Epistemology
Without Guidance*

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§I. The Alleged Importance of Guidance

Many epistemologists think that reflecting on the connection between normativity and guidance can help us to decide between competing views about the most fundamental epistemic norms of belief – norms like: be rational; believe only truths; believe what your evidence supports, and; believe only what you know.¹ The idea is that the these norms must be

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¹ This is a draft. Feel free to cite it but bear in mind that it might change. If you’re going to quote it directly, it’s probably a good idea to email me first.

capable of giving us adequate (useful, usable, etc.) guidance, and that we should accept one set of norms, or one way of understanding that set of norms, over another on the grounds that the former, unlike the latter, meets this demand.

In this paper I’ll argue that these philosophers are mistaken; guidance considerations cannot help us to decide between competing views about the fundamental norms. My approach will be to look in detail at a test case for the claim that they can. I’ll present a normative epistemology which, I hope you’ll agree, guidance considerations would tell against if they could tell for or against any view about these norms. I’ll then argue that they don’t tell against it. From this, I’ll argue, we can infer that guidance considerations have no role to play in deciding between competing views about these norms.

The plan is this. §2 presents a puzzle about epistemic normativity. §3 presents a possible solution to it – this will be our test case. §4 describes a natural way of thinking about what adequate guidance must be if this view fails to provide it. §5 argues that this conception of adequate guidance is too strong for it to help us decide between competing views about the fundamental norms. In short, the problem is that if this is what adequate guidance amounts to, then no normative epistemology gives it. §6 looks at one obvious way of weakening our understanding of what constitutes adequate guidance in order to overcome the problem. §7 argues that, whilst this might seem at first to do the trick, ultimately it still cannot help us to decide between the competing views. §8-9 consider several other ways of thinking about guidance and argue that none of them does the job either. §10 discusses a variety of ways in which the point generalises to other areas of normative epistemology. §11 concludes by sketching a more expansive and optimistic way of thinking about
On to the puzzle. It begins with two plausible-looking claims:

**TRUTH**: One ought (epistemically) to only believe truths

**RATIONALITY**: One ought (epistemically) to be epistemically rational

There’s plenty of scope for debate about how **TRUTH** and **RATIONALITY** should be interpreted, but it is hard to deny that each is true in some sense. Now consider the following case, which is based on a true story:

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[2] The concept of adequate guidance is protean. Space constraints make it impossible to discuss everything epistemologists have had to say about it. I have omitted discussion of Gluer & Wikforss’ (2009, 2013) guidance-related objections to normativism, and arguments against practical reasons for belief that appeal to internal reasons (Kelly 2002, Shah 2006, Way 2016, et al.)

[3] One thing that shouldn’t be up for debate is their logical form. Let ‘O’ = ‘it ought to be the case that’, ‘B’ = ‘one believes that’, and ‘RB’ = ‘it is rational for one to believe that’. **TRUTH** should be read as saying O(Bp → p). In the case where belief is rational, **RATIONALITY** should be read as O(RBp → Bp). When suspension is rational, and ‘S’ = ‘one suspends on’, O(RSp → Sp)…and so on. One result of this is that **TRUTH** and **RATIONALITY** do not require one to take an attitude towards a proposition tout court, but only require (permit forbid, etc.) combinations of attitudes and states of affairs. For instance, **TRUTH** requires that in circumstances C, in which p is false, one does not believe that p. However, for ease of exposition I will often write as though **TRUTH** and **RATIONALITY** require (permit, forbid) attitudes towards propositions. When I do, these claims should be interpreted in the way just indicated.
BRUEGHEL: *The Crucifixion*, a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Younger, hangs in a church in a small town in Northern Italy. A gang of thieves intends to steal it. After weeks of planning, late one March night they quietly disable the church alarm system, break in through the apse door, snatch the painting from its frame, and make their escape. Back at the boss’s house, they celebrate; they expect to negotiate a large ransom from the government for its return. Meanwhile, the local police are also celebrating. After being tipped off about the thieves’ plan, they set up a hidden camera in the church and replaced the painting with an identical-looking replica. Now they can use the camera footage to identify the thieves. The actual Brueghel is sitting in a vault in the basement of the Uffizi.

Let ‘p’ = ‘the thieves have a painting by Brueghel’. According to *truth* the thieves ought not to believe that p, since it is false. But wouldn’t it be irrational for them not to believe it?\(^4\) Herein lies the problem. If that’s right, then there are cases in which *truth* and *rationality* issue conflicting instructions. Sometimes *truth* tells you not to believe that p even whilst *rationality* tells you to believe that p. But it’s logically impossible to both believe that p and not believe that p at the same time. Call any case in which *truth* and *rationality* conflict a ‘conflict case’. The puzzle is: what should we say about conflict cases?

\(^4\) Epistemologists who think there are only negative epistemic duties (e.g. Nelson 2010, Littlejohn 2013) will deny this. See [omitted-b] for an argument that they are mistaken.
§III. Dilemmism

I think they should be taken at face value. My view – dilemmism – is that TRUTH and RATIONALITY both express requirements. You’re required to believe that \( p \) in conflict cases, and at the same time required not to believe that \( p \).\(^5\) And that’s that. Neither requirement outweighs or takes priority over the other, and we cannot resolve the conflict by appealing to the idea that there are different senses of ‘ought’ at work or anything like that. Just as there are moral dilemmas, in which you fall short of living up to the demands of morality whatever you do, so too are there epistemic dilemmas.\(^6\)

That’s the dilemmic view in outline. Clearly, many details need to be filled in, and there’s also the matter of why we should prefer it to the myriad possible alternatives. I won’t discuss any of that here. The point of this article isn’t to defend dilemmism. Its role here is only to serve as a test case for the idea that guidance considerations can help us decide between competing views about the fundamental norms of belief, and this outline will suffice for it to serve that role.

I have been told that dilemmism must be rejected because it fails to give adequate guidance. In conflict cases, it says that you must believe that \( p \), and must not believe that \( p \). This “guidance” looks completely useless. Furthermore, it’s plausible that if any (sane) view about the fundamental norms of belief can be dismissed on the grounds that it fails to give adequate guidance, dilemmism can be. It seems to have all of the features to make it potentially unsuitable as a guide. In committing to TRUTH it

\(^5\) At first glance this might look like a logical contradiction. It isn’t. See [omitted-b].
\(^6\) See [omitted-b] for a defence of this view. This paper elaborates and expands on some things I said there.
faces the problem of issuing imperatives that the people subject to them are not necessarily in a position to know about. It also issues imperatives that it is impossible — logically impossible — to comply with. And these imperatives are demanding — you are not merely advised, but required, to comply with them. This combination of properties intuitively makes dilemmism especially vulnerable to the charge that it fails to be adequately guiding. This makes it the perfect test case for our purposes. If it can be shown that guidance considerations don’t favour rejecting dilemmism in favour of one of the alternatives to it, then we can reasonably conclude that such considerations cannot tell for or against any plausible view about the fundamental norms of belief.

§IV. Motivating Norms and Perfect Guides

So far, we have the intuitive thought that dilemmism fails to give adequate guidance. Call this the ‘guidance objection’. It needs to be sharpened up. What exactly is it about dilemmism that makes it inadequate as a guide?

§4.1. Ignorance and Inability

One obvious worry, noted above, is that in conflict cases at least one of dilemmism’s demands is opaque to you. Think about the BRUEGHEL case. The thieves are not in a position to know that TRUTH requires them not to believe that p. When a normative theory allows for the possibility of circumstances in which you are required to φ but not in a position to know about it, it fails, in some intuitive sense, to be available as a guide.\(^7\) This

\(^7\) The idea that guidance considerations rule out the possibility of unknowable requirements is a popular one. See Hudson (1989), Jackson (1991), and Kagan (1998).
suggests a desideratum on adequate guidance that dilemmism fails to satisfy. Call it **TRANSPARENCY**:

**TRANSPARENCY**: A normative theory is adequately guiding only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you are in a position to know that it requires you to φ.

Secondly (and also noted above), in conflict cases dilemmism gives you instructions it is manifestly impossible to follow. When a normative theory allows for the possibility that you can be required to φ even though you are clearly unable to φ, it is again in some intuitive sense not usable as a guide. This gives us a second desideratum on adequate guidance that dilemmism fails to satisfy. Call it **ABILITY**:

**ABILITY**: A normative theory is adequately guiding only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you are able to φ.

§4.2. Motivating Reasons

Is there a unified notion of guidance that connects these two seemingly disparate desiderata? There may be. Whatever else it takes for you to have been guided by a fact, that fact must surely have exerted some kind of influence on you. But not just any old kind of influence will do. The fact that he’s drunk might influence John’s behaviour by causing him to start a fight. But his decision to start the fight wasn’t guided by the fact that he was drunk – it was a reason why he started the fight, but it wasn’t his reason; his reason was the way the other guy looked at him. The contrast here is between explanatory reasons and motivating reasons: between the

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It is often argued that guidance considerations rule out the possibility of impossible-to-satisfy requirements. See, for instance, Hare (1963), Driver (1983), Smith (1986), Williams (1995), Griffin (1992), and Copp (2003).
facts that help to explain someone’s action, and the facts that motivated them to perform it. A natural thought is that a person’s action has been guided by the fact that \( p \) if, and only if, they act as they do at least in part because – that is to say, for the reason that – \( p \), where the ‘because’ is understood as that of a motivating reason. It follows that your action has been guided by a norm’s requirement that you \( \varphi \) if and only if you act as you do in part because the norm requires you to \( \varphi \). This sounds quite plausible. Levitical law prohibits consumption of any animal that ‘parts the hoof but does not chew the cud’. If you order the salmon rather than the pork, then you comply with this law. But you may be unaware of the law, or simply indifferent to it. Unless you order the salmon rather than the pork in part because Levitical law requires that of you, your decision hasn’t been guided by the law. Your compliance is merely coincidental.

