Epistemic vs Practical Balancing of Reasons

Abstract: Several authors have noted an apparent contrast between practical and epistemic reasons: Epistemic reasons balance prohibitively whereas practical reasons balance permissively. This raises a question as to whether the contrast points to a deep difference between practical and epistemic reasons. Selim Berker (2018) argues that it lends support to the view that there are no practical reasons for belief. I argue that, contrary to previous authors, either practical reasons also balance prohibitively, or epistemic reasons never balance prohibitively. Either way, these authors were wrong about the contrast and Berker's argument fails. The discussion reveals a new distinction between types of reasons. I distinguish between vectorial reasons and specific range reasons and argue that it is this distinction, rather than the distinction between epistemic and practical reasons, that explains when and why reasons balance prohibitively vs permissibly.

1   Introduction

Suppose you have equal reason to take course of action *a* and course of action *b*, there is no other course of action that you have reason to take and you cannot do both *a* and *b*. What would it make most sense to do? In typical cases, it would make most sense to do either *a* or *b*. Following Selim Berker (2018), we will call this feature of practical reasoning *permissive balancing* because when reasons are balanced it is permissible to go either way. In contrast, suppose you have equal reason to believe *p* and to believe *~p* and, regarding belief in *p*, there are no other considerations. What would it make most sense to believe? In this epistemic case, it would not make sense to believe either *p* or *~p*. Rather, you should suspend judgment. Once again following Berker, we will call this behavior of epistemic reasons *prohibitive*

balancing because when reasons are balanced, rationality prohibits us to go either way. In the epistemic realm the way to do so is by suspending judgment.

The claim that practical reasons balance permissively whereas epistemic reasons balance prohibitively was suggested a while ago by Gilbert Harman (1995, pp. 179–180), though he uses slightly different terms, and is widely endorsed.[1] It is a striking claim as it seems like it might hold a key to understanding the relationship between the two kinds of reasons. So far, the contrast remains unexplained.

Recently, an argument by Selim Berker has added to this claim an extra layer of significance. Berker does not have an explanation to offer for this general contrast. Nevertheless, he uses the contrast to develop an argument for a far-reaching conclusion: that there are no practical reasons for belief whatsoever. This conclusion stands in contrast to the view that there are two kinds of reasons for belief, practical and epistemic.[2] Berker argues that since epistemic and practical reasons portray different balancing behaviors, if indeed there were both epistemic and practical reasons for belief, they would have no way to interact with each other. He then argues that this is a reason to believe that only one kind of reasons for belief exists.

The following is a summary of Berker's argument:

(1) Practical reasons only balance permissively.

(2) Epistemic reasons only balance prohibitively.

(3) If (1) and (2), then there is no plausible way for these two kinds of reasons to interact.

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[1] For a list of references, see Berker (2018, n. 6).

[2] These are not the only possibilities. Susanna Rinard (2022) challenges the view that there are epistemic reasons for belief, arguing that there are only practical reasons for belief.

(4) If there are both epistemic and practical reasons for belief, then they must interact.

(5) Therefore, there are no practical reasons for belief.

In response to Berker's argument, Adam Shmidt (2020) argues that if pure pragmatism about reasons for belief, the view that all reasons for belief are ultimately practical, is true, then premise (2) should be denied. Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen and Mattias Skipper (2019) argue that if instrumentalism about epistemic reasons is true, that is the view that all epistemic reasons for belief are relative to certain ends, then premise (3) should be denied. Similarly, Howard (2019) develops a model for resolving conflicts between epistemic and practical reasons. Berker himself anticipates and discusses a separatist view that denies premise (4). Nobody thus far has questioned premise (1), as I will do shortly.

In the next section I will argue that there are counterexamples to premise (1). The rest of the article explores an explanation for why reasons sometimes balance prohibitively and other times balance permissively. In section 3 I draw a distinction between two types of practical reasons and argue that the one tends to balance prohibitively while the other tends to balance permissively. In section 4 I apply this distinction to epistemic reasons. In section 5, I raise an objection and respond.

2   Prohibitive Balancing in Practical Reasoning

In this section I argue that prohibitive balancing is sometimes present in practical reasoning as well. Moreover, it can be present in practical reasoning as applied to beliefs. In the next section I will suggest a diagnosis.

