

NO REASONS TO BELIEVE THE FALSE

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Abstract: I argue that if there are non-disabled reasons to believe p , then there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something incompatible with p . I first defend a restricted version of the view, which applies only to situations where the relevant agent has complete evidence. Then, I argue for a generalized version of the view, which holds regardless of the agent's evidence. As a related result, I show that, given plausible assumptions, there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something false.

1. Introduction

On a standard view of deliberation, agents weigh the considerations in favor and against different alternatives and choose the option that, on balance, is supported by weightier or stronger reasons. This view of deliberation allows for the existence of reasons both in favor and against a given option, or in favor of conflicting options. Often, there will be reasons in favor of an option that are nonetheless outweighed by contrary reasons against it. Even if the reasons recommending the option have normative force and genuinely count in its favor, there may be other considerations that speak against it (or in favor of conflicting options), so that, all things considered, what is recommendable is not to choose that option.

This picture of deliberation is typically taken to apply both to practical and doxastic deliberation, that is both to deliberation about what to do and about what to believe. In particular, it is generally accepted that reasons to believe can compete against contrary reasons to *disbelieve*: it may happen that there are normative reasons to believe that p and also normative reasons to disbelieve it, i.e. to believe $\neg p$ (see Pollock 1986; Horty 2012; Schroeder 2015a, b). In other words, it is commonly assumed that reasons to believe a proposition can be outweighed by stronger reasons to disbelieve it. Given that either p or $\neg p$ will be false, this would mean that there can be reasons with some weight to believe a proposition that happens to be false (even if in general the reasons in favor of a false belief will be ultimately weaker than the existing reasons in favor of its true negation).

My aim is to show that, while this standard picture may be suitable for practical reasoning, it is problematic for doxastic deliberation. I will argue that a non-disabled (i.e. non-weightless) reason to believe p cannot be balanced against non-disabled reasons to believe something incompatible with p . This is to say, there cannot be conflicts between non-disabled reasons to believe incompatible things.¹ First, I will defend a restricted version of the view, which applies only to situations where the agent has complete evidence (i.e. situations where the agent knows all relevant facts). Then, I will go on to defend a generalized version of the view, which holds regardless of whether the agent has access to complete evidence. According to this more radical view, if there are good reasons to believe that p , there cannot be non-disabled reasons to disbelieve it. I will also show that, given plausible assumptions, a consequence of this view is that there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something false. This is a claim with far-reaching implications for epistemology and normativity theory.

Before going forward, let me make two important clarifications. First, I will be concerned with normative, justificatory reasons, and I will conceive of such reasons in a factualist way. According to this factualist conception, normative reasons are facts that recommend or favor

some response (Scanlon 1998; Dancy 2000; Schroeder 2007; Alvarez 2010, 2018; Parfit 2011; Sylvan 2016). I will say that a fact r is weightless (or disabled) as a reason to φ if it does not favor φ -ing at all. Moreover, I will assume that there is some relation between favoring and fittingness. In particular, I will take it that it is fitting for an agent to φ if φ -ing is sufficiently favored by her reasons, that is, if her reasons in favor of φ -ing are at least as weighty as her reasons against φ -ing (e.g. Schroeder 2007: 134).²

Of course, I do not deny that there may be *merely apparent reasons* for a false belief: it may be that some consideration *mistakenly* appears to an agent as a reason to believe something that happens to be false (for the notion of apparent reason, see Parfit 2011; Alvarez forthcoming; Sylvan 2015).³ My claim is that this consideration will not actually be a normative reason for that belief – it will not be a fact actually counting in its favor. A further issue, which I will not discuss here, is whether this type of consideration can be a *motivating* reason for belief, that is a consideration on the basis of which the agent has the relevant belief (for discussion, see Sylvan 2016; also Alvarez forthcoming). Thus, I will not assume that motivating reasons are always normative as well – I will leave open the possibility that merely apparent reasons can function as motivating reasons. However I will regard as a constraint on normative reasons that they can play a suitable motivating role, more specifically that they can intelligibly intervene as premises in our reasoning and deliberations (for this idea, see Schroeder 2007; Way 2017; Snedegar forthcoming).

So, the conclusion I want to argue for here is that, given the factualist conception of normative reasons that I have just sketched, there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe $\neg p$ if there are non-disabled reasons to believe p . This conclusion can be read as saying something about the behavior of reasons to believe or, alternatively, as speaking against such a factualist conception of normative reasons. I will opt for the former reading, but perhaps others will take

the considerations in this paper to recommend abandoning factualism about normative reasons (I do not intend to provide here a defense of factualist conceptions of normative reasons).

The second clarification is that I will focus on the notion of full, outright belief. As I will understand the notion, outright belief is the sort of attitude adopted when one judges that something is the case or when one takes oneself to know something, and which is typically expressed in a direct way by means of assertion: as Williamson (2000: 256) claims, ‘occurrently believing *p* stands to asserting *p* as the inner stands to the outer.’ This understanding of the notion is, I think, rather widespread among philosophers, but I do not claim it to correspond in all details to the usage of the term ‘belief’ in ordinary speech. Arguably, ‘belief’ is often used in speech to refer to a weaker attitude, which is compatible with high levels of doubt, and which is not properly expressed by unqualified assertions, but rather by hedged statements such as ‘I believe it will rain’ or ‘It think it will rain’ (see Hawthorne, Rothschild and Specter 2016). I take it that the stronger attitude I will be concerned with plays a central role in our rational life, in virtue of its connections with assertion, judgment and agency (see Weisberg forthcoming; also, Clarke 2013; Ross and Schroeder 2014).