Call this idea MOTIVATING NORMS:

MOTIVATING NORMS: When a norm requires someone to \( \varphi \), their behaviour is guided by the norm if and only if they act as they do at least in part because (i.e. for the reason that) the norm requires them to \( \varphi \).

MOTIVATING NORMS isn’t without problems, as we’ll see later. But it’s a good starting point, for as we’ll see shortly it provides us with a way of thinking about guidance according to which dilemmism is clearly inadequate.

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9 I say ‘in part’ because although we often talk of the reason why someone did something, in reality a complete explanation will almost always make reference to a plurality of reasons.

10 I borrow this example from Smith (2012)
§4.3. Perfect Guides

As it stands, MOTIVATING NORMS is schematic. How we flesh it out will depend on how we think about motivating reasons. So far, we have assumed ‘factualism’: the view that worldly facts can be our motivating reasons. Some philosophers think that it is not worldly facts that are our motivating reasons, but rather the contents of our beliefs – i.e. propositions. Another view – psychologism – maintains that they are our psychological states themselves. However, we need not concern ourselves with this debate here. For the time being I’ll assume a factualist interpretation of MOTIVATING NORMS. Later on, we’ll look at alternative interpretations of it that will be more congenial to those who reject factualism. In the meantime, following on from MOTIVATING NORMS, let’s call ‘PERFECT GUIDES’ the idea that a normative theory is adequately guiding if and only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you are able to φ for the reason that you are required to φ:

PERFECT GUIDES: A normative theory is adequately guiding if and only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you are able to φ for the reason that you are required to φ.

Why ‘PERFECT’ GUIDES? Because the claim is that a normative theory is adequately guiding only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you can φ for the reason that you are required to φ. We’ll see soon why this is important.

11 Prominent factualists include Alverez (2010) and Hyman (2015).
12 For example, Comesana & McGrath (2014). I’ll assume here, since nothing turns on it, that a fact is a true proposition. ‘Propositionalists’ about motivating reasons think that false propositions can also be our motivating reasons.
13 E.g. Davidson (1963)
14 PERFECT GUIDES doesn’t quite flow naturally from MOTIVATING NORMS. MOTIVATING NORMS says that your actions have been guided by a requirement to φ if you act as you do in part because you’re required to φ. But it doesn’t specify that the action in question must be φ-ing
PERFECT GUIDES looks fairly plausible at first glance, and there are good reasons to think that it entails both TRANSPARENCY and ABILITY. A number of philosophers have argued that the fact that p can be one’s reason for φ-ing only if one knows that p. Let’s call this HYMAN’S THESIS, since it’s most closely associated with John Hyman (1999, 2015):

HYMAN’S THESIS: The fact that p can be one’s reason for φ-ing only if one knows that p.

Why accept HYMAN’S THESIS? Here is a variation on the argument Hyman gives. Like the BRUEGHEL case, it’s based on a true story. Once, at a house party in Brighton, I went to go into a bedroom. On opening the door, I saw a panther lying on the bed. I nearly jumped out of my skin and immediately slammed the door shut. After taking a few seconds to gather myself I realised that of course there couldn’t really be a panther in the room. This was urban England, not rural Indonesia. It must be a life-sized stuffed toy. Why did I slam the door? It wasn’t because there was a panther in the room, since there wasn’t. No true explanation has a false explanans. A better explanation is that it was because I believed there was a panther in the room. Why did I slam the door? It wasn’t because there was a panther in the room, since there wasn’t. No true explanation has a false explanans. A better explanation is that it was because I believed there was a panther in the room. Now suppose instead (and here we depart from actual events) that in addition to the toy panther on the bed, unbeknownst to me there really was a panther in the room, hidden from view, lying under the bed. It should be obvious that this makes no explanatory difference. I still didn’t slam the door because there was a panther in the room, but rather because I believed that there was. And yet my belief that there was a panther in the room was both true and (let’s imagine) rational.

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rather than something else. Some philosophers (Jay 2012, Talbot 2016) have inferred from this point that guidance considerations don’t motivate ABILITY. I think they’re right, but I won’t press the matter here since my concerns with PERFECT GUIDES and ABILITY, to be presented shortly, are independent of this point.
So why couldn’t the fact that there was a panther in the room be the reason why I slammed the door? Hyman maintains (and I agree) that the most plausible answer is: because I didn’t know that there was a panther in the room. If that’s right, what best explains it? Answer: HYMAN’S THESIS.15

If HYMAN’S THESIS is right, that’s TRANSPARENCY covered. And ABILITY is straightforward: you can’t φ for the reason that p if you can’t φ.

This adds some substance to the guidance objection; we now have more than just an intuition. Furthermore, it’s clear that if PERFECT GUIDES is right, then dilemmism fails to give adequate guidance. So, do we have a good reason to reject dilemmism here?

§V. Imperfect Guides

We do not. PERFECT GUIDES is too strong. Neither of TRANSPARENCY or ABILITY are genuine desiderata for adequate guidance.

§5.1. On TRANSPARENCY

Let’s start with TRANSPARENCY. The problem with it is that there are a variety of reasons, both theoretical and empirical, to think that no non-trivial condition is such that, whenever it obtains, one is in a position to know that it obtains (in other words, no non-trivial condition is, as Timothy Williamson (2000) has put it, ‘luminous’).16 This applies to the

15 In addition to Hyman, see Unger (1975), Williamson (2000), Hornsby (2007), and Littlejohn (2013). In [omitted-c] I argued against the thesis. I have since changed my mind.
16 For a survey of these reasons, see Srinivasan (2015).
condition being required to \( \varphi \) as much as it does to any other. It follows that no possible normative epistemology satisfies TRANSPARENCY. This is a familiar observation. As Amia Srinivasan (2015) points out, the sensible conclusion to draw from it isn’t that no normative epistemology is capable of giving adequate guidance, but rather that TRANSPARENCY is too strong.

§5.2. On ABILITY

What about ABILITY? Interestingly, a knock-on effect shows that it is also too strong. According to MOTIVATING NORMS you can only be guided in \( \varphi \)-ing by a requirement to \( \varphi \) if you are both able to \( \varphi \) and know that you’re required to \( \varphi \). Think back to the Levitical law example. If you order the salmon rather than the pork, then you are certainly able to comply with the law, since actuality implies possibility. But if you are unaware of the law, then you’re not guided by it when you decide on the salmon. Again, your compliance is coincidental. Both of the ability and knowledge conditions must be met if you are to be guided by a requirement. If one is but the other isn’t, then it’s not as though you have somehow been partially guided by the requirement. You haven’t been guided by it at all. Recall, the thought behind ABILITY is that requirements must be guiding yet aren’t if you can’t comply with them. But as we’ve already seen, the limits of our knowledge guarantee that requirements sometimes aren’t guiding. In that case, there is simply no ground on which to maintain that you must always be able to comply with requirements lest they be incapable of guiding you. It’s too late, that ship has sailed. The upshot is that ABILITY is left unmotivated.\(^\text{17}\)

As simple as it is, this argument goes quite a long way. Ability comes in grades. \( \varphi \)-ing may be logically possible, but not metaphysically possible;

\(^{17}\) See [omitted-d] for a more detailed version of this argument.
metaphysically possible, but not nomologically possible; nomologically possible but not physiologically possible...and so on. Dilemmism is committed to the claim that one can be required to do that which is logically impossible – the strongest grade of impossibility. One might have thought that the argument only shows that some interpretations of ABILITY cannot be motivated by guidance considerations. But that would be a mistake. On the MOTIVATING NORMS schema, luminosity failure precludes guidance considerations from motivating even the least committal interpretation of ABILITY, according to which the kind of ability in question is that of bare logical possibility: if, due to ignorance, you cannot always be guided by the requirements that bind you, there is simply no guidance-related motivation even for saying that it must be logically possible to satisfy those requirements.\footnote{I have experienced some resistance on this point. Some philosophers with whom I have discussed it have pointed out that it is a contingent fact resulting from our limited discriminatory capacities that no condition is luminous for beings like us. There are possible beings for whom every condition is luminous (c.f. Srinivasan 2013). They then reason that even if we cannot always be guided by TRUTH and RATIONALITY, due to our ignorance, beings with luminous discriminatory capacities could be. But, they point out, even these beings could not extract useful guidance from dilemmism in conflict cases. They conclude that guidance considerations do motivate the bare-logical-possibility interpretation of ABILITY after all – without it we do not have a normative epistemology that provides guidance for epistemically idealised agents. I agree with everything here except the conclusion. Two reasons to reject it. Firstly, epistemologists who maintain that guidance considerations are important universally agree that the norms of belief should be able to guide us. So questions about whether and how they can guide epistemically idealised agents are beside the point. Secondly, beings with luminous discriminatory capacities will never encounter conflict cases in the first place: for every p, these beings know whether p, and know that they know whether p. Assuming that knowledge entails rationality, it follows that TRUTH and RATIONALITY will never issue them conflicting directives. As a result, the fact that they could not extract useful guidance from dilemmism in conflict cases is moot: such cases will not (and could not) arise. We will return to ABILITY later when we look at ways of thinking about guidance that don’t accept MOTIVATING NORMS (for instance, ways that think of epistemic norms as guiding ideals).}
§VI. Degrees of Guidance

If we interpret the claim that a normative epistemology must be adequately guiding along the lines of PERFECT GUIDES no normative epistemology gives adequate guidance. So it can hardly be an objection to dilemmism that it comes up short too. It also follows that guidance considerations cannot help us to decide between competing views about the fundamental norms of belief. A different approach is needed if we are to make sense of the guidance objection. There are two ways we can go at this point. We might consider weakening PERFECT GUIDES, or we might start looking at alternatives to MOTIVATING NORMS or the factualist interpretation of it. We’ll get to the second idea later. Before we do, I want to explore the first.

