not to touch the hot stove? Shouldn’t there then be reasons *not* to believe, too? Presumably, when we say that there are reasons not to do something, we mean that there are reasons to do something else instead, since it is hard to see how we could not act at all. For example, if I do not touch the hot stove, I’ll do something else instead. So, we might say that we have reason not to believe something, but the analogy to the case of actions would be that we thereby mean that we have a

for BVE would then remain. Now, Schroeder could deny that reasons are for reasoning with and insist that one can have reasons for the mere absence of an attitude. But his solution would then rest on a contentious claim that requires further argument. And even if there was such a reason for the mere absence of any attitude toward *Q*, we still wouldn't get the desired results. For one thing, it would have to be the case that, generally, the purported reason not to believe *Q* is strong enough to not be outweighed by the evidential reasons Schroeder thinks we have in favour of believing *Q*. And it is hard to see how this could be so: since *Q* is an analytic truth, the evidential support for it seems *maximal*, and the weight of reasons to believe plausibly covaries with the corresponding evidential support. For another, we still wouldn't have an explanation for why we are required to believe *Q* once we've considered it. According to Schroeder, our reason not to believe *Q*, and thus the fact in virtue of which it is not the case that we generally ought to believe *Q*, is that *Q* is an uninteresting triviality that would just clutter our mind. But *Q* remains an uninteresting triviality in most cases, even in ones in which we've considered it and are required to believe it.¹⁰

Perhaps Schroeder does not mean that we have a reason for the mere absence of an attitude. A second way to understand having a reason not to believe *Q* is having a reason for some other doxastic attitude than believing *Q*, that is, for either actively suspending judgement about *Q* or disbelieving *Q*. However, we don't have such a reason, at least not one of the relevant kind. There might be cases in which we have *practical* reasons to withhold belief about *Q* or to disbelieve this proposition – suppose someone offers you large sums of money for adopting one of these attitudes. But

reason for some other available attitude or mental act. Below, I consider this way of interpreting having a reason not to believe *Q*.

¹⁰ One exemplary context in which believing *Q* might be of some epistemic interest is one in which pupils in an elementary logic class are supposed to derive *Q* from certain other propositions in order to understand the relevant inference rule. But such contexts presumably are less prevalent than cases in which we've considered *Q* and are required to believe this proposition. If I'm asked whether *Q* holds, and I'm not in a logic class or the like, then this proposition still isn't interesting at all, but I'm then required to believe it. And even if we suppose, for the sake of argument, that a proposition becomes interesting *whenever* we're considering it, this would certainly call for explanation – one that Schroeder does not provide.

pointing to such reasons won't help to solve the Problem of Clutter, since it is a problem for an account of the *epistemic* ought, on which only *epistemic* reasons bear. And from an epistemic point of view, there seems to be nothing speaking in favour of adopting a neutral stance towards *Q*, or for taking *Q* to be false. After all, it is analytically true. In any case, recall that the reason not to believe *Q* is supposed to be that, by believing *Q*, we would clutter our mind with an uninteresting triviality. But surely this fact is not a reason to disbelieve *Q* or withhold belief about it. For disbelieving *Q* and withholding belief about it would clutter the mind just as believing does.

There is yet another, third way to interpret having a reason not to believe *Q*, namely as having a reason to *bring about* that we lack that attitude, for example by focusing our attention on something else than *Q*. Perhaps we have such a reason. However, the presence of such a reason does not help Schroeder in getting the desired result: that we are not required to believe *Q*, unless we're considering it. An immediate worry is that the aforementioned reason does not even compete with the evidential reasons one seems to have in favour of believing *Q*. The relevant competition is usually understood as one between the different doxastic options an agent has: believing, disbelieving, and withholding belief. But even if they *do* compete, we wouldn't get the desired result: as I said above, since *Q* is an analytical truth, the evidence supporting it is maximally strong. And if this is so, presumably, the same goes for the corresponding evidential reasons. But then how could the reason to bring about that we lack belief in *Q* not be outweighed by the evidential reasons? If it is outweighed, we still ought to believe *Q*. And even if we suppose that the reason to bring about that we lack belief in *Q* is *not* outweighed by the evidential reasons, it still remains unclear how Schroeder could secure the verdict that we ought to believe *Q* when we're asking ourselves whether it is true: it would have to be the case that, once we've considered *Q*, the evidential reasons to believe *Q* suddenly outweigh the reason to bring about that we lack the belief that *Q*. Why should that be so? This calls for explanation. So, on any of the three

ways of understanding having a reason not to believe Q , positing such a reason does not seem to deliver the desired results. We should thus look for another way of solving the Problem of Clutter than Schroeder's approach.