The theses that I will put forward depend, therefore, on several assumptions: as I have just said, I will rely on a certain view of outright belief and I will take for granted the factualist conception of reasons introduced above; moreover, as it will become apparent, I will appeal to the idea that the fittingness standard for belief is truth-involving. Thus, for those who find the conclusions I will reach incredible, a possible reaction is to take the arguments in the paper as a *reductio* of these assumptions. The paper will still be interesting, I think, for readers prone to drawing this negative moral. However, given that the relevant assumptions are independently plausible, an alternative reaction is to see the conclusions of the paper as revealing something interesting about the nature of reasons to believe.

The ideas defended in this paper are in some respects close in spirit to the views advocated by Maguire (forthcoming). Maguire's contention is that there are no reasons for affective attitudes, because the considerations supporting such attitudes are not contributory and are not weighed against each other, but rather make the relevant attitude fitting. My discussion, however, will focus on belief instead of affective attitudes, and the sorts of arguments I will appeal to are different from those examined by Maguire. Moreover, I will not conclude that there are no reasons for belief. Even if the considerations supporting beliefs are not weighed against each other, they still play many of the characteristic roles of normative reasons. In particular, such considerations may serve as premises of good reasoning,⁴ and the agent's doxastic attitudes can be said both to be based on and justified by them.⁵ Thus, I will take it that it makes sense to talk of reasons for belief, despite the fact that the picture of weighing does not apply to such reasons (I remain neutral about whether the same can be said in relation to affective attitudes).

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2 I argue for the thesis that, from a perspective in which all relevant facts are known, non-disabled reasons to believe cannot be balanced against non-disabled reasons. In section 3 I extend this thesis to perspectives with limited evidence. I motivate this general thesis by appeal to two lines of argument. The first one focuses on the role of contrary reasons in weighing deliberations (section 3.1). The second one relies on the idea that reasons can be undermined by disablers to which the agent has no epistemic access (section 3.2).

2. No outweighed reasons with complete evidence

Imagine the following case. Elena is deciding whether to go to Ann's or Sam's party. The food in Sam's party will be good, but the music in Ann's will be extraordinary. The fact Sam's food will be good is a reason to attend his party, but the fact that the music in Ann's party will be

extraordinary is a reason to go there instead. Assume that this latter reason is stronger. Then, Elena will have most reason, on balance, to go to Ann's party.

Notice that the fact that there will be good food in Sam's party is still a weighty reason to go to Sam's party: it is a consideration that counts in favor of attending that party, even if it is outweighed by stronger reasons to do otherwise. So, in the practical case it is possible to have outweighed reasons that keep being weighty and having normative force. These outweighed reasons would still speak in favor of a certain course of action (they would indicate a good-making feature of that course of action), even if it is not action that is recommended all things considered. When a reason is defeated in this way, it is said to have been *rebutted* (Pollock 1986; Horty 2012); accordingly, the relevant outweighing reasons are known as *rebutters*.

In addition to being outweighed by stronger considerations, a putative reason may be *disabled* or *undercut* (see Pollock 1986; Dancy 2004; Schroeder 2007; Horty 2012). When this happens, the disabled reason loses its normative force and has no weight: it stops being a reason at all, it does not favor the response that it was supposed to recommend. If R is disabled as a reason to φ , no favoring relation between R and φ obtains. Disabling can be seen as an extreme form of the more general phenomenon of attenuation (Dancy 2004; Schroeder 2007). A reason R to φ becomes attenuated if its weight as a reason to φ is reduced. If the reason becomes weightless, it is disabled.

Suppose, for instance, that Elena must fast until the morning (say, because of some medicine she has taken). Given that Elena will be unable to eat anything, the fact that the food at Sam's party is good will not be a reason for her to go there. This *prima facie* reason is disabled by the fact that she must fast. By contrast, in a situation where Elena will be able to eat, this reason remains weighty, even if it is outweighed by stronger considerations (i.e. that the music will be extraordinary in Ann's party).

Let us say that a deliberating agent has *complete evidence* if she knows all (relevant) facts, so that she knows all facts that have some potential bearing on her deliberation (and also knows that she knows such facts and so on).⁶ In practical cases, it is possible to have non-disabled, outweighed reasons, even in such situations of complete evidence. When deciding how to act, it may be that the agent knows it is not fitting for her to choose option A, while still acknowledging that there are features of A that count towards its choice-worthiness, that speak in favor of choosing it. Assume, for the sake of illustration, that options are choice-worthy or desirable to the extent that there is good in them (say, to the extent that they promote good outcomes). As the example of Elena's choice shows, there can be some good in an option that is not overall the best thing to choose. The fact that there will be tasty food is a respect in which attending Sam's party is desirable (at least to some extent), even if attending Ann's party is known to be overall a more desirable option, and therefore the right thing to choose.⁷ Although Elena knows that going to Ann's party is the fitting to do, she can keep acknowledging that the quality of the food offered speaks in favor of attending Sam's party. The fact that there will be tasty food remains a weighty, non-disabled (albeit outweighed) reason for Elena to go to Sam's party.