PERFECT GUIDES says that a normative theory is adequately guiding only if, whenever it requires you to φ, you are able to φ for the reason that you are required to φ. So if there are any cases in which you are required to φ but cannot φ for that reason, the theory is inadequate. But the idea of adequate guidance need not be so stringent and simpleminded. We might instead view the relationship between theories and guidance as a matter of degrees. The thought would be that even if no normative theory is perfectly guiding – even if we can’t always be guided by its imperatives – the more often a theory can be used as a guide – the more frequently we can be guided by its imperatives – the better. To be clear, the idea isn’t that the more demands it makes, the better a normative theory is. Totalitarianism isn’t a theoretical virtue. Rather, it is that the more often one is in a position to be guided by the demands it does make, the better
the theory is. *Ceteris paribus*, one theory is better than another if we are more often in a position to be guided by the instructions issued by the former than we are the latter.

We need to be careful here. The *ceteris paribus* proviso is important. There are many dimensions of evaluation on which normative theories should be judged, and their availability as guides is only one. If we put too much emphasis on guidance we will end up with bizarre and implausible conclusions. For example, suppose for the sake of argument that you are almost always in a position to know what you want to believe and always able to believe whatever you want. If we allow guidance considerations to carry the day, we may end up saying that an epistemology which says you should believe whatever you want to believe is superior to one which says you should proportion your beliefs to the evidence. Whatever your opinion of evidentialism, surely that can’t be right.

One might well wonder whether, once we recognise that guidance-giving is only one amongst many criteria of evaluation, guidance considerations will end up playing any significant role at all in our theory choice. This is a reasonable concern, but I won’t go into the matter here. There’s no need to, as dilemmism doesn’t do worse than the alternatives when it comes to giving guidance. I realise that this may sound implausible but hear me out.

§VII. Ubiquitous Irrationality

Firstly, it is important to remember that dilemmism isn’t only a view about conflict cases. Most of the time *truth* and *rationality* don’t conflict with one another. The dilemmic view isn’t that you always face a dilemma; only that you sometimes can. When *truth* and *rationality* concord,
dilemmism says that you are required to comply with each. Such cases present no special difficulties when it comes to guidance.

Secondly, guidance failures will be commonplace for any view that takes TRUTH to express a requirement – the knowledge norm of belief, for instance. Of course, such views will usually not make logically impossible demands. But that is beside the point. Recall, if MOTIVATING NORMS is right, then in order to be guided by a norm on a particular occasion, one needs both to know what it requires of one, and to be able to do what it requires. The fact that a non-dilemmic theory like the knowledge norm doesn’t have the additional property of demanding the impossible is irrelevant. Non-dilemmic TRUTH-centric theories don’t do any better than dilemmism when it comes to degrees-of-guidance.

The more interesting question, of course, is theories that reject TRUTH but accept RATIONALITY, which those who press the guidance objection will presumably prefer. In a recent paper, Stewart Cohen and Juan Comesana (fc.) consider a dilemmic view similar in some respects to ours. In response to it they write that “…even if there are [epistemic dilemmas] it is implausible that they are as pervasive as this position would have it. [If this view is right] we collectively face epistemic dilemmas multiple times an hour” (fc: 13). This will likely resonate with those who press the guidance objection. Maybe we can tolerate dilemmas, and along with them guidance failures, if they are a recherché anomaly – freak events in our epistemic lives. But if dilemmism is right, then they are utterly commonplace. You’re in a dilemma situation every time rationality requires you to believe a falsehood, which, given how often things aren’t as they seem, is quite a lot. And if MOTIVATING NORMS is right, every time this happens you are unable to use the norms of belief as a guide to determine what to believe. In that case, the argument goes, the problem with dilemmism isn’t that if it’s right the norms of belief aren’t always available as guides, it’s that they are unavailable far too often.
Popular opinion seems to be that rationality-centric views do much better here. Even if we are not always in a position to know what rationality requires of us, the thought goes, we’re generally in a much better position with respect to it than we are with respect to truth. Cohen and Comesana certainly seem to think so. In a telling passage, they describe the idea that everyone is irrational multiple times a day as ‘extremely radical’ (fc: 3).

There are reasons to think that popular opinion is mistaken. The view that each of us is irrational multiple times a day may be extremely radical in some circles, but it shouldn’t be. Arguably, the only thing that should be radical about it is how little irrationality it supposes us to exhibit. Over the last fifty-years psychologists have uncovered a variety of biases in reasoning and doxastic attitude formation, retention, and revision, to which we are prone. Here are three examples, each of which is empirically well-confirmed. First, we exhibit confirmation bias: a tendency to seek and accept at face value evidence that supports our beliefs whilst avoiding disconfirming evidence. Second, we exhibit hindsight bias: when we know the outcome of an event, we judge it to be more probable on the evidence available before the outcome than we do when we are ignorant of the outcome. Third: we exhibit implicit bias: our judgements are unconsciously influenced by prejudices and stereotypes.

Intuitively, when a belief is formed, retained, or revised under the influence of these biases it is not rational (at least, when the influence of

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19 Lord (1979) et al.
20 Roese & Vohs (2012)
21 Brownstein (2019) is a good introduction to the philosophical implications of implicit bias.
the bias is sufficiently strong). And these are only three bias amongst many. The general picture emerging from cognitive psychology is one in which epistemic irrationality is a pervasive feature of human cognition. Does it follow that guidance failures will be commonplace even for theories that reject TRUTH but accept RATIONALITY? Not immediately. If it turns out that although we frequently fall short of the standards of rationality, this shortcoming is one that we can correct upon attending to it, then the mere fact that we are habitually irrational wouldn’t cause problems for the idea that RATIONALITY is a guidance-giving norm. For suppose that most of the time when you irrationally form, retain, or revise a belief as a result of the influence of bias you are in a position to know that you are being irrational; you only need to turn your attention towards the matter. In that case, the fact that you are habitually irrational poses no threat to the idea that RATIONALITY is good at giving you guidance, or at least better than the alternatives.

But is there any reason to think that a bias-infected belief reveals its pathology to your introspective gaze? If the answer is ‘no’, then you’re not in a position to know that RATIONALITY requires you not to hold the belief, at least not without further information and investigation. But it is highly doubtful that the answer is ‘yes’ – at least, not usually. A wealth of studies indicate that biases usually operate at a sub-personal level, with the result that they simply cannot be detected by introspection. As Timothy Wilson and Nancy Brekke (1994) put it: bad judgements, unlike bad food, don’t smell.

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22 See [omitted-e] for more on this and for an explanation of why such beliefs are irrational, which draws on recent work by Lasonen-Aarnio (2010, fc.) on knowledge-conducive dispositions.
23 Gilovich et al. (2002) provide a good overview this work.
24 See Wilson (2002) for an overview.
All this strongly suggests that guidance failures will be commonplace even for RATIONALITY-centric views. But will they be as commonplace as they are for dilemmism and TRUTH-centric views like the knowledge norm? I think they will. According to our best theories of belief, for you to believe that $p$ is for the proposition that $p$ to play a certain role in your cognitive life. Very roughly, for it to be a proposition that you are disposed to take as given in your reasoning and decision-making, amongst other things. So understood, you have billions of beliefs, even on a very conservative estimate. Perhaps you have them for every proposition, in which case you may have infinitely many. Moreover, they are in a state of constant flux. Every second you spend walking down the street, thousands of them spin and shuffle. Of course, you will never consciously entertain any more than a tiny fraction of them. There isn’t enough time, for one thing, but even if there was, there mostly wouldn’t be any reason for you to do so. Nevertheless, they are there in the background, constantly shifting as your experience of the world unfolds.25

Epistemologists sometimes overlook this fact. It is striking that Cohen and Comesana worry about the possibility that we face epistemic dilemmas ‘multiple’ times an hour. That’s an enormous understatement; if there are epistemic dilemmas, they are far, far more common than that. The important point for our purposes is that what goes for dilemmism here also goes for RATIONALITY. When we combine the fact that irrationality-caused-by-bias is an ordinary feature of human cognition with the fact that

25 The notion of belief in play here is dispositional rather than occurrent. Some philosophers draw a distinction between dispositional beliefs and dispositions to believe – Audi (1994), for instance. But even if one accepts that distinction, and even if one thinks that we have rather few dispositional beliefs (as opposed to dispositions to believe), this won’t make a difference for the argument. Dispositions can be rational or irrational, so everything I say here could be rephrased in terms of a rationality norm for dispositions to believe, and it surely cannot be plausibly maintained that we don’t have a vast number of dispositions to believe.
we are massively prolific in our doxastic attitude formation, there is every reason to think that guidance failures are utterly pervasive even for RATIONALITY-centric views; just as commonplace as they are for the dilemmist and the knowledge normer. But if so, then RATIONALITY-centric views do no better than the alternatives when it comes to giving guidance.