McHugh and Way (2022: 167–69) take a different approach. They concede that we ought to believe Q on BVE, but they argue that our unease with this implication can be alleviated. Their argument goes like this: since Q is a pointless proposition, we have no reason to consider Q . Thus, it is permissible not to consider this proposition on BVE. And if it is permissible not to consider this proposition, we are not criticizable for not believing it. Since our unease with stating that we ought to believe Q was due to our unease with stating that we are criticizable for not forming this belief, our unease can be appeased: we can say the former without saying the latter.

McHugh and Way seem right that we have no reason to consider Q , and that it is thus permissible not to consider this proposition on BVE. Moreover, they might be right that this shields us from being criticizable for not believing Q . But their result is still counterintuitive in several respects. First, they still accept that we violate a true ought-claim if we do not believe every proposition that is entailed by the propositions we ought to believe, no matter how pointless these are. This remains a bullet to bite. Second, on their approach, it is true that you ought to believe Q , but you may as well just not consider Q , which sounds infelicitous. Third, and perhaps most importantly, according to McHugh and Way, whether we ought to believe Q is insensitive to whether we are considering Q . However, as stressed by Gilbert Harman (1986: 15), the much more intuitive result would be that whether we ought to believe Q depends on whether we are asking ourselves whether Q : since Q is a pointless proposition that we have no reason to consider, it is permissible not to believe it in a case in which we are not considering it. But since Q is an analytical truth, in a case in which we do consider it, we ought to believe it. We should thus look for a more satisfying solution to the

Problem of Clutter – one that also allows us to explain why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them.

4. How Norms of Inquiry constrain Norms of Belief

While Harman (1986) wasn't concerned with the Problem of Clutter for BVE, he was the one who introduced Clutter Avoidance and raised the question of why we generally shouldn't clutter our minds with trivialities while nonetheless sometimes being required to believe them. I do not think that he managed to formulate a principle that answers this question. Still, his thoughts bring out an idea that lies at the heart of both a solution to the Problem of Clutter for BVE and the correct answer to the above question. Or so let me argue.

Harman introduced the following normative principle:

Normative Interest Condition One is to add a new proposition p to one's beliefs only if one ought to be interested in whether p is true (Harman 1986: 15).

With this principle, Harman could secure the verdict that we are generally not required to believe the pointless trivialities that are conclusively supported by our evidence. For it is not the case that we ought to be interested in them. However, the Normative Interest Condition does not seem correct, for the following reason: when my attention happens to be directed at Q , I ought to believe this proposition – disbelieving it or withholding belief would be wrong. But even in such a situation, it is not the case that I ought to be interested in whether Q is true. Q remains a completely uninteresting proposition, and so it remains completely fine to have no interest in it.¹¹

¹¹ Harman (1986: 55) has also mentioned a principle on which what we ought to believe does not depend on what we ought to be interested in, but rather on what we are *actually* interested in. This, however, is implausible: we can easily imagine agents that are not interested in understanding the world at all. There are nonetheless propositions these agents ought to believe. Moreover, note that

Nevertheless, Harman's principle brings out an important idea: that norms of inquiry could constrain norms of belief such that we are not required to believe trivialities. Building on this insight, I will now present my solution to the Problem of Clutter as well as my answer to the question of why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them. My solution is straightforward but will naturally invite objections. Let me thus tackle these things in turn: first the solution, then the objections.