Things are different for belief, at least if one thinks that reasons for belief can only be considerations that bear on the truth of the proposition believed (i.e. evidence), rather than pragmatic reasons bearing on the desirability of getting to form the belief in question, regardless of its truth (e.g. that one will get a reward if the belief is formed). In this paper, I will assume that there are no such pragmatic reasons for belief: I will take it that the standard of fittingness for belief is truth-involving (see, among others, Wedgwood 2002; Whiting 2010; Smithies 2012; McHugh 2014; McHugh and Way 2016a: 584). If this assumption is made, it seems that, when all facts are known, there cannot be non-disabled reasons in favor of false beliefs. As Gregory argues (2016: 2302-2303), 'If, taking all your present evidence into account, you have conclusive evidence that P, your present attitude towards your present evidence that $\neg P$ ought to be

dismissive: such evidence is just misleading' (also Owens 2002: 390-391, 2000: 142-145). This is so because no consideration may actually support the truth of a belief *known to be false*. Once we learn all there is to know about a situation, and we find out that p is false, we realize that there is nothing speaking in favor of believing p : it is just false, there is no truth in it (Hurley 1993: 133). There is no respect in which a known falsity is belief-worthy. No fact actually favors believing known falsities.

The claim I am making, thus, is that from perspectives with complete evidence, (apparent) reasons to believe false things reveal themselves to be disabled. From such perspectives, all non-disabled reasons for belief support truths. Therefore, from a full evidence perspective there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe that are balanced against contrary reasons to disbelieve. We just saw that things are different in the practical case, where non-disabled outweighed reasons can exist even if the agent knows all facts. The view I am presenting can be summarize as follows:

Weak No Weighing (WNW): from a perspective with complete evidence, if there are non-disabled reasons to believe that p , there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something incompatible with p .

In order to make my case more convincing, let me discuss some examples that might seem to involve clashes between reasons to believe incompatible things. Imagine that Robert is told by Alice that the local swimming pool will open in July. This is a reason for Robert to believe so, since Alice is a usually reliable informer. However, suppose that Robert also reads in the local newspaper that the swimming pool will remain closed in July. This is a *prima facie* contrary reason to disbelieve what Alice said. Of course, someone must be wrong. As it turns out, it was the newspaper that was mistaken. The journalist writing the piece relied on a source that was interested in propagating false information. Once this is known, the fact that the newspaper said that the swimming pool will be closed in July will not be counted as a reason in favor of believing

such a thing: after all, the newspaper took it from a misleading source. The reason for belief provided by the newspaper article is disabled by the known fact that it relied on a lying source.

Consider a second example. I see ice in the pond in the garden, which I take to be a reason to believe that the temperature is below 0° C. Yet I also read in the thermometer hanging in a tree in the garden that it is 10° C. This seems to be a *prima facie* reason to disbelieve that it is freezing. Later, I find out that the thermometer is broken and stuck in the 10° C reading. This fact disables the reasons I thought I had for believing what the thermometer says: such putative reasons lose all normative pull. Given that I now know that the thermometer is not working, I do not count its reading to speak in favor of any belief about the garden's temperature.

A final example. Sylvia has observed many swans in her life, and all of them were white. This seems to be a reason for her to think that Tommy-the-swan (her friend Mary's pet swan) is white. However, when she sees Tommy, she finds out that it is black. Tommy is not like most swans regarding its color. This fact disables the reason to believe that Tommy is white given by the fact that swans are generally white.⁸ Once Sylvia discovers that Tommy is black, she has no reason to think that it is white.⁹

These representative examples point, I think, towards a general trend. I submit that it will be possible to give similar disabling stories for all other apparent examples of clashes between reasons to believe and disbelieve (see Owens 2002: 390-391). Thus, from a perspective with complete evidence, the sorts of examples that seem to be cases of outweighed reasons to believe, actually turn out to be cases of disabling. Note that if these examples are naturally read as cases of disabling it is because we are assuming that the standard of fittingness for belief is truth involving. When one learns that some piece of evidence (e.g. the journal article) is misleading, one becomes aware that it is not connected with the truth of the belief it seemed to support and therefore it does not actually count towards the fittingness of the belief. Thus,

such a piece of evidence does not actually favor the belief – it is disabled as a reason for that belief.

Another way to approach the issue is, as already suggested by Williams, in terms of regret and conflict (Williams 1965: 170; Gregory 2016: 2303; also De Sousa 1974: 536; Adler 2002: 6-7; Owens 2002: 388). When an agent with full evidence performs the action that is, on balance, supported by the strongest reasons, she may still feel some regret for not being able to choose some of the alternatives that were also recommended by (weaker, but still weighty) reasons. The regret is called for because one will miss out on the fitting-making features of the alternative actions, even if it is only in order to choose an overall more desirable option: there is a genuine conflict among weighty reasons in favor of different actions. For instance, Elena may regret not being able to taste Sam's food, although she still thinks that, all things considered going to Ann's party is the thing to do (given the extraordinary music she will find there). However, an agent with full evidence will not have any feeling of conflict when deciding what to believe, since there is nothing in a proposition known to be false that recommends believing it – there are no facts that support the truth of a known falsity.