Proponents of RATIONALITY-centric views might respond by conceding that guidance failures are commonplace for RATIONALITY-centric views, but maintain that they are not as commonplace as they are for dilemmism and that this is a reason to prefer the former theories to the latter.

Let me say two things in response. Firstly, I don’t deny that the exact tally of guidance failures may well be greater for the dilemmist than it is for the RATIONALITY-centric theorist. The imperatives of dilemmism fail to be available as guides in every case in which you are not in a position to know what RATIONALITY requires of you and in every case in which you know that RATIONALITY requires you to believe that p, but, unbeknownst to you, TRUTH requires you not to believe that p. By contrast, the imperatives of RATIONALITY-centric views only fail to be available as guides in the first set of cases. But is this a difference that makes a difference? There surely needs to be, not just a difference, but a significant difference in the frequency of occasions on which the norms of belief are, or are not, available as guides according to competing theories for us to have a reason to prefer one theory over another. At the extreme, one occasion amongst billions quite clearly isn’t sufficient. Whatever the difference in frequency turns out to be, it plausibly will not be enough to justify adopting a RATIONALITY-centric theory over dilemmism. At the end of the day, when the numbers involved are so large guidance failures will be ubiquitous come what may. Issues of relative frequencies are rendered insignificant in the light of this fact.
I want to be very clear on what the claim is here. Not everything is such that, once there is a certain amount of it, any more of it doesn’t make a difference. If one million people will die of a disease come what may, that doesn’t mean that there’s no reason to prefer an outcome where only two million will die to one in which three million will die. But the relationship between guidance failures and theory choice isn’t like that. It is more like affordability. Suppose I’m thinking about buying a house. One thing I’ll take into account when I’m making my decision is how much each of the houses I’m looking at costs. In other words, how affordable it is. The cost of houses is important to my decision, but only up to a point. There is a threshold above which houses are unaffordable for me, full stop, and whatever difference in price there is between them doesn’t matter. A house that costs five million pounds is (alas) far beyond that threshold. So is a house that costs ten million pounds. Although there is a sense in which the five million pound house is more affordable than the ten million pound house, there is another, more significant, sense in which they are equally unaffordable: whether the price is five million or ten million isn’t an issue that will affect my decision, since they are both well beyond my price range. What I claim is that from the point of view of theory choice, the difference in the tally of guidance failures when we compare dilemmism and RATIONALITY-centric views is like the difference in price for me between a house that costs five million pounds and a house that costs ten million: irrelevant.

That’s the first thing I wanted to say in response. The second is that, although they are useful (they make things vivid), strictly speaking we don’t need the empirical results from psychology to make the point here. Once we appreciate why this is, we can see that the idea that RATIONALITY-centric views are more often available as guides in any significant sense is incredibly hard to sustain.
Why don’t we need the empirical results? Because the fundamental norms of belief are not contingent. Whatever they are, they hold necessarily. This is something all parties in the debate should agree with. It is difficult to see how exotic modally remote worlds populated by envatted agents, evil epistemic demons, Boltzmann brains, philosophical zombies, infallible oracles, and the like could tell us anything about the fundamental norms were they merely contingent: true for us in the actual world but not necessarily true for other agents in other worlds. These worlds, being modally remote, would simply be irrelevant to the question of what we should believe. Yet, epistemologists who debate the fundamental norms do not treat them as irrelevant; they go to great lengths to accommodate them. And with good reason. Some norms – ‘trust your eyes, ‘trust your doctor’ – are clearly contingent. They don’t hold in worlds in which eyes and doctors are known to be unreliable. But norms like ‘believe only truths’, and ‘be rational’ surely aren’t like that.

This raises a question: what kind of necessity do these norms have? The obvious answer is: metaphysical. But whatever it is, the fact that they have at least enough modal strength to encompass the exotic worlds just mentioned means that we can run the argument using merely possible biased agents.

With this in mind, consider Blixa. I will stipulate two facts about him. The first is that he is prone to extreme confirmation and implicit bias. He has a pronounced tendency to form beliefs by stereotyping and to accept confirming evidence at face value and subject disconfirming evidence to critical scrutiny. The second is that Blixa has no introspective access to the influence of these biases. When he reflects on his biased beliefs, they look just fine to him, and not because he isn’t looking hard enough.

In all probability, Blixa is an actual person. But even if not, he is surely a possible person. And not just metaphysically possible. Nothing I have
stipulated about Blixa is incompatible with what we know about the structure of the human mind. That our judgements can be influenced by introspectively inaccessible sub-personal processes is as well-established as any thesis in psychology. Moreover, the fundamental norms of belief apply to Blixa as much as they do to us. There may be a limit on how poorly a mind can function whilst the person in possession of it remains an agent to whom the fundamental norms of belief apply, but it is hard to see why anyone would think that Blixa is beyond the pale. He isn’t a mere animal, he’s just an idiot.

How will Blixa fare when it comes to being guided by the RATIONALITY norm? Not at all well. Occasions on which Blixa is unable to be guided by the norm because he’s not in a position to know what it requires of him will be very common indeed. Blixa isn’t in any better a position with respect to RATIONALITY than he is with respect to TRUTH when it comes to guidance. And remember: Blixa is only one possible person. We can come up with many others just like him.

Can fans of guidance considerations legitimately ignore or discount Blixa and his kin when comparing dilemmism, TRUTH-centric, and RATIONALITY-centric theories on degrees-of-guidance-giving? Given that the norms posited by these theories are supposed to hold necessarily, it is hard to see how they can. But if they can’t, then it should be clear that the prospects of vindicating a RATIONALITY-centric theory by appealing to degrees-of-guidance-giving are utterly hopeless. Once we recognise that we must take into account, not just more-or-less-normal people in the actual world,

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26 It might be claimed that although the RATIONALITY norm still applies to Blixa, it makes different demands of him than it does of us. I see no reason to think this is true unless one accepts a view ('blame-and-control epistemology') which I will argue against shortly.

27 Those who are engaged in non-ideal epistemology could legitimately ignore Blixa. But non-ideal epistemologists are not in the business of debating epistemic norms that hold of necessity.
but also a vast number of possible people in a vast plurality of possible worlds, the claim that RATIONALITY is significantly more frequently available as a guide than TRUTH or dilemmism looks like a total non-starter.

Before we continue, I want to address one other potential concern the reader might have about the argument so far. In light of the above, those who feel the pull of the intuition that RATIONALITY simply must be guiding (to a certain degree) might argue that biased beliefs are in fact rational. However, at this point it is reasonable to ask: if rationality does not even require one not to be biased, what does it require? And why should we think that it is an interesting normative notion at all? As I see it, it is a desideratum on a theory of epistemic rationality that it delivers the result that the kinds of biased beliefs under discussion are irrational. If a theory doesn’t do so, so much the worse for the theory. Unlike with, say, the false beliefs of an agent deceived by the New Evil Demon, which are the product of a well-functioning mind placed in an uncooperative environment – and hence rational, even though false – there isn’t really anything epistemically positive to say about bias-infected beliefs. As such, it is hard not to suspect that those who still maintain at this point that we must not yet have found the right theory of rationality are driven by a

28 Internalists sometimes give theoretical significance to how things seem or appear to agents (e.g. Huemer 2001, Smithies 2019). They risk facing what I have elsewhere called the ‘problem of laundered biases’ [omitted-e]. Does it seem or appear that p to an agent whose belief that p has a biased etiology? If the answer is ‘yes’, then insofar as these internalists take seemings and appearances to be evidence, they will have to say that seemings and appearances produced by biases are nonetheless good evidence. This is not an attractive thing to have to say (C.f. Siegel 2017, Williamson fc). But if the answer is ‘no’, then given the ubiquity of bias-infected beliefs, seemings and appearances must not be things we have particularly good epistemic access to. This would make them ill-suited to play the role that internalists typically want them to play. We will return to this point later. I also think this is a problem for Wedgwood’s (2001, 2017) guidance argument for internalism about rationality, but I cannot pursue this here.
picture of rationality according to which an irrational belief is necessarily a belief that one can be appropriately blamed for holding. Since bias-infected beliefs are the product of introspectively inaccessible sub-personal processes over which we have little control, it is natural to think that we are, in some sense, not to blame for them. This impression is liable to strengthen when we realise that everyone harbours them and will continue to do so no matter how hard they try.