Our intellectual lives do not just consist of forming doxastic attitudes such as beliefs or judgement-suspensions. They also consist of all sorts of (mental) acts and processes of inquiry: gathering evidence, considering propositions, asking questions, etc. Let's focus on considering propositions. By that I mean the mental process of attending to this proposition in some way or another. One such way is by having a questioning attitude toward the relevant proposition (Friedman 2019), but this might not be necessary. Now just as our doxastic attitudes are subject to certain norms, so is the mental process of attending to a proposition. It is a selective process which involves privileging some things over others, and in many cases, a subject-level mental activity, that is, something an agent *does* (Watzl 2017: ch. 1). We can thus sensibly ask someone 'Why did you attend to this or that proposition, and not to another?', thereby asking for normative reasons, not causes. Now, some of the reasons for attending to propositions are practical in nature: they are considerations concerning practical interests, as when someone has promised us a large sum of money if we form the correct doxastic attitude toward a certain proposition. But reasons for attending to propositions can also be of epistemic nature, namely when they concern our non-instrumental aim of better understanding the world – a purely epistemic aim. For example, there are certain propositions that a mathematician who is currently

we could recast Harman's Normative Interest Condition as laying down a necessary condition on *what we ought to consider*: you epistemically ought to consider p only if you epistemically ought to be interested in p. This strikes me as a perfectly plausible claim.

developing a theory in combinatorics has epistemic reasons to attend to – propositions that will help her better understand the relevant subject matter. But some propositions are generally not worth attending to, from an epistemic point of view at least. And Q as well as other trivialities are certainly among those. In most contexts, these propositions are just completely uninteresting. For instance, Q adds nothing to our understanding of the world beyond what P already conveys, namely that bachelors are unmarried. In fact, it might be part of the very meaning of ‘triviality’ that it is a proposition we generally have no reason to attend to, whether or not it is conclusively supported by our evidence. In any case, it seems we have no epistemic reason to consider propositions that are of no epistemic interest.¹² Thus, we can safely assume the following:

No Epistemic Reason to Consider Trivialities There is no epistemic reason to consider a triviality like Q .¹³

Next, note that there is an important link between considering a proposition like Q and believing it: if we haven’t yet considered Q , considering it is a *necessary means* to believing it, at least in the sense of belief that is relevant here. For recall that the Problem of Clutter arises for *explicit* beliefs, and explicitly believing Q involves having some mental representation of that proposition. This requires attending to Q , a mental process governed by reasons. Perhaps some processes of attention are not governed by reasons. I’m thinking of cases in which we attend to propositions and form the

¹² When I say a triviality is of no interest, I mean it normatively, not descriptively: it is about what we have reason to be interested in, not what actually interests us.

¹³ Two points on this: first, this shows that evidence for p is *not* necessarily a reason to consider p . Below, I will say more about the connection between evidence for p and epistemic reasons to believe p . Second, there might be exceptional contexts in which even a proposition like Q is of some epistemic interest, as in the logic class example I’ve mentioned in footnote 10. So, there might be exceptional cases in which one has epistemic reasons to consider such a proposition. Strictly speaking, then, we should only assume that we *generally* have no epistemic reason to consider trivialities. Importantly, however, contexts like logic classes are plausibly ones in which one is required to believe trivialities – a verdict that my solution will yield, precisely because these are contexts in which we have epistemic reasons to consider them.

corresponding beliefs through sub-agential processes akin to digesting food, as when we form perceptual beliefs. But Q and all the other uninteresting trivialities entailed by the propositions we ought to believe are not disclosed to us via visual experience. Explicitly believing propositions like Q requires attending to them through some non-automatic mental process, one that is governed by reasons and that costs us cognitive resources we should rather spend on more interesting propositions. This is precisely why coming to believe them clutters our mind – it requires our attention first, in a non-automatic way.

Now, it has been argued that there is a principle linking reasons for responses and reasons for the necessary means to these responses, namely

Necessary Means Transmission (NMT) If an agent has a reason to ϕ , and ψ ing is a necessary means to ϕ ing, then the agent has a reason to ψ (Kiesewetter 2015).

For example, if you have a prudential reason to go to the city, then you have a prudential reason to take the bus 37, assuming that doing so is the only way to get to the city (McHugh and Way 2022: 49). And as I just argued, considering a proposition is a necessary means to (explicitly) believing it. So, this idea seems to extend to the connection between reasons to believe and reasons to consider. For example, if Galileo Galilei has epistemic reasons to believe that the earth revolves around the sun, then he has epistemic reasons to attend to the proposition ‘the earth revolves around the sun’, provided that he hasn’t yet attended to it. We thus get the following application of NMT:

Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle If you have an epistemic reason to believe Q and you haven’t yet considered Q , then you have an epistemic reason to consider Q .¹⁴