Suppose you have ten hours a week that can be dedicated either to spending time with your family or preparing your lectures, and you have to decide how much of that time to allocate to each of the activities. Suppose a crazy billionaire offers 1,000$ if you spend 3 hours with your family, and another crazy billionaire offers 1,000$ if you spend 7 hours with your

family, no other considerations are involved. What should you do? You should either spend 3 or 7 hours with your family. This is the kind of case Berker was thinking of in which practical reasoning exhibits permissive balancing. However, not all cases of practical reasoning behave in this way.

Crazy billionaires are not what we typically come across in real life. Suppose instead that you had reason to spend the ten hours with your family, because spending time with your family is a way to strengthen your relationship with your family, and your family deserves your attention. And suppose this is balanced by a reason to spend those ten hours preparing for a lecture, and your students deserve a good lecture. What you should do is very dependent on particulars of the context. But in a wide range of ordinary cases, it would make most sense to do neither and to compromise, spending half of that time with your family and the other half preparing the lecture. Any such case would be a case in which practical reasons prohibitively suggest that you compromise.

The same can happen with regard to practical reasons for belief. Now I know that Berker's whole point is that we should think that there are no practical reasons for belief. But there are examples that are difficult to deny, and I find Berker's way of denying them difficult to digest. Let's go back to our crazy billionaires. Suppose a crazy billionaire offered you 1000$ if you were to believe p. That seems intuitively like a practical reason for belief. Berker, due to the deep divide he finds between reasons for belief and for action, thinks that actually the billionaire's offer would not be a reason for belief, but rather a reason to intend to believe. To me this seems wrong. I do not understand what other reason this billionaire could give you other than a reason to be in the state of believing p. The billionaire will not give you the money if you just intend to believe p. I will therefore assume such a billionaire gives you a practical reason to believe p.

Billionaire examples are the kinds of examples that push people to think that practical reasons for belief are always permissive. They think: if one billionaire offered you 1000$ to believe p, and another billionaire offered you 1000$ to believe ~p, then it would make equal sense to either believe p or believe ~p. It would not make sense to withhold judgment, if these were somehow your only considerations. However, even practical reasons for belief do not always exhibit this permissive behavior. Once again, instead of crazy billionaires, let's consider a more ordinary scenario in which someone might have a practical reason for belief.

Suppose you need to figure out what to believe about a certain disreputable act. A has been accused on social media of assaulting B. A is your friend. Many people are attracted to the view that we owe our friends a special presumption in their favor (Stroud, 2006). Suppose that is correct. That would mean that in this case you have a practical reason to believe that A is innocent. Suppose furthermore that B is also your friend and that this is a practical reason to trust B's claim that A is blameworthy. You might not think that in this particular case the practical reasons are as described. However, assuming there are any practical reasons for belief, it is very plausible that you can come up with a case with similar features. If these were your only considerations, what should you believe all things considered? Intuitively, you should withhold belief. It would make no sense to arbitrarily choose to believe either A or B's version.

Sometimes, when faced with opposing practical reasons, what one must do is compromise rather than arbitrarily choose between extremes. If this is correct, it means that the divide between practical and epistemic reasons is not as sharp as Berker suggests. Practical reasons exhibit both permissive and prohibitive balancing. And this is enough to undermine Berker's argument against the existence of practical reasons for belief. Now it is true that, as far as I can tell, epistemic reasons only exhibit prohibitive balancing, and this is something to be explained. I will do so in section 4.

3   Vectorial reasons

In this section I introduce a new distinction between types of reasons. I will argue that this distinction nicely explains why sometimes reasons balance prohibitively and other times permissively.