However, there are many reasons to be dissatisfied with a blame-and-control epistemology. The two most important in this context are connected. Firstly, the conditions under which it is appropriate to blame a person for their behaviour, including their epistemic behaviour, are a motley bunch, and are highly sensitive to facts about the person’s individual circumstances. This includes both their general circumstances (their upbringing, education, and intelligence, for instance) and their immediate circumstances (are they stressed, anxious, tired, distracted, etc.?). Any normative epistemology that tries to take account of all such considerations in order to deliver the result that one can never blamelessly violate a genuine a epistemic norm will almost certainly find it impossible to say anything sufficiently general about epistemic normativity to be interesting. A collapse into epistemic particularism is virtually guaranteed. This is not a satisfying theoretical endpoint. Secondly, for this very reason a blame-and-control epistemology should be especially unappealing to those who think that it is important that our normative epistemology is available as a useful, usable, guide. The resulting epistemology will either have no principles at all – and so, no principles by which we can guide our doxastic attitude formation – or principles so complex that no normal human being could possibly apply them. Either way, the result will be the same: no guidance.

29 Littlejohn (fc.) makes a similar point about excusing conditions.
§VIII. Guidance Without Factualism

If we conceptualise guidance along the lines of a factualist reading of MOTIVATING NORMS, then, dilemmism does no worse at giving it than the alternatives. But there are a number of different ways of fleshing out MOTIVATING NORMS. Perhaps one of the alternatives tells against the view? In this section we’ll look at the options. I’ll argue that however we think about guidance within the MOTIVATING NORMS framework, dilemmism will still do no worse than its rivals at giving it.

§8.1. Propositionalism

On the factualist interpretation, MOTIVATING NORMS is a fairly demanding conception of guidance. One obvious worry has to do with how it interprets the claim that your action has been guided by a norm’s requirement that you φ on an occasion only if you act for the reason that the norm requires you to φ. On the factualist interpretation, this entails that you are required to φ by the norm (there are no false facts). But it is not obvious that you need to respond to the actual requirements that a norm generates in order to count as having been guided by it. Take one of the thieves. In the BRUEGHEL case TRUTH requires him not to believe that the painting in their possession is a Brueghel. But that’s not how it looks from his point of view. He will, presumably, believe that TRUTH permits him to believe that p. And had he not believed this, presumably he wouldn’t have believed that p. Isn’t this enough for us to correctly say that he has been guided by the TRUTH norm?

This is an idea that proponents of propositionalism about motivating reasons could take up. They could say that when one forms a doxastic
attitude because one believes that it is required or permitted by a norm, one’s reason for forming it is that the attitude is required by TRUTH.\textsuperscript{30} We can also add, if we like, that the belief in question must be rational. Since, unlike factualists, propositionalists think that false propositions can be one’s motivating reasons, the fact that TRUTH actually requires the thief not to believe that p need not stand in the way of his having been guided by it.

Notice however, that regardless of how we fill in the details, the notion of guidance in play here is not one that can be used to argue against dilemmism. If this is what adequate guidance is, a person who believes that p in a conflict case may well have been guided by both TRUTH and RATIONALITY, even though they conflict with one another. After all, our thief may well believe – rationally believe – that RATIONALITY requires him to believe that they have a Brueghel and that TRUTH permits this belief. Dilemmism would turn out to be guiding in conflict cases after all! Since conflict cases are the only cases that create a special difficulty for dilemmism, it follows that we cannot appeal to guidance considerations to argue against dilemmism and in favour of one of the alternatives to it.

§8.2. Propositionalism Plus Truth

The problem with this way of thinking about guidance, when it comes to raising an objection to dilemmism, is that it denies that one must actually be required to φ by a norm to have been guided by that norm. What, then, about the idea that one has been guided by a norm in φ-ing if one believes that it requires one to φ and that belief is true, even if it is not knowledge?

\textsuperscript{30} Note that since this way of thinking about guidance doesn’t say that one has to do what a norm actually requires in order to be guided by it, it does not motivate an ABILITY condition on guidance.
Again, we also have the option of adding the condition that the belief must also be rational.

This might look more attractive to those who press the guidance objection. We can’t maintain that dilemmism gives useful guidance in conflict cases once a truth requirement is attached to the theory of guidance. The thief might rationally believe that RATIONALITY requires him to believe that p and that TRUTH permits it, but he’s wrong – TRUTH requires him not to believe that p. So according to this way of thinking about guidance, he hasn’t been guided by TRUTH. He might instead believe, correctly, that he is required to believe that p and also required not to believe that p, but now ABILITY kicks in: it is manifestly impossible for him to do both of these things, and so it’s hard to see what he’s supposed to do with that information when it comes to deliberating about what to believe.

Crucially, if we employ this notion of guidance, appeals to the ubiquity of human ignorance and irrationality will not show that none of the alternatives does any better than dilemmism at giving guidance. Take a RATIONALITY-centric view. Even if you’re not in a position to know that RATIONALITY requires you to φ, it doesn’t follow that you’re not in a position to truly believe that it requires you to φ. And, unlike with the dilemmic view, your true beliefs about what a RATIONALITY-centric view requires you to do can serve as a helpful basis for deliberation about what to believe – whether, for example, to believe that p or not believe that p. This is because, in virtue of the fact that RATIONALITY-centric views disavow the possibility of dilemmas, your true beliefs about what a RATIONALITY-centric view requires you to do are guaranteed to point in a single direction: towards belief, suspension, or disbelief.

This looks like a problem for the dilemmist. Ultimately, however, it’s hard to make sense of the idea that having a non-knowledgeable true belief about what it requires is sufficient for guidance by a norm but having a
false belief about what it requires is not. According to the factualist interpretation of MOTIVATING NORMS, it is the norms and requirements themselves that guide us. When one acts guided by a norm, one acts on facts about what the norm actually requires. One must bear the relation of knowledge to these facts because the fact that p can be one’s reason for acting only if one knows that p (that’s HYMAN’S THESIS again). By contrast, according to the propositionalist interpretation, it is not facts about what a norm itself actually requires that guide us. Rather, it is propositions – the contents of our representations of norms and requirements – that guide us.

Now, where does the idea that non-knowledgeable true belief is sufficient for guidance fit into this picture? Well, the claim can’t be that one acts guided by facts about what a norm itself requires. That is barred by the point that if motivating reasons are facts, one can act for the reason that p only if one knows that p. Instead the claim must be that one acts guided by propositions representing a norm’s requirements. But if so, it makes no sense to maintain that only a true belief is sufficient for guidance. Insofar as it is plausible that the contents of our representations of normative requirements guide us in action, they do so irrespective of whether they correspond to reality. So if we accept that a true belief is sufficient for guidance, we must also accept that a false belief is. To deny this is ad hoc. But if a false belief is sufficient for guidance, then, as we have already seen, dilemmism turns out to be guiding after all, since a person in a conflict case – our thief, for instance – may well believe that both TRUTH and RATIONALITY speak in favour of believing that p. The upshot is that there is no coherent notion of guidance to be found here on which dilemmism fails to be guidance-giving.31

31 There is another way of making this point, though it requires relying on the assumption that facts are identical to true propositions. Suppose they are. In that case, the proposal under consideration is that the fact that p can be one’s reason for acting, and hence, can have guided
§8.3. Psychologism

Factualists and propositionalists agree on one thing: that it is not our psychological states themselves that are our motivating reasons. Proponents of psychologism disagree. They maintain that when one φ’s, one’s motivating reasons for φ-ing are, and could only ever be, one’s psychological states – usually one’s beliefs, desires and intentions. Does psychologism offer us a useful way of thinking about guidance? And if it does, does the resulting view cause problems for dilemmism?

The answer, it seems to me, is that proponents of psychologism will have a hard time making sense of the idea that we can be guided by norms and the requirements that they generate within the MOTIVATING NORMS schema in the first place. The reason is simple: norms and requirements are not psychological states of agents. my belief that UK law requires me to drive on the left is a psychological state, but the legal requirement, by which I am bound, is not. Given this, proponents of psychologism will have to say that a requirement to φ generated by a norm (say, a requirement to believe that p, because it would be irrational not to) is not, and can never be, amongst the reasons for which you φ. You can never φ even in part because φ-ing is required by a norm. But in that case, it is rather hard to see how you could ever be guided by a norm or the requirements that it generates at all. Those who go in for the MOTIVATING NORMS schema are best advised to steer well clear of psychologism.

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one’s action, even if one does not know that p. But if HYMAN’S THESIS is right, that is simply not true.
§IX. Guidance Without MOTIVATING NORMS

In summary, if MOTIVATING NORMS is our model of normative guidance, then however we fill in the details dilemmism doesn’t do any better or worse than the alternatives when it comes to giving it. On a factualist interpretation, all the alternatives do just as badly as dilemmism at giving guidance. On a propositionalist interpretation, dilemmism does just as well as all the alternatives at giving it.

But maybe the MOTIVATING NORMS framework doesn’t capture the notion of guidance that those who press the guidance objection against dilemmism have in mind? Maybe there is a better way of thinking about guidance that really does show dilemmism to be a fatally flawed theory? Let’s look at some of the options.