¹⁴ The term ‘doxastic’ means ‘related to belief’ and the term ‘zetetic’, which is increasingly used since Friedman (2020), means something like ‘related to inquiry’. For another author who endorses a transmission principle between reasons for acts of inquiry and reasons for belief, see Steglich-

In many cases, such as Galileo Galilei's, the agent will have epistemic reasons to believe a certain proposition and thus epistemic reasons to consider it. But the case of trivialities like *Q* is different. In such a case, as I've argued above, there just are *no* epistemic reasons to consider the relevant proposition – it's completely uninteresting. Thus, via *Modus Tollens*, we can infer from No Epistemic Reason to Consider Trivialities and the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle that

Conclusion If you haven't yet considered *Q*, you have no epistemic reason to believe *Q*.

Such an inference is familiar from the practical realm. As McHugh and Way (2022: 50) have noted, it is precisely because NMT holds that there are cases in which facts about the choiceworthiness of necessary means warrant conclusions about the choiceworthiness of the corresponding ends: if we realize that taking the bus 37 is the only means by which someone can get to the city but that they have no reason whatsoever to take this bus, then we can correctly conclude that they have no reason to go to the city. Analogously, if we realize someone has *no* epistemic reason whatsoever to attend to *Q* – because it is wholly uninteresting –, and that believing *Q* requires such attention, then we can correctly conclude that they have no reason to believe *Q*, evidence notwithstanding.

From a metaphysical point of view, there are different ways in which we might describe the mechanism at play here. One way is to say that if we haven't yet considered *Q*, the reasons to believe *Q* constituted by the evidence for *Q* are *disabled*. They are disabled by the fact that we have no reason to take a certain necessary means to explicitly believing *Q*, namely considering this proposition in the first place. Another way is to say that it is only once we've considered *Q* that the reasons to believe

Petersen (2024). The principle that Steglich-Petersen endorses is not an application of NMT but of the more controversial 'liberal transmission principle'.

Q constituted by the evidence for Q are *enabled*.¹⁵ In any case, the central point is that facts about reasons to consider propositions together with facts about the necessary means to believing these propositions constitute background conditions on whether evidence for these propositions is reason to believe them.

Since BVE tells us that we ought to believe a proposition just in case it is more strongly supported by reasons than the relevant alternatives, if you haven't yet considered Q , BVE does *not* entail that we ought to believe it. And this generalizes to any other triviality entailed by the propositions we ought to believe. What's more, BVE also delivers the correct result that we ought to believe Q once we are considering this proposition. For then, considering this proposition is not a necessary means to believing it anymore – you've already taken the means. And if considering a proposition is not a necessary means to believing it anymore because you've already taken the means, the fact that there is no reason to consider it does not disable the reasons to believe it anymore. Or, put in terms of enabling, the fact that you've already considered Q enables the reasons to believe Q constituted by the evidence for Q . This solves the Problem of Clutter for BVE.

Moreover, independently of BVE, we can now explain why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them. To believe a triviality, we need to attend to it. But we shouldn't spend cognitive resources on attending to a triviality. This is the sense in which we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities. Moreover, as I've argued, the relevant norm of inquiry also constrains our norms of belief: because we have no reason to spend cognitive resources on attending to trivialities, and believing trivialities requires attending to them, it is

¹⁵ The terms 'enabling' and 'disabling' trace back to Jonathan Dancy (2004: ch. 3) and are commonly used in the theory of normativity ever since. Roughly, an enabler is a consideration making it the case that another consideration has normative force as a reason. Correspondingly, a disabler is a consideration making it the case that another consideration has *no* normative force as a reason. 'Disabler' is just another word for what has also been called a 'full undercutting defeater'.

generally not the case that we ought to believe them.¹⁶ Nonetheless, we are sometimes required to believe trivialities. This is because if we've already considered such a proposition, the norm of inquiry ceases to constrain the norm of belief. For then, we've already spent our cognitive resources on the triviality by undergoing the process of attention necessary for coming to believe it. And once we've done so, believing it does not require notable additional cognitive resources. We thereby realize the proposition is trivially true, which is either already tantamount to believing it, or will compel us to believe it – a belief that then gets stored as a *dispositional* belief, which does not require our attention anymore.¹⁷