Often, we have to decide not between two or three courses of action, but rather between a wide range of possibilities. These possibilities can be arranged in various structures. Let us return to an example from above. Suppose you have to decide how much of your time to dedicate to quality time with your family and, due to various constraints, you can only choose between 0 to 10 hours a week. The possibilities can be represented as a continuous linear scale, thus:
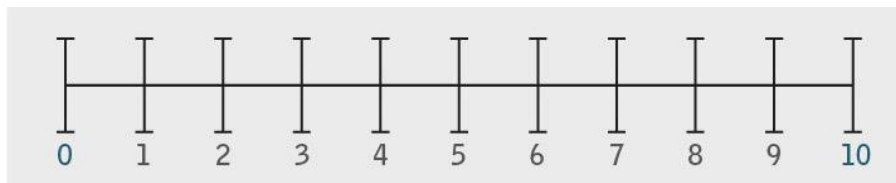

Given this range of possibilities, there are different types of practical reasons that can come into play. Let us focus on two such types. One type of reason is a reason to spend a very specific amount of time with your family. This is what happens in the crazy billionaire examples from above. If a crazy billionaire offers you 1,000$ to spend exactly 3 hours with your family, no more and no less, that is a reason to spend 3 hours with your family, no more and no less. We can call such reasons *particular-action* reasons. Particular-action reasons can be contrasted with a different kind of reason. What we normally have are not reasons to spend a particular amount of time with our family, but rather reasons to spend *more* or *less* time with our family. For instance, the fact that your relationship with your family is important to you and the more quality time you spend with them the more you will strengthen that relationship, is a reason to spend more time with them. The fact that you have other

important tasks competing for your time, such as preparing your lectures and doing research, can be reasons to spend less time with your family. We can call this second type of reasons *more or less* reasons. You may be skeptical that there really are, in real life, more or less reasons. I will discuss such a worry shortly (section 5). For the time being, it suffices for our purposes that in principle there can be reasons of this sort.

I suggest that *particular-action* reasons exhibit permissive balancing, whereas *more or less* reasons exhibit prohibitive balancing. If one billionaire offers 1,000$ if you spend 3 hours with your family, and another crazy billionaire offers 1,000$ if you spend 7 hours with your family, and there are no other considerations involved, you can arbitrarily choose between spending 3 or 7 hours with your family. No compromise, like spending 5 hours with them, would make any sense. However, if you have a reason to spend *more* of the 10 hours with your family and a reason, of equal weight, to spend *less* of the 10 hours with your family and there are no other considerations, then, at least sometimes, it would make most sense to compromise, and spend 5 hours with your family.

We can generalize even more. There may be reasons that do not favor a very specific action, but rather favor a certain set of actions, all to the same extent. For example, there may be a crazy billionaire who offers you 1,000$ if you spend anywhere between 2–4 hours with your family. We may call such reasons *particular set* reasons. *Particular set* reasons also exhibit permissive balancing. Just think of what would happen if one billionaire wanted you to spend between 2–4 hours with your family, while the other one wanted you to spend between 7–8 hours with them.

The range of options can have more than a single dimension. For example, suppose you have to decide how to split your 10 hours between quality time with family, preparing lectures and relaxing. These possibilities can be represented by a two-dimensional diagram like this:

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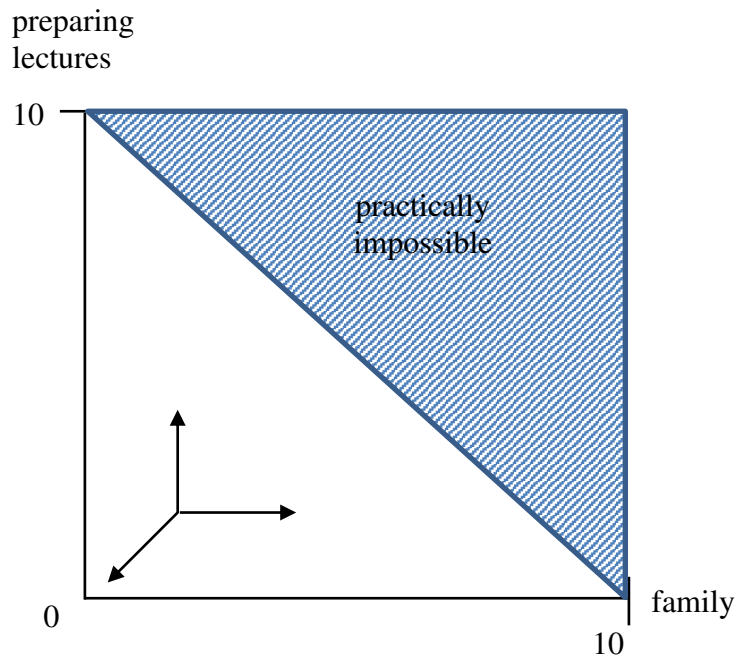
Although there is a third dimension to this case, it can be left out of the diagram since the time you will dedicate to relaxation, is just whatever is left of the ten hours after we deduce the time spent with family and preparing lectures. Now you can have reasons to spend more or less time on each of these three tasks. The reasons can be represented as vectors, that is, as having a direction and a length. The direction of the vector represents the direction of the reason. If, for instance, you have a reason to spend more time with your family, the direction of the vector will be along the time-with-family axis towards the 10. The length of the vector represents the strength of the reason. We can call the type of reason that is representable with a vector, "vectorial reasons". Vectorial reasons need not be perpendicular to an axis. In our last example, for instance, a reason to spend more time relaxing would be represented as a vector 45 degrees from the two axes. Quite generally, vectorial reasons represent a broader class of reasons than *more or less* reasons. In order to apply vectorial reasons, we need another piece of data, a starting point. It is an interesting question what determines the starting point. The starting point might be some relevant default, say, the middle, if there is one. Or maybe some other account for the starting point can be given. However, the starting