§9.1. Guiding Dispositions

A worry one might have about MOTIVATING NORMS is that it overintellectualises the idea of guidance. You probably hardly ever think to yourself ‘it would be irrational for me not to believe that \( p \), so I should believe that \( p \)’ prior to forming a belief. Nevertheless, provided that the belief-formation process is appropriately sensitive to a norm and the demands that it makes, it seems natural to say that you are guided by that norm.\(^{32}\)

\(^{32}\) I am not convinced that MOTIVATING NORMS overintellectualises in this way, but I won’t press the issue here.
One way to avoid this problem is to conceptualise guidance in terms of dispositions. Think about our thief again. Since he has no reason to think that anything is amiss, he manifests a truth-conducive disposition when he believes that the painting in their possession is a Brueghel – in normal circumstances he would only believe that they have a Brueghel if they actually do. His error can be explained by the fact that he is in abnormal circumstances. Given this, even though he doesn’t believe in accordance with TRUTH, isn’t it right to say that he has been guided by it when he believes what he does?

This looks promising as a way of thinking about guidance, and it doesn’t require us to have formed higher-order beliefs in order to count as having been guided. But notice that, as with the non-factive propositionalist interpretation of MOTIVATING NORMS, regardless of how we fill in the details, the notion of guidance in play here is not one that can be used to argue against dilemmism. The reason is the same. If this is what adequate guidance is, a person who believes that p in a conflict case may well have been guided by both TRUTH and RATIONALITY, even though they conflict with one another. The proposal is, roughly, that a person’s action has been guided by a norm when it is the manifestation of a disposition to comply with the norm. Since the thief manifests a disposition to believe only truths, and to be rational, when he believes that they have a Brueghel, he has been guided by both norms according to this notion of guidance. But in that case, dilemmism is guidance-giving in conflict cases after all. As before, since conflict cases are the only cases that create a special difficulty for dilemmism, it follows that we cannot appeal to guidance considerations to argue against dilemmism and in favour of one of the alternatives to it.

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33 As with the non-factive propositionalist interpretation of motivating norms, this way of thinking about guidance doesn’t motivate an ABILITY condition, since it does not say that one must do what one is actually required to do in order to count as having been guided.
There is, of course, a possible variation on this view according to which one has been guided by a norm just in case one successfully manifests a disposition to comply with it. However, there is no good argument from this view to the claim that we should reject dilemmism, because if we adopt it guidance failures will be commonplace for any view. The situation will be the same as with the factualist interpretation of MOTIVATING NORMS.

§9.2. Guiding Ideals

An idea one sometimes encounters is that some norms of belief should be thought of as goals or ideals rather than requirements because we cannot be directly guided by them. For instance, it has been said that since we cannot be directly guided by the demands of TRUTH – we can only try to conform with it by following the (imperfect) directions of RATIONALITY – TRUTH does not guide by being a requirement, but rather by being a goal or ideal.34

This argument can, I think, be quickly dismissed. The reason is simple: it assumes that if φ-ing is a goal or ideal, it is not also a requirement. But that isn’t always true. The ideal for a building contractor is (let us suppose) to finish the job on time and on budget. This goal cannot be ‘directly’ pursued, if by that we mean that one does not need a means to achieve the end. Yet for all that it may well be that the contractor is also required to finish the job on time and on budget. I see no (guidance-related) motivation for thinking that the situation is any different with TRUTH.

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A more pressing concern is that dilemmic views, in virtue of making logically impossible demands, cannot even serve as guiding ideals. Daniel Greco (2012) and Susanna Rinard (fc.) deny the existence of epistemic dilemmas on these grounds. They go in for the following argument. Let ‘epistemic flawlessness’ be the state of satisfying all of the epistemic requirements that bind one. Now consider:

1. Epistemic flawlessness is an ideal which can guide our doxastic attitude formation by being something we can strive towards.

2. If epistemic flawlessness is sometimes logically impossible, then it is not an ideal which can guide our doxastic attitude formation by being something we can strive towards.

3. Therefore, epistemic flawlessness is never logically impossible.

4. If there are epistemic dilemmas, then epistemic flawlessness is sometimes logically impossible.

5. Therefore, there are no epistemic dilemmas.

The crucial thought is that whilst satisfying certain demands might be beyond our reach, due to physical, psychological, epistemic, or computational limitations, they can nevertheless guide our behaviour by serving as ideals. But when satisfying a would-be ideal is logically (or metaphysically) impossible, it is not possible for one to guide one’s behaviour by treating it as an ideal to strive for. Greco gives an example. You cannot match Eliud Kipchoge’s record Marathon time. But you can nevertheless treat it as an ideal to strive towards, and, if you do, it can guide your training. But what could you do to get on your way to running faster than yourself? Similarly, what could you do that would be a step in the direction of both believing that p and not believing that p? Nothing
you could do would ever get him any closer to reaching these ‘ideals’. So they are not ideals. And if they are not ideals, then they are not requirements either. Or so the argument goes.

This argument is unpersuasive. Premise (1) is ambiguous. Once it is disambiguated, we can see that premise (2) is false on one reading and that the argument overgenerates on the other. Either way, it is not sound.

Unpacked, (1) says that ‘satisfying all of the epistemic requirements that bind one is an ideal which can guide one’s doxastic attitude formation by being something one can strive towards’. The ‘all’ here is ambiguous between a collective reading and a distributive reading. On the collective reading, the idea is that we take the epistemic requirements as a whole, and the ideal of epistemic flawlessness is to satisfy all of them. One will inevitably fall short, of course, but one can strive to do better by satisfying more of them. On the distributive reading we don’t bundle up the requirements. Rather, we keep them separate, and for each requirement the ideal is that you satisfy it. On this reading, there are many ideals, not one. For each requirement, there is an ideal: satisfying that requirement.

Let’s look at the collective reading of the argument first. On it, premise (2) is false. Even if it is logically impossible to satisfy all of the epistemic requirements that bind you, because some of them conflict with one another, it is possible to get closer to satisfying all of them. You will certainly fall short, but you can strive to do better and get closer by satisfying more of them. Let me explain.

The dilemmic view says that you should believe only truths and that you should be rational. Most of the time these requirements are jointly satisfiable. Just because there are cases in which, through sheer bad luck, you find yourself in a situation in which the demands of truth and rationality conflict with one another, that doesn’t mean you’re always
in that position. Now, in those cases in which they conflict, it is not logically possible to do what is required of you. So, if you ever find yourself in a dilemma situation, you will not achieve epistemic flawlessness. But you get closer to it the more of the requirements you do satisfy. In that case, epistemic flawlessness is an ideal that can guide your practice of doxastic attitude formation by being something you aspire to. Hence, premise (2) of the argument is false. Moreover, you can strive to avoid such conflict cases altogether by being judicious in your choice of epistemic sources. You’ll almost certainly fail to live up to the ideal on some occasions, but that doesn’t show that it is not an ideal towards which you can strive, and by which you can be guided.

On the collective reading of the argument, then, it is simply not true to say that a normative epistemology which allows for dilemmas does not provide us with a guiding ideal toward which we can strive. That leaves us with the distributive reading of the argument. Here the thought is that there cannot be conflicting requirements because, in virtue of it being logically impossible to satisfy each of them, you cannot even begin to get closer to doing what is required of you. On this reading, the argument might be thought to cause a problem for dilemmism, since there really is nothing you can do to get closer to satisfying the requirement ‘believe that p and don’t believe that p’.

However, read this way the argument overgenerates. Suppose that you’re either required to φ or required to not-φ but have no way of knowing which and no chance of finding out. Can you use the ideal ‘do what you’re required to do’ as a guide when making your decision about whether to φ or not-φ in this context? No. The most you can do is guess and hope you get it right. The requirement (whatever it happens to be) cannot be used by you as a guide to make your decision in any way whatsoever; you might as well flip a coin. But we already know from anti-luminosity considerations that this situation – one where you are either required to φ
or required to not-\(\phi\) but have no way of knowing which – is possible. What’s the difference between this situation and a conflict case? It’s logically and metaphysically possible for you to do what’s required of you, of course – that’s a difference. But it isn’t a relevant difference. What’s important is that in this situation you cannot use the requirement that binds you as a guide to help you make your decision. As we might put it: an invisible ideal is not one that you can strive to satisfy. You might satisfy it by accident, of course – a case of fortuitous luck. But it can’t play the role of guiding your behaviour. The upshot is that we should reject the argument on its distributive reading. However we interpret it, then, the flawlessness argument does not undermine dilemmism.

§9.3. Guiding Reasons

We still don’t have a good guidance objection to dilemmism. Perhaps the problem is that we have focused on guidance by norms and requirements. Some philosophers – ‘reasonsologists’ (Kiesewetter 2017, Lord 2018 et al.) – think that guidance considerations speak in favour of adopting RATIONALITY over TRUTH (and so, a fortiori, dilemmism). But they don’t worry don’t whether norms can guide us in the ways we have discussed so far. They subscribe to the reasons first ideology – the idea that the building blocks of normativity are not norms, but reasons. They endorse these two principles:

**REASONS-DETERMINE-oughts:** What you ought to do is determined by the balance of your reasons

**REASONS GUIDE:** You are able to \(\phi\) for the reasons that make it the case that you ought to \(\phi\).
REASONS GUIDE gives voice to the idea that our *reasons* must be capable of guiding us. How do these principles get us to the conclusion that we should accept *rationality* and reject *truth* and dilemmism? Like this. Suppose for reductio that *truth* is right. If so, then given *reasons-determine-oughts*, the fact that *p* is false is a reason for you not to believe that *p* even when you don’t know that *p* is false. But this contravenes *reasons guide*. Why? Because given Hyman’s thesis, *reasons guide* entails:

**Possession:** If *p* is a reason for you to *φ*, then you know that *p*.

Since you cannot refrain from believing that *p* for the reason that *p* is false when you’re not in a position to know that *p* is false, we must reject *truth*. Why should we accept *rationality*? Because, the reasonsologists argue, being rational is just a matter of correctly responding to your reasons.