Of course, this was quick, and objections are looming. I see mainly three such objections. The first concerns NMT. While NMT is a broadly accepted principle regarding reasons for actions, one might think that it does *not* hold in the epistemic realm. Jonathan Way (2012: 499) has advanced a type of case that could be taken to corroborate this claim: suppose the agent has evidence for *p*, and therefore, a reason to believe *p*. Suppose further that, for this agent, believing *q* is a necessary means to believing *p*. Now, by stipulation, *q* is a proposition that stands in no evidential relation to *p*, and for which there is no evidence whatsoever. Plausibly, that believing *q* is a necessary means to believing *p* does *not* make it the case that there is a reason to believe

¹⁶ Balcerak Jackson *et al.* (2022) have argued that a clutter avoidance principle is best understood as a principle on asking and considering questions, rather than on belief. My view thus builds on theirs insofar as I also claim that there is a norm of inquiry on which we shouldn't consider uninteresting trivialities. However, my proposal differs from theirs in a crucial respect: I've argued that, via the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle, norms of inquiry bear on norms of belief. This is why it is also *not* the case that we ought to believe trivialities. By contrast, Balcerak Jackson *et al.* severe norms of belief from norms of inquiry.

¹⁷ One might ask: but what if I've started considering a triviality and realize it's uninteresting before I've considered it *as a whole*? One example that comes to my mind is a case in which I've only considered some boring disjuncts of a long boring disjunction. Isn't it then permissible for me to halt contemplation and consider the resources I've spent on it sunk costs? I think this is permissible. And it is also the result my proposal yields. Here is why: it is considering a proposition *as a whole* which is a necessary means to explicitly believing it. So, strictly speaking, given the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle – an application of NMT –, we have no reason to believe the trivialities as long as we haven't considered them *as a whole*.

q. This seems true especially if one thinks that only evidence for q can be a reason to believe q.

This all seems right. But it is important to be clear on what it shows: that NMT does not apply *unrestrictedly* in the epistemic realm insofar as there are cases in which adopting a certain belief is a necessary means to adopting another belief, but in which this does not give rise to a reason for the former belief. In the type of case Way imagines, for one thing, the belief that is required to adopt another belief is wholly unsupported by evidence. For another, the objects of these beliefs are not related in any way that is relevant for the epistemic rationality of adopting these beliefs, since by stipulation p and q stand in no evidential support relation to each other. Our case is different. Our case is about the belief that p and the mental process of considering p. And in this case, the object of the belief and the object of the mental process are related in a relevant way: it's the same object, namely p. So, the reason Way has advanced for thinking that NMT is false in the epistemic case does not apply to ours. More generally, it seems plausible that NMT applies to a restricted set of epistemic cases, at least to the case of believing a proposition and the necessary means of considering this very proposition, as stated by the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle.

Now, even if one accepts the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle, one might still reject my conclusion. This is the second kind of objection I want to consider. To recall: from the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle and the assumption that there is no epistemic reason to consider Q, I concluded that as long as one hasn't considered Q, there is no epistemic reason to believe Q. Now my opponent might agree with me on the principle, but conclude that since there *are* epistemic reasons to believe Q – the evidence for Q –, there is an epistemic reason to consider Q. In other words, my opponent and I might agree on the principle, but instead of opting for the *Modus Tollens*, as I do, my opponent might go for the *Modus Ponens*. As usual, to adjudicate between the *Modus Ponens* and the *Modus Tollens*, we need to assess which of the

premises at issue is more plausible. In our case: the premise that there is no epistemic reason to consider Q , or the premise that there is an epistemic reason to believe Q ? Again, Q is a completely uninteresting triviality. And again, whether or not one has evidence for a certain proposition, there plausibly is a reason to consider it only if this proposition is of some epistemic interest. It is thus hard to see how one could deny that there is no epistemic reason to consider Q . But my opponent – who would opt for the *Modus Ponens* – might insist that since there is evidence for Q , there is a reason to believe Q , and thus, given the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle, a reason to consider Q . The idea in the background might be that evidence for p always constitutes a reason to believe p . However, there are independent reasons to reject this idea, and several authors have done so. Thomas Kelly (2014) has introduced the distinction between *indicator* evidence and *normative* evidence, according to which evidence sometimes fails to constitute a reason. This has been noticed for example in the context of the

Guidance Condition on Reasons r is a reason for you to X only if you can X for the (motivating) reason that r (Kelly 2002; Kolodny 2005; McHugh and Way 2022).