The thesis I am putting forward can be glossed metaphorically by saying that there are no conflicts within the realm of the true, while there can be inner conflicts in the realm of the good (De Sousa 1974; Hurley 1993: 133; Raz 2011: 42).¹⁰ There may be facts that make good or desirable (to different degrees) different, incompatible actions.¹¹ By contrast, there cannot be truth in each of two incompatible beliefs: under the prism of truth, all facts are aligned in the same direction (see Hurley 1993: 133).¹²

The conclusion reached in this section, thus, is that from a perspective in which all relevant facts are known, there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe incompatible propositions, and therefore it cannot be that non-disabled reasons to believe that *p* are balanced against non-disabled reasons to disbelieve it. If there are non-disabled reasons to believe that

p, any apparent contrary reason to disbelieve it will actually be a disabled reason. This does not happen with contrary reasons for action: even from a perspective with full evidence, there can be non-disabled reasons recommending alternative courses of action. This contrast is, I think, interesting enough in its own right. However, it points towards a more radical view, according to which non-disabled reasons to believe cannot be outweighed by reasons to disbelieve *even if the agent's evidence is incomplete*. This is the view explored and motivated in the next section.

3. No outweighing with partial evidence

So far, I have considered situations in which the agent has complete evidence. But agents often deliberate in situations of partial evidence, that is in situations where they lack knowledge about facts that potentially bear on the issue they are deliberating about (for instance, situations in which the agent is unaware of the presence of some disabler). Perhaps from perspectives with partial evidence there can be non-disabled reasons to believe incompatible things: it might be that, for agents with incomplete evidence, there can be non-disabled reasons to believe false propositions (as long as it is not known that such propositions are false). If this were so, the existence of such reasons would be evidence-relative: they would disappear (by becoming disabled) once the agent acquires the relevant additional evidence, and becomes aware of the presence of disablers. More generally, this would mean that a reason is only disabled if the disabler is within the agent's ken. As long as the agent is unaware of the existence of the disabler, the reason would preserve its normative force (and have actual weight in the balance of reasons).

In this section I offer reasons for rejecting the position I have just sketched. Although I will not provide knock-down arguments against this position, I will try to make a convincing case for an alternative view, which I will call *Strong No Weighing*:

Strong No Weighing (SNW): regardless of the agent's evidence, if there are non-disabled reasons to believe that p , there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something incompatible with p .

Again, it is important to note that I intend to examine and defend SNW as a view about *normative reasons* to believe, understood as facts that actually count in favor of some belief. There may be other senses of the notion of reason in relation to which there can exist reasons for false beliefs. For instance, one may think that false propositions can act as *motivating reasons*, that is as the considerations for which an agent responds in a certain way.¹³ Clearly, if a false proposition can be a reason in this sense, then there will be such reasons for false beliefs. My discussion focuses instead on the normative sense of reason. SNW in relation to such reasons keeps being a radical, interesting thesis.

In 3.1. I put forward a first argument supporting SNW. This argument revolves around the relation between outweighed reasons and weighing deliberations. I argue that there do not seem to be cases in which we adopt a belief after a weighing deliberation in which the existence of (outweighed, but non-disabled) reasons for disbelief is acknowledged. After that, in 3.2. I explore a path leading from WNW to SNW, underpinned by the general idea that disablers whose presence is unknown to the subject still have disabling power.

3.1. OUTWEIGHED REASONS AND DELIBERATION

The argument I want to discuss in this section focuses on the explanatory function of the notion of outweighed reason. Remember that I am regarding as a constraint on normative reasons that they are intelligible potential premises in our deliberations (Way 2017; Snedegar forthcoming). In particular, it can be argued that the main role of the notion of outweighed normative reason is to contribute to our understanding of weighing deliberations, in which some option is chosen

after balancing the weights of the reasons in favor and against the different alternatives (see Broome 2004). This sort of deliberation presupposes that it will be possible to choose correctly an option while acknowledging that other options are also supported by (weaker) reasons. One only has a weighing balance if it is possible to put weights in more than one weighing pan. As we have seen, it is easy to find examples of this sort of weighing decisions for reasons for action: Elena may decide that, on balance, there is most reason to attend Ann's party while acknowledging that the food at Sam's party does offer some (weaker, outweighed) reasons to go there instead. I will argue that there are no analogous cases for reasons to believe, regardless of whether the agent's evidence is incomplete. This suggests that SNW is on the right track: non-disabled reasons to believe cannot be weighed against non-disabled reasons to disbelieve.

Suppose for the sake of argument that, when the agent's evidence is incomplete, there could exist non-disabled reasons for incompatible beliefs (in particular, for some belief and its negation). Then, it should be possible for such reasons to figure in a weighing balance of reasons leading to the recommendation of a belief. That is, there should be cases in which the agent takes the balance of reasons to recommend a certain belief while at the same time acknowledging that there are some (perhaps very weak) non-disabled reasons to disbelieve it. However, it seems that this cannot happen. Why? Because there is a tension in (outright) believing a proposition and at the same time acknowledging that there are non-disabled considerations that actually speak against the truth of that proposition. It is awkward to make assertions with the structure ' p , but given the fact that r it may be that $\neg p$ ' or ' p , although the fact that r actually makes $\neg p$ somewhat probable.'¹⁴ As Yalcin (2007: 983) notes, sentences of the form ' p although it may be that $\neg p$ ' or ' p but possibly $\neg p$ ' are generally unassertable. For instance, it is odd to assert 'John is at home, but given that his car is not in his driveway it may be false that John is at home' or 'John is at home, but given that his car is not in his driveway there is actually some probability that he is not at home' (remember that I am assuming that the attitude of outright believing is normally expressed via unqualified assertions). By contrast,

it is perfectly natural to say 'Going to Ann's party is the best thing for me to do, although Sam's food is certainly a point in favor of his party' or 'Going to Ann's party is definitely the right decision, but it must be said that Sam's cooking makes his party quite appealing and worth-attending.'