Here’s the interesting thing. This reasoning appears to be invulnerable to the arguments provided so far, which trade on the observation that we often have poor epistemic access to facts about what’s required of us. Why? Because *possesion* isn’t a luminosity principle. The claim isn’t (1), it’s (2):

1. If *p* is a reason for you to *φ*, you know that *p* is a reason for you to *φ*.
2. If *p* is a reason for you to *φ*, you know that *p*.

(1) is a luminosity principle, but (2) isn’t. The fact by which you are guided is *that p*, not *that p is a reason to φ*. As a result, it is unaffected by anti-luminosity arguments. The upshot is that reasonsologists can bypass worries about our poor epistemic access to the facts about what we should
do by arguing that only the facts that we have access to make a difference to what we should do in the first place.

Why should we accept reasons guide? Kiesewetter (2017) claims that it is a conceptual truth. But this claim keeps bad company. Philosophers have frequently said exactly the same thing about requirements. And we’ve already seen that that isn’t true. An argument is needed. There are two on offer: Lord’s (2015, 2018) ‘credit argument’ and ‘non-accidentality argument’.

First, the credit argument. The key idea is that if one ought to φ, one can φ in a way that is creditworthy:

**CREDIT:** If one ought to φ, then one can φ in a way that is creditworthy

Why should we accept credit? Lord says that to reject it “…is intuitively unsatisfying. It is not plausible that one can be obligated to φ even though one couldn’t φ in a normatively kosher way” (2015: 37). He then argues for the following two claims, both of which seem reasonably plausible:

**NO CREDIT FOR ACCIDENTS:** One is creditworthy for φ-ing only if it is not an accident that one φ’s.

**ONLY REASONS AVOID ACCIDENTS:** When one ought to φ, one φ’s non-accidentally only if one φ’s for the reasons that make it the case that one ought to φ.

This puts him in a position to argue for reasons guide like this:

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35 For example, Hare (1963), Driver (1983), Smith (1986), Griffin (1992), and Copp (2003).
1. By CREDIT, if you ought to φ, then you can φ in a way that is creditworthy.

2. By NO CREDIT FOR ACCIDENTS, you φ in a way that is creditworthy only if you non-accidentally φ.

3. Therefore, if you ought to φ, you can φ non-accidentally.

4. By ONLY REASONS AVOID ACCIDENTS you φ non-accidentally only if you φ for the reasons that make it the case that you ought to φ.

5. By (3) and (4) you can φ for the reasons that make it the case that you ought to φ.

The conclusion of the argument, (5), is REASONS GUIDE.

Lord also thinks we can get REASONS GUIDE even without CREDIT. He reckons we should endorse:

NO ACCIDENTS: If one ought to φ, then one can non-accidentally φ.

Why? His reasoning is that if we reject it there will be cases in which you will have to get lucky in order to do what you ought to. He thinks this is implausible. With NO ACCIDENTS in hand, he argues as follows:

1. By NO ACCIDENTS, if you ought to φ, then you can non-accidentally φ.

2. By ONLY REASONS AVOID ACCIDENTS you φ non-accidentally only if you φ for the reasons that make it the case that you ought to φ.
3. Therefore, you can φ for the reasons that make it the case that you ought to φ.

(3) is REASONS GUIDE.

Since the conjunction of REASONS GUIDE and REASONS-DETERMINE-oughts appear to motivate accepting RATIONALITY and rejecting TRUTH and dilemmism, it looks like we have arguments from guidance considerations that help us to decide between the fundamental norms of belief. Moreover, since these arguments side-step anti-luminosity concerns, it looks like nothing I’ve said so far undermines them.

Does this shift of focus to guidance-by-reasons help us to decide between the fundamental norms? It does not. The problem is that even if we accept POSSESSION and REASONS-DETERMINE-oughts there will still be cases in which one ought to φ yet cannot φ non-accidentally or in a creditworthy way. CREDIT and NO ACCIDENTS are false. So they can’t motivate REASONS GUIDE. Consider the following two cases:

RED TABLE: Grace is in room one. She sees a red table in front of her in normal lighting conditions and forms the belief that there is a red table in room one.

WHITE TABLE: Bella is in room two. She sees what appears to be a red table in front of her but is in fact a white table made to look red by a hidden light source. She forms the belief that there is a red table in room two.

Both beliefs are surely rational. Are they the beliefs Grace and Bella ought to have according to the reasonsologists? Given that they endorse RATIONALITY and reject TRUTH one would expect the answer to be ‘yes’. But
in fact the answer seems to be ‘no’: Grace should believe that there is a red table in room one, but Bella should not believe that there is a red table in room two. Why? Remember that according to the reasonsologists what one ought to believe is determined by the balance of reasons (REASONS-DETERMINE-oughts), and only known facts are reasons (possession). Grace knows that there is a red table in front of her and knows that she is in room one. So she has excellent reasons to believe that there’s a red table in room one. Bella isn’t so lucky. She knows that she’s in room two, but she doesn’t know that there’s a red table in front of her, since there isn’t – the table is white. So it doesn’t look like she has good reasons to believe that there is a red table in room two. And since what she should believe is determined by her reasons, it looks like she shouldn’t believe that there is a table in room two.

Now consider credit. Is it possible for Bella to do what she ought to in a way that is to her credit? Pretty clearly not. She’d be completely irrational to suspend on or disbelieve the proposition that there is a red table in room two, and you don’t get credit for being irrational. But in that case white table is a counterexample to credit. It would also be a total fluke if she happened to do what she ought to do in suspending on the proposition that there is a red table in room two. In that case white table is a counterexample to no accidents. Since credit and no accidents are the animating ideas driving the arguments for reasons guide, the arguments are a bust.

Unsurprisingly, Lord is aware of this problem. In reply, he points out that it appears to Bella that the table is red, and that this is something that she presumably knows (or at least, is in a position to know). He then argues that this fact – the fact that it appears to Bella that there is a red table in front of her – is a reason for her to believe that there is a red table in room two. Moreover, this reason carries substantial weight. Enough to make it the case that on the balance of reasons she ought to believe that there is a
red table in room two. So in fact Bella ought to believe what it would be rational for her to believe and what she would be creditworthy for believing. Moreover, it need not be an accident that she believes what she ought to. WHITE TABLE isn’t a counterexample to CREDIT and NO ACCIDENTS after all.

This reply is unconvincing. Why? Notice that for it to work, Lord needs there to be a set of facts to which you *always* have access, and which will *always* result in rationality if you respond to them correctly. Otherwise the same problem will simply re-emerge one level up: rationality will require one thing from you even whilst it looks to you as though it requires something completely different. If that happens, then even if you do what rationality requires, it will be an accident – nothing more than a fluke. That would mean there are still counterexamples to NO ACCIDENTS. By NO CREDIT FOR ACCIDENTS it would also mean that there are still counterexamples to CREDIT. Lord’s proposal is that the appearance-facts are always accessible and always result in rationality if you respond to them correctly. The problem is that neither of these claims is true.

Why not? The first reason should be obvious. If no non-trivial condition is luminous, you’re not always in a position to know how things appear to you. Hence, the appearance-facts aren’t always accessible. The second reason is that even when you do know how things appear to you, there is no guarantee that responding to these appearances will put you in a position to conform with rationality. To see why, let’s return to the biased agent we looked at earlier – Blixa. A reminder: Blixa has extreme implicit and confirmation bias and has no introspective access to the influence of these biases.

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36 For several reasons. See Littlejohn (2018) and Lasonen-Aarnio (2019).
37 Lasonen-Aarnio (2019) uses this point against Lord.
Consider one of Blixa’s irrational beliefs. Say, his belief that his Nigerian colleague is lazy, produced and sustained by an unholy admixture of implicit and confirmation bias. Does it appear to Blixa that his colleague is lazy? The natural answer is ‘yes’, but it is certainly either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Suppose that it is ‘yes’. In that case we have a problem. If responding to the appearances always puts you in a position to conform with RATIONALITY, then Lord will have to say that Blixa’s belief is rational. In turn, he’ll have to say that rationality doesn’t require one not to be biased. We’ve already seen why that claim should be resisted. But if responding to appearances doesn’t always put you in a position to conform with RATIONALITY, then Lord’s reply won’t get him out of the original problem in the first place – responding to appearances won’t guarantee rationality, and so even if appearances were luminous, there would still be counterexamples to CREDIT and NO ACCIDENTS.

So, suppose instead that the answer is ‘no’ – it doesn’t appear to Blixa that his colleague is lazy. He might tell us that it does, but he’s mistaken. In that case, given the ubiquity of irrational beliefs caused by bias, appearances must not only not be luminous, but, worse, they must be very often opaque: we have no better access to them than we do to facts about the world beyond our minds. But if so, the appeal to appearances simply pushes Lord’s problem back step. He needs the facts about how things appear to you to be facts which you always have access to. Otherwise the idea that responding correctly to them guarantees rationality won’t help avoid counterexamples to CREDIT and NO ACCIDENTS. But you often don’t have access to them.