point is not part of the vectorial reason, it's a separate factor and we can leave it for others to explore.

When only vectorial reasons are involved, how do they balance against each other? It seems natural to think that their balancing behavior is similar to the way vectors are normally combined. This gives us the intuitive compromise result in the examples. Vectorial reasons exhibit prohibitive balancing.

I introduced two general types of reasons, particular range and vectorial reasons. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list. Rather, I focus on them because they are the types relevant to analyzing Berker's contrast. An interesting question to ask about these two types of reasons is how do they weigh against each other? Suppose a billionaire offers you 1000$ to spend 3 hours with your family, but you also have reason to spend more time with your family to enhance your relationship with them. How can these very different sorts of reasons be compared? Much of Berker's paper is an argument that this is a difficult question to answer, when one type of reason is epistemic and the other practical. However, the same difficulty, mutatis mutandis, applies to weighing out practical reasons for action of the different types. To the extent that we should think there is a resolution within the practical domain, we should think the same will work for interactions between practical and epistemic reasons.

4   Epistemic Reasons are Vectorial

In the previous section we focused on practical reasons of various sorts. Now we return to epistemic reasons. I suggest that what we call "epistemic reasons to believe p or $\sim p$" are really reasons to raise or decrease credence in p. That is, they are vectorial reasons. And this is what explains their prohibitive balancing behavior. This is not a trivial claim, given that

there is an ongoing debate regarding the relationship between partial beliefs (or credences) and binary beliefs (Jackson, 2020).

If one billionaire offers 1000\$ if you have a credence in *p* within the range of [0.1–0.3] and another billionaire offers 1000\$ for the range [0.7–0.9], and there are no other considerations, it would make no sense to withhold judgment. You can arbitrarily choose any credence within one of the two ranges. However, in the friendship cases, your friendship with A is a reason to raise credence in A's version, and your friendship with B is a reason to raise credence in B's version. These are vectorial reasons, and they exhibit prohibitive balancing. It makes most sense to compromise and withhold judgment.

Those were two simple cases. Suppose A is a meteorologist, and A tells us that there's a 40% chance that it will rain tomorrow. Assuming the principal principle, this is a reason to have 0.4 confidence that it will rain tomorrow. Suppose B is also a meteorologist and B says that there's a 60% chance that it will rain tomorrow. Once again, suppose the principal principle, that would be a reason to have 0.6 credence that it will rain tomorrow. How do these opposing reasons weigh against each other? If you have no reason to believe that A is more or less reliable than B, it would make most sense to compromise, that is, to have 0.5 credence in rain tomorrow. Is this a counterexample to my claim? After all, the testimonies of the meteorologists seem like reasons to be at specific points, yet they exhibit prohibitive balancing.

My response is that initial appearances were misleading. When meteorologist A says there is a 40% chance of rain tomorrow, that is a reason to move my credence in rain tomorrow closer to 40%. It is not, strictly speaking, a reason to be at 40%. The misleading appearance is no different essentially than in the case of an apparent binary reason for belief. If a meteorologist says it will rain tomorrow for sure, that appears to be a reason to believe that it will rain

specifically, but I claim that it is a reason to move in that direction, not just to have a full belief.