Perhaps the infelicity of the utterances I have considered can be ultimately explained pragmatically,¹⁵ or in some way compatible with the rationality of outright believing p while leaving $\neg p$ open (see Worsnip 2015). However, I take it that these examples offer strong motivation for rejecting the rationality of this type of combination of attitudes. At any rate, the prima facie rational defectiveness of such combinations reveals, again, an interesting contrast with the case of practical deliberation (where no analogous prima facie defectiveness is found). My claim is that the apparent irrationality of these combinations of attitudes puts pressure on the view that there can be non-disabled reasons to believe incompatible things. Let me further develop this line of argument.

According to the observations made above, if one contemplates the possibility that p is false (by acknowledging the existence of non-disabled reasons to disbelieve it), then it seems that one should not form an outright belief in p .¹⁶ One should adopt instead a least committal attitude towards p . For instance, one could have a degree of credence not amounting to full belief. Clearly, there can be non-disabled reasons to adopt these less committal attitudes towards incompatible propositions, because such attitudes do not rule out the falsity of the proposition they target. In particular, an agent with limited evidence may possess non-disabled reasons to have some non-zero credence in a false proposition. This will happen when her evidence makes that (actually false) proposition somehow likely from the agent's perspective. Indeed, one can have an extremely high credence in p while acknowledging that there are facts that confer some (small) probability to $\neg p$ (e.g. 'The most likely outcome is that the favorite

Seabiscuit will win the race, but taking into account Hyperion's good performance in rainy conditions, there is a small probability that Seabiscuit loses').

One could have thought that reasons for (outright) belief behave in a similar way. On this view, reasons for belief would be understood in terms of conditional probability: a fact r would be a reason to believe p if the probability of p raises when one conditionalizes on r (given the rest of the agent's evidence). It may happen that an agent has some factual evidence that increases the probability of p , while also having evidence that somehow increase the probability of $\neg p$ instead. In these cases, the agent would have some reasons to believe p and some reasons to disbelieve it.

However, this view clashes with how doxastic deliberations seem to work. If such a view were right, one would expect that, in situations where the evidence available overwhelmingly supports p (but not completely, there is some marginal evidence that confers some probability to $\neg p$), the agent would be in a position to outright believe that p while acknowledging that there are some facts that actually make $\neg p$ somewhat probable. After all, she would have reasons to believe p that greatly outweigh her reasons to disbelieve it (and we can make the imbalance as extreme as we want). Yet we have just seen that, plausibly, beliefs cannot be rationally formed in this way. When one adopts an outright belief, it is because the possibility that it is false has been discarded, or at least is not considered for the purposes of the context.¹⁷ One cannot outright believe p while at the same time ascribing some probability to $\neg p$. Again, it is odd to assert something like ' p , but given the fact that r there is some probability that $\neg p$.' Thus, probabilistic evidence (i.e. evidence that makes p somehow probable) provides reasons to adopt a corresponding degree of credence in p , not to outright believe it. If your evidence makes p 0.9 probable, then the fitting attitude for you to adopt is not outright belief in p , but a suitable degree of credence (say, 0.9 credence in p , 0.1 in $\neg p$).

Some may protest that I am just dismissing the possibility that outright belief amounts to credence above some non-maximal threshold. Certainly, the rejection of such a threshold view is an implication of the discussion in this section. While this rejection is not uncontroversial, I take it to be well motivated, in part by the sorts of considerations I have just adduced – outright believing p does not seem to be rationally compatible with acknowledging that there is some probability that $\neg p$ (so, one may not rationally believe that a random ticket will lose a fair lottery).¹⁸ Moreover, the threshold view is ruled out by my initial assumption that the standard of fittingness for beliefs is truth-involving. Under this assumption, false beliefs are always incorrect or unfitting. By contrast, an extremely high credence in p (say, 0.99) may be correct even if p happens to be false (Ross and Schroeder 2014). My aim is to explore the implications of my initial assumptions. Those who want to resist such implications may see my arguments as offering reasons to reject some of the assumptions.

As I have claimed above, taking part in weighing explanations of our decisions is the main role of the notion of outweighed reason. However, there seem to be no cases in which one's decision to form an (outright) belief involves weighing non-disabled reasons to disbelieve against stronger reasons to believe. Therefore, we have lost great part of the motivation to appeal to the notion of outweighed reasons to (dis)believe. Indeed, it seems that we can do without such a notion. Granted, this is not a full argument for SNW: perhaps it could be that there exist non-disabled outweighed normative reasons to (dis)believe, even if for some reason they can never take part in our deliberative processes of belief adoption. However, I think that these considerations provide strong motivation to dispense with the idea that non-disabled reasons to believe can be balanced against non-disabled reasons to believe.

Note that this argument about deliberation is compatible with the view that an agent has reasons to believe p if and only if all considerations within her epistemic ken coherently support that belief (i.e. no such consideration supports the belief $\neg p$). The acquisition of

incoherent evidence would destroy one's reasons to believe and this would explain why it is never appropriate to say things like ' p but there is some evidence that $\neg p$.' On this view, it would be an open possibility that the agent had non-disabled reasons for a false belief, as long as her evidence coherently supported such a false belief, and it were not balanced against contrary evidence against it. However, it is not clear that such coherence would itself be related to the truth of the belief supported. Thus, if we think that the fittingness of a belief has to do with its truth, it seems that mere coherence cannot count in favor of a belief. In this way, coherent considerations unrelated to the truth of a belief will not constitute actual normative reasons in its favor.