Suppose you come across a mathematical theorem that follows from certain axioms, but that the proof is just too complicated for you to be able to grasp it (McHugh and Way 2022: 62). In such a case, given the Guidance Condition on Reasons, even though you possess evidence that p , this evidence is not a reason for you to believe p . It is only once you are able to believe p in light of this evidence that the latter exerts normative pressure on you, as it were. Our case is structurally analogous: it is only once we've considered Q that the evidence for Q exerts normative pressure on us. I thus take it that the *Modus Tollens* is more plausible than the *Modus Ponens*: it is hard to deny that we have no epistemic reason to consider Q , or any other uninteresting triviality. But there are good independent reasons to deny that evidence for p always exerts normative pressure on us in the form of an epistemic reason to believe p .

The third and final objection I want to consider concerns the worry that my solution comes with too strong of a departure from evidentialism. For it rests on the claim that non-evidential considerations can bear on what we epistemically ought to believe, namely by affecting whether evidence for p constitutes a reason to believe p : the fact that we have no reason to take a certain necessary means to explicitly believing Q – considering Q –, disables the reasons to believe Q constituted by the evidence for Q . However, this shouldn't scare away evidentialists. Of course, the strongest form of evidentialism on which only evidential considerations bear on the epistemic ought must be rejected if we are to accept my solution to the Problem of Clutter. But this is *not* specific to my solution. As Friedman (2018) has pointed out, anyone who accepts Harman's principle of Clutter Avoidance must reject this strongest form of evidentialism. Fortunately, we have independent reasons to think that this form of evidentialism is overly strong anyway. The Guidance Condition on Reasons that I've introduced above is one such reason, since it states that there are non-evidential background conditions on the normative force of evidence, namely facts about the agent's cognitive capacities. My solution just introduces another such non-evidential background condition: facts about what the agent has reason to consider and about what they have or haven't already considered. Importantly, however, my solution allows us to retain a form of evidentialism on which only evidence can constitute a *reason* for or against belief. This is because the relevant non-evidential facts about our reasons to consider are only background conditions on the normative force of evidence, not reasons for or against belief. Moreover, my solution does not commit us to pragmatic or moral encroachment: the controversial claim that prudential or moral considerations can bear on what we epistemically ought to believe. To see this, recall the Doxastic-Zetetic Bridge Principle: if you have an *epistemic* reason to believe p and you haven't yet considered p , then you have an *epistemic* reason to consider p . On this principle, only facts about our epistemic reasons to consider affect our epistemic reasons to believe. Thus, since only genuine epistemic considerations – ones concerning the promotion of our non-instrumental interest in understanding the

world – can constitute epistemic reasons to consider, pragmatic or moral considerations won't have any bearing on what we epistemically ought to believe. More generally, then, my solution is situated at the *sweet spot* between, on the one hand, an overly strong form of evidentialism that we have independent reason to reject, and on the other hand, encroachment views that come with controversial non-evidentialist elements.

5. Conclusion

I've argued that we can accept the Balancing View of the Epistemic Ought without endorsing the verdict that we ought to believe every triviality entailed by the propositions we have most reason to believe. We needed to see that practical and epistemic normativity are structurally analogous in yet another respect: in the practical case, we cannot assess what reasons we have for pursuing a certain end without considering the necessary means to achieving this end. In epistemic cases, even if we have decisive evidence for certain propositions, whether we have decisive reason to believe them depends on whether we have reasons to consider these propositions in the first place. The conclusion is that if we haven't considered a certain triviality, the Balancing View of the Epistemic Ought does not entail that we ought to believe it. It is only once we've considered it that we ought to do so, which is the desired result. This should contribute to restoring confidence in a unified explanation of ought in terms of reasons. Moreover, it comes with an independent explanation for why we generally ought not clutter our minds with trivialities yet are sometimes required to believe them: we generally ought not attend to uninteresting trivialities, since this would be a waste of cognitive resources. But once we've considered the trivialities, we've already spent our cognitive resources on them. And then coming to believe them does not require notable additional mental effort.

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