Can epistemic reasons ever be genuinely specific range and exemplify permissive balancing? I cannot think of any such possibility. This suggests that it is in the nature of epistemic reasons that they are vectorial; they can never be specific range reasons.

5   Objection: No genuine prohibitive balancing of practical reasons

If, contrary to premise (1), there are genuine cases of prohibitive balancing of practical reasons, that is an interesting and costly piece of data for Berker's argument. However, there are reasons to doubt that the examples I've given are genuine cases of prohibitive balancing. There is an alternative way of analyzing the cases such that they do not count as balancing at all.

Let us first recapitulate how we determine whether some set of reasons exhibit permissive or prohibitive balancing. We choose a case in which we have conflicting reasons. In the simple case, which is the only kind of case we've been thinking of so far, there are only two sets of reasons at play, and they're of equal weight: reasons for A and reasons for B, and A and B are incompatible. A can be a course of action or an epistemic attitude. Then we judge how it would make most sense to judge such a conflict. If either A or B would make sense, then that is a case of permissive balancing. If neither possibility that would make sense, but rather some compromise C is required, then we call it prohibitive balancing. This is the general schema.

Now in the previous sections I argued that sometimes we find prohibitive balancing within the domain of practical reasons. For any example I gave to be genuine case of prohibitive balancing, it must be such that one has reason to do A, reason to do B and no other considerations whatsoever. If then the result is that one must do C, then it is a case of

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prohibitive balancing. However, one might object and argue that in all those examples there are not just reasons to do A and to do B. Rather, there are also reasons to do C, and those reasons outweigh the reasons to do A or B or any other course of action. So there is no genuine prohibitive balancing. Only domination of reasons.

Take the time-with-family example. I presented the case as if there is a reason to spend more time with family which balances against a reason to spend less time. An alternative analysis of the case is that when I have most reason to compromise, then it is not because there are opposing reasons to compromise, but rather, I have most reason to spend about 5 hours with my family and 5 hours preparing the lecture. This is obviously not always the case. If my family is such that if I spend any less than 9 hours with them my relationships will be disrupted, then the compromise will make no sense. Similarly, if spending only 5 hours preparing my lecture does not significantly improve the lecture in comparison to 1 hour, then spending 5 hours on each does not make sense. It only makes sense to compromise when, in fact, this is an optimal way, given my constraints, to maintain a good relationship with my family and to prepare a decent lecture. So, arguably, whenever a compromise makes sense, it is because I have most reason to compromise, not because opposing reasons of equal weight are being balanced.

Sometimes the situation can have a nice mathematical representation. Suppose we represent the scenario using two functions. One function takes as input the time you spend with your family, and outputs a number representing the value of that quality time. The other function does the same for preparing your lecture. If 10 hours with family has the same value as 10 hours for preparation, and both functions from time to value are linear, then (assuming 0 time has the same value for both too) the two functions are identical. Which means that no matter how you split your time, the sum of value of the time spent with family and time spent for lecture preparation would be the same, and any combination should be permissible assuming

no other considerations are involved. Only some pairs of functions will be such that the compromise dominates other possibilities.

That was the objection. Here is my response. The same can be said for any case of prohibitive balancing of epistemic reasons. In any case in which what we should do is withhold judgment about *p*, it must be the case that withholding belief is advantageous in comparison to believing *p* and in comparison to believing ~*p*. Otherwise, how could it be the case that it only makes sense to withhold belief? What precisely is the advantage of withholding belief is a question that is not easy to answer and there are different general proposals as to why one epistemic state is advantageous over another. Some might argue that it is expected to be more accurate, given certain assumptions about how accuracy should be measured. However, even without settling this question, I argue that we should see it as settleable. Think of it as a dilemma. Either there is some reason to prefer withholding belief or there is not. If there is, then, just like the practical cases, it is arguably not a case of balancing at all. If there is not a reason to prefer withholding belief, then how can it be that withholding belief is what you must do?

To conclude, either practical and epistemic reasons both can balance prohibitively, or neither of them ever does. Either way, contrary to Harman et al, it is not the case that practical and epistemic reasons always balance differently, and Berker's argument against practical reasons for belief relies on a false premise.

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