In the next section, I keep examining this link between reasons for belief and truth, in order to argue against the existence of reasons for false beliefs. More specifically offer a further defense of SNW which, on the assumption that the standard of fittingness for belief is truth-involving, rules out the possibility of there being non-disabled (even if outweighed) reasons for false beliefs.

3.2. NON-POSSESSED DIABLERS

In section 2 I gave arguments for WNW that relied on the claim that, when the agent has complete evidence, she will be aware of the existence of disablers for any putative reason to believe something false. If one assumes that reasons can be disabled when the agent is unaware of the existence of the relevant disabler, the arguments for WNW will also offer support for the more demanding SNW. Let me present some considerations speaking in favor of such an assumption.¹⁹

Disablers defeat reasons by undercutting the favoring relation. When a (non-disabled) disabling fact obtains, the favoring relation between the putative reason and the relevant

response does not obtain. Regardless of whether the agent is aware of the existence of the disabler, there is actually no objective connection between the consideration and the fittingness of the response. In a situation where the disabler exists, the putative reason does not actually contribute to making the response recommendable or fitting in any respect, it does not actually favor such a response at all. In this sense, the reason-giving force of the putative reason is undermined, even if the agent is unaware of the existence of the disabler.

Note that it is natural for factualists about reasons to allow for the possibility that facts we are currently ignorant about actually constitute normative reasons for a given response, in the sense that they favor it. For instance, scientists may *discover* that certain facts about yogurt offer a so far unknown health-related reason for eating it. Arguably, whether such facts are reasons for the relevant response depends on whether they actually favor it, and in particular on the absence of disabling facts severing the favoring connection between the putative reason and the response. Whether the relevant facts about yogurt favor eating it does not depend on what scientists know about this alleged favoring relation, but on whether it actually obtains. Otherwise, it is not clear how it could make sense to contemplate the possibility that there are favoring relations that we are currently ignorant about and that we may discover in the future. Likewise, if scientists come to learn that there are disablers undercutting the alleged reasons to eat yogurt, we will say that they have discovered that the relevant facts about yogurt have never actually been reasons to eat it – and not that they stopped actually being such reasons when the scientist learnt about the existence of the disablers.

Thus, rejecting the disabling power of unknown facts sits uneasily with a factualist account of normative reasons. The same considerations that motivate the requirement that normative reasons are facts (rather than possibly false propositions) seem to motivate as well the requirement that the fact constituting the reason *actually favors* the relevant response – in other words, the requirement that there is actually a suitable connection between the reason

and the fittingness of the response it recommends. Treating r as a normative reason for some response φ does not only involve treating r as a fact, but also treating it as *actually* recommending φ -ing, as *actually* speaking in its favor. This favoring relation between the fact constituting the reason and the response is taken by the agent (perhaps implicitly) to underpin the status of that fact as a normative reason for the response.²⁰

Now, as I have pointed out in the previous paragraphs, when a disabler obtains the putative reason does not actually favor the relevant response, it does not make it fitting in any respect. Thus, if a disabler is present, an agent relying on r as a reason to φ will be mistakenly taking r to favor that response, when it *merely appears* to favor it. If this sort of merely apparent favoring relation is allowed to count as a non-disabled normative reason-giving relation, then it is not clear why one should not also allow apparently true, but actually false considerations to be normative reasons (against the thesis that normative reasons are facts). After all, according to the resulting view, it would not be the case that in order for some consideration to be a normative reason it has to actually be a fact that favors the response: it would be enough if the consideration is *taken to favor* the response. In the same spirit, one could go on to add that it is also enough if the consideration is *taken to be a fact*, regardless of whether it actually is. Why should we privilege the factuality of the consideration constituting the putative reason over the factuality or objectivity of the favoring connection between that consideration and the response?²¹ So, rejecting the possibility of disabling by unknown facts introduces significant pressure to abandon the thesis of the factuality of normative reasons. However, this is a quite popular thesis: while several authors defend that false considerations can be motivating or subjective reasons (see Schroeder 2007; Comesaña and McGrath 2014), it is much less common to defend this view for normative reasons (for arguments against the normative version of non-factualism, see Dancy 2000; Parfit 2011; Alvarez 2010; Sylvan 2016).

Summing up, there are good grounds to think that, when a (non-disabled) disabler is present, the corresponding prima facie reason is disabled, even if the agent is not aware of the presence of the disabler. This result allows us to go from WNW to the stronger thesis SNW. I motivated WNW by arguing that, when we have full evidence, we always end up discovering facts that actually disable those prima facie reasons that could appear to speak in favor of false beliefs. Now, in general such disableds will also exist in situations in which the agent has partial evidence (even if it may happen that she is unaware of their existence). For any putative reason for an agent S to believe a false proposition, an observer with full evidence could always find facts that show that such a putative reason fails to actually speak in favor of that belief – that is, there will always be disabling facts that undercut the alleged favoring connection between the putative reason and the belief (assuming, as I am doing, that the relevant fittingness standard is truth-involving). For instance, imagine an agent S that forms her belief about the current temperature by consulting a thermometer which, unbeknownst to her, is broken. An observer S* with complete evidence would realize that the fact that the thermometer is broken is a disabler for S's reasons to believe, even if S is unaware of the presence of such a disabler. Given what I have discussed in the paragraphs above, the mere existence of disabling facts would suffice to disable the agent's reasons, no matter whether the believing agent is aware of their presence. Thus, we get SNW. Moreover, when arguing in this way for SNW it follows that there cannot be (non-disabled) reasons for false beliefs.

No Reasons for the False (NRF): there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something false.

A possible way to resist this conclusion would be to argue that the facts that may disable reasons for belief are perspective-dependent facts about the mental states of the agent or about how things appear to her. The idea would be that the relevant disabler for S's belief about the temperature is not the fact that the thermometer is broken, but the fact that she knows that it

is broken, or perhaps that it appears to her that it is broken. In a situation with incomplete evidence in which S is not aware that the thermometer is broken, these disabling facts would not obtain. This proposal could perhaps be made to work if the fittingness standard for belief were reasonableness or, more specifically, apparent support by the available evidence. However, it is not very plausible if we assume that the fittingness standard for beliefs is truth-involving. In principle, the connection between a consideration and the truth of some proposition may depend on conditions beyond the agent's epistemic ken. In this way, the testimony of an individual that is intentionally lying is not connected to the truth of what is being testified, and yet these disabling circumstances may remain unknown to a reasonable audience relying on such testimony. Likewise, there is no reliable relation between a broken thermometer and the environmental temperature, regardless of whether the user of the thermometer is aware that it is broken.

Thus, the claim that disablers for reasons for belief can be constituted by facts external to the agent's perspective follows naturally from the assumption that the standard of fittingness for beliefs is truth-involving. Moreover, as we have seen above, factualists about reasons should also think that the mere existence of (non-disabled) disablers for some reason is enough to disable that reason – it is not necessary that the agent is aware of the presence of the relevant disabler. This allows us to move from WNW to SNW and NRF.

Many will think that NRF is highly implausible, given that false beliefs can be reasonable and epistemically blameless. Note, however, that this is not incompatible with NRF. It may be that whether it is reasonable for an agent to believe something is determined by her apparent reasons, that is by those considerations that appear to the agent as reasons (even if perhaps they are not actually such reasons).²² NRF does not rule out that there can be (merely) apparent reasons for false beliefs. NRF does not exclude either the possibility of having reasons to withhold belief. Even if non-disabled reasons to believe p cannot be balanced against non-

disabled reasons to disbelieve it, an agent can still possess reasons to withhold, for instance constituted by the fact that she lacks non-disabled reasons either to believe or disbelieve p . Anyway, for those that remain unconvinced, the arguments I have put forward may be taken to recommend rejecting some of the premises I have assumed (e.g. factualism about reasons).

4. Conclusions

Normative reasons behave very differently in the case of belief and action. Agents often acknowledge the existence of non-disabled reasons in favor of incompatible actions, even when they take one of those actions to be decisively supported by the overall balance of reasons. I have argued that this does not happen with reasons to believe. According to SNW, there cannot be genuine conflicts between non-disabled reasons to believe incompatible things. Arguably, all cases of apparent conflicts of this sort actually involve some disabling story. Going beyond SNW, I have also defended NRF, the claim that there cannot be non-disabled reasons to believe something false.

Both SNW and NRF are bold, heterodox theses. Surely, many philosophers will be initially reluctant to accept such radical views. However, I also think that they are interesting, and potentially illuminating theses, and I hope to have made some contribution to their plausibility. Although I do not claim to have offered decisive, knock-down arguments supporting SNW and NRF, I think that the considerations above make these theses attractive enough and worth exploring. We should not be too quick to conclude that the structure of practical normativity will be mapped onto the doxastic domain without relevant modifications.

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NOTES

¹ I leave open the possibility that non-disabled reasons to believe can be outweighed by reasons to withhold belief, even if not by reasons to disbelieve (for discussion of reasons to withhold, see Schroeder 2012, 2015b). The points I want to make in this paper do not depend on this issue.

² The precise connections between favoring and fittingness can be fleshed out in different ways. For instance, it can be claimed that reasons are facts that make a response fitting in some respect (Schroeter and Schroeter 2009), or that reasons are evidence that there are such fitting-making facts (Whiting 2018). I remain neutral about whether we should understand reasons in terms of fittingness (McHugh and Way 2016a), the other way around (Scanlon 1998; Schroder 2007; Parfit 2011), or whether none of these notions is more fundamental than the other. For further discussion on fittingness, see Chappel (2012), McHugh and Way (2016a), Howard (forthcoming). I will use terms such as 'correct', 'right', 'appropriate' or 'worthy' to speak about fittingness. So, fitting responses are correct, appropriate and worth-producing.

³ What I am calling apparent reasons are sometimes known as *subjective reasons* (see Schroeder 2007). Arguably, whether an agent is praiseworthy or criticizable in adopting some attitude depends on how things appear to be to her, and therefore on her apparent or subjective reasons (for discussion, see González de Prado 2018). So, I grant that false beliefs may be epistemically non-criticizable, since they may (appear to) be supported by apparent reasons. Yet such apparent reasons will not be real normative reasons, so they will not actually favor, or contribute to the fittingness of the false belief in question.

⁴ For an account of reasons as premises of good reasoning, see Way (2017), McHugh and Way (2016a).

⁵ Gregory (2016) characterizes reasons as good bases for responses.

⁶ What about deliberations concerning indeterminate future contingents? It may seem that one can never have complete evidence when deliberating about such questions. We could perhaps say that a perspective of complete evidence in these cases would be that of a fully informed agent at a relevant future time. Anyway, for the sake of simplicity I will leave aside propositions about genuinely indeterministic future contingencies. The views I am going to discuss are sufficiently interesting and controversial when restricted to deterministic matters or propositions that are not about the future. I also leave aside the possibility that p and $\neg p$ are both true in the same world. Again, my proposal is interesting enough in relation to more standard cases.

⁷ See Chappel (2012) for discussion on the relation between desirability and choice-worthiness.

⁸ Since we are considering perspectives with complete evidence, we can even assume that Sylvia comes to know the specific features of Tommy's genome that make Tommy's pigmentation unlike most swans'.

⁹ What should we say about cases of purely statistical evidence? Think, for instance, of the statistical information that 99% of the tickets of a certain lottery are losers. An agent with complete evidence, who knows that ticket 5 actually won, will not take this statistical

information about the lottery to offer any reason to disbelieve that ticket 5 won, although she will not take the evidence provided by such statistical information to be defeated, either.

Arguably, this is so because purely statistical information like this does not provide reasons to outright believe that any particular ticket is a loser. Instead, such information gives reasons to form outright beliefs about the statistical frequency of losing tickets, and for agents with partial evidence it may also offer reasons to adopt certain credences (say, 0.99 credence that ticket 5 is a loser). In line with these ideas, several authors have argued that one cannot come to know or rationally believe something on the basis of mere statistical evidence (Nelkin 2000; Smith 2017; Littlejohn forthcoming). Anyway, if someone wanted to insist that statistical evidence can provide prima facie reasons to outright believe that ticket 5 is a loser, then I would reply that such prima facie reasons are disabled by the further fact that ticket 5 is a statistical rarity, a lottery winner. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

¹⁰ Hughes (forthcoming) puts forward an alternative view according to which there can be normative dilemmas in the epistemic domain. I think that the intuitions behind Hughes' proposal can be accounted for in terms of the contrast between genuine and apparent normative reasons, but due to space limitations I cannot discuss this issue here.

¹¹ Note that this does not entail the existence of genuine practical dilemmas, in which it is not clear which action is supported by stronger reasons.

¹² As mentioned above, things change if pragmatic reasons for belief are allowed. If you are offered different rewards for forming different, incompatible beliefs, you could feel conflicted and experience some regret when deciding to form the belief associated with the most valuable reward. However, I am assuming that rewards and pragmatic considerations of that sort do not count as reasons to believe.

¹³See Comesaña and McGrath (2011) for a defense of the view that the reasons an agent has may be false propositions – where the reasons had by the agent are those considerations on

the basis of which she can respond in certain ways. See also Schroeder's (2007) notion of subjective reason.

¹⁴ It also sounds bad to say: '*p*, although there is some respect in which $\neg p$ is worth-believing.'

¹⁵ Schroeder (2007) claims that when we have the intuition that there are no reasons for (or against) a response, often what happens is just that such reasons are very weak. I do not think that this explains the infelicity of the examples considered here. The point of these examples is not that one cannot find reasons against believing a certain proposition, but rather that when such reasons are acknowledged, one cannot have an outright belief in the proposition.

¹⁶ Relatedly, it has been noted that cases of epistemic akrasia are harder to find than cases of practical akrasia (Hurley 1993; Pettit and Smith 1996; Adler 2002; Owens 2002; Raz 2011). A plausible explanation for this is that in practical decisions one may acknowledge that the strongest available reasons decisively favor *φ -ing*, while still being tempted by weaker contrary reasons to ψ . In the case of belief, there cannot be such temptation by weaker reasons, given that acknowledging that there are decisive reasons to believe *p* would be incompatible with recognizing that there are weaker, non-disabled reasons to disbelieve it (see Owens 2002; Raz 2011: 42; Antill ms).

¹⁷ Assuming that there cannot be non-disabled reasons for incompatible beliefs, when it appears to the agent that there may be reasons to disbelieve *p*, the agent will be explicitly leaving open the possibility that her apparent reasons to believe *p* are actually disabled. Arguably, this will give the agent reasons to withhold belief in *p*.

This does not mean that an agent needs to rule out explicitly all possible sources of error before forming an outright belief. In general, agents may properly ignore some error possibilities, as not relevant given the circumstances of the conversation (see Lewis 1996).

¹⁸ For arguments against identifying outright belief with non-maximal credence, see Smitihies (2012), Clarke (2013), Ross and Schroeder (2014), Greco (2015), Buchak (2014), Weisberg (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Schroeder (2015a) seems to accept that objective reasons – the type of reason I am concerned with – can be disabled by unknown facts. See also Whiting (2014).

²⁰ I am not claiming that an agent relying on r as a reason to φ needs to represent r as favoring φ -ing (for criticism of this view, see McHugh and Way 2016b). It may be enough if she competently treats r as favoring φ -ing (Sylvan 2015; Lord 2018).

²¹ Perhaps another way of putting this idea is that, insofar as the favoring connection between a putative reason and a response is broken, the putative reason will not be a *good* reason for that response (in the sense that it will not actually count in favor of the response). I take it that a reason that is not good at all (i.e. it does not count in favor of the response) has no actual weight, so we can say that it is disabled.

²² For accounts of rationality in terms of apparent reasons, see Schroeder (2007); Way (2009); Parfit (2011); Vogelstein (2012); Whiting (2014); Sylvan (2015).

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