Either way, then, Lord’s reply fails. Is there some other set of facts that have the properties needed for his arguments to succeed? It seems highly unlikely. But if not, REASONS GUIDE is as-yet unmotivated, and we don’t have a good guidance argument against TRUTH and dilemmism.
§X. Generalising

We’ve looked at a number of ways of filling in the details of the guidance objection. On none of them does it tell against dilemmism. We have not looked at every way of filling in the details. Nevertheless I suggest that the conclusion to draw from the foregoing is that there is no good objection to dilemmism to be found from guidance considerations.

But dilemmism was only a test case. At the outset, I said that my goal was to show that guidance considerations cannot in general be used to decide between competing views about the fundamental norms of belief. If guidance considerations can’t rule out dilemmism, what else can’t they do?

§10.1. The Nature of the Fundamental Norms

Clearly, they also fail to undermine unabashedly externalist views like process reliabilism and the knowledge norm of belief. Equally clearly, they do not undermine externalist versions of RATIONALITY-centric views (neither, of course, do they undermine internalist RATIONALITY-centric views).

Nor will they help us to adjudicate between competing ways of thinking about rationality, such as evidentialism, normal-worlds reliabilism,

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38 See fn. 2
'normic support' views, mentalism, and dispositionalism. If it is a desideratum on a theory of epistemic rationality that it marks bias-infected beliefs as irrational, then, depending on how we conceptualise guidance, guidance failures will either be ubiquitous whichever way we go with the theory of epistemic rationality, or every theory will easily be capable of giving guidance.

Another result is that guidance considerations cannot be used to choose between normative epistemologies according to which how one ought to conduct one’s doxastic life is constrained by limitations on how one is able to conduct it, and epistemologies that do not posit this constraint. This follows from the fact that they cannot be used to motivate epistemic ‘ought-implies-can’ principles.

Yet another result is that they cannot be used to motivate thinking of some epistemic norms evaluatively, rather than deontically, as aims, goals, or ideals, rather than requirements. Those who are happy to endorse the idea that truth is an aim of belief (most epistemologists), but recoil at the idea that we are epistemically required to believe only truths (again, most epistemologists) will not find any support for their view from guidance considerations. Generalising, it looks like we simply cannot use guidance-giving as a criterion on which to choose between competing approaches to the fundamental norms of belief.

So much for the fundamental norms. I also mentioned that the point generalises to other areas of normative epistemology. Which ones? A

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39 For evidentialism, see Conee and Feldman (2004); normal-worlds reliabilism: Goldman (1986); normic support: Smith (2016); mentalism: Conee & Feldman (2004) and Wedgwood (2001, 2017); dispositionalism: Lasonen-Aarnio (2010, fc.). What about access internalism? If the argument of §7 is correct, it is not a tenable position.
comprehensive answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, here is a sample.

§10.2. Evidence and Coherence

Starting with our dilemmic theme, recently David Christensen (2016) has floated the idea that conflicts between substantive and structural norms of epistemic rationality should be thought of as dilemmas. The conflicts in question are between the norm: conform to the evidence, and the norm: be enkratic. One might have thought we should reject this idea on the grounds that the resulting epistemology would not be adequately guiding. But if what I’ve argued here is right, that would be a mistake. Instances of substantive rationality failing to give guidance will be so commonplace for the evidentialist anyway that there is nothing to be gained, from the point of view of theory choice, from cleaving to a non-dilemmic normative epistemology on guidance grounds.

§10.3. Uniqueness and Permissivism

There are also implications for the uniqueness versus permissivism debate. Proponents of uniqueness maintain that for any given body of evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude to take towards a proposition p given that evidence. Permissivists disagree. They maintain that sometimes more than one attitude is rationally permissible on a single body of evidence.40 A common argument against uniqueness and in favour of permissivism is that uniqueness is too demanding. Here’s Miriam Schoenfield:

40 See Kopec & Titelbaum (2016) for an overview of this debate.
“Consider...the proposition that all ravens are black. The Uniqueness defender is committed to thinking that there is some number \( n \), such that if you see \( n \) or more ravens, all of which are black, it is rational to believe that all ravens are black, but if you see fewer than \( n \), it is not rational to believe that all ravens are black. It is, however, implausible that possessing rational capacities would allow one to recognize a unique such number!” (2014: 198)

If uniqueness is true, it is often difficult to know what one is rationally required to believe. As a result, it is often difficult to conform with the demands of rationality. But why should these be objections to the view? One obvious answer is that in virtue of making such exacting demands, epistemologies that endorse uniqueness fail to give us usable guidance. But the foregoing arguments show that this observation cannot ground the demandingness objection. A plausible permissivist epistemology must accept that unconsciously biased beliefs and credences are irrational. One consequence of this is that we will frequently fail to have the beliefs and credences that rationality requires, without having the ability to correct the problem, due to ignorance and an inability to control for such biases. Guidance failures will be commonplace even for the permissivist. When we take into account the sheer mass of beliefs and credences we form, retain, and revise, it is doubtful that permissivists are in any better a position than proponents of uniqueness when it comes to degrees-of-guidance. The situation is the same as with RATIONALITY-centric theorists being in no better a position than TRUTH-centric theorists and dilemmists.

Permissivists might reply that they do not take their view to be necessarily true: uniqueness may well be right for agents with god-like cognitive abilities – permissivism is for us, with all our cognitive imperfections and

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41 Of course, this is not the only possible answer.
limitations. But this reply misses the mark – biased beliefs are irrational, even for non-ideal agents like us.

§10.4. Bayesian Epistemology

The same dialectic plays out when it comes to Bayesian epistemology. Bayesianism requires one’s credences to be probabilistically coherent. A common complaint is that this is unrealistically demanding. Amongst other things, probabilistic coherence requires one to assign credence 1 to all logical truths and credence 0 to all logical falsehoods – something that no human being has ever done. A natural thought is that in virtue of making such unrealistic demands, Bayesianism fails to give usable guidance: we are often not in a position to know whether p is a logical truth/falsehood. But this observation cannot ground the demandingness objection, for precisely the same reason that it cannot ground an argument against uniqueness. And as before, it is not open to anti-Bayesians to argue that they are offering a non-ideal epistemology.

§10.5. Sharp and Mushy Credences

The dialectic also plays out in the debate about sharp versus mushy credences. Some epistemologists argue that our credences should sometimes be mushy – they should be spread out over intervals of real numbers (e.g. $[0.3–0.5]$), rather than precise real numbers (e.g. 0.41111…). One possible argument for mushy credences is the thought that an epistemology that requires sharp credences makes unrealistic demands.

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42 C.f. Titelbaum (ms.)
43 For an introduction to the debate, see Bradley (2019)
Guidance considerations cannot ground this argument, for the same reason as before.⁴⁴

§10.6. What’s Going On?

These conclusions might be surprising. It is patently obvious that only highly idealised counterparts to ourselves could possibly live up to the standards set by Bayesianism, uniqueness, and sharpness. Shouldn’t this be taken into account when we construct our normative epistemology? No doubt it should. But the question is: on what grounds? I maintain that it cannot be on guidance grounds. Even when it comes to norms that don’t look obviously demanding (like, say, a dispositionalist version of RATIONALITY) we are in a much worse position, guidance-wise, than many epistemologists have (often tacitly) assumed. Once this fact is appreciated, the gap between norms that appear to be relatively undemanding and those that are obviously highly demanding shrinks dramatically – at least when it comes to guidance.

Why has this point been overlooked? I suspect that part of the explanation has to do with the kinds of cases that epistemologists working on what I have called ‘the fundamental norms’ usually focus on. The typical vignette in this area of epistemology involves a person receiving a new piece of information, usually through testimony or visual perception, contemplating it, and forming a new belief or revising an existing belief as a consequence. The way these vignettes are presented encourages us to think of this as a somewhat extended and effortful process that takes place at the forefront of the person’s conscious mind. But this is the exception, not the rule. Most of the action in our doxastic lives takes place behind the

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⁴⁴ Note that Mushers may be in just as bad a position as Sharers here. As Carr (2019) points out, figuring out which credence interval one should have is arguably no easier than is figuring out which sharp credence one should have.
scenes. Too much emphasis on the action in the spotlight encourages a picture of our doxastic lives according to which we have far fewer beliefs that we really do and according to which they are much more under our control than they actually are. This, in turn, suggests a more optimistic outlook on the prospects of being guided by a norm like RATIONALITY than is in fact justified.

§XI. Conclusion

Much of what I have said about guidance has been rather discouraging. In closing I would like to very briefly sketch a more positive view. Consider conditionals of the form ‘When in circumstances C, adopt doxastic attitude D’. A large part of the problem is that one is often not in a position to know whether the antecedents of the relevant conditionals obtain. But this ignorance need not prevent one from knowing that the conditional itself is true. This knowledge can serve as a useful guide in all kinds of ways. For instance, knowing that one must be rational, and one must only believe truths, individuals might try to avoid unreliable sources of evidence. Similarly, policy-makers might make use of this knowledge when setting school curricula. The possibilities are expansive and open-ended. No doubt many of them are already being exercised. These are ways of being guided by epistemic norms that are quite easily available to those who wish to make use of them. But it is doubtful that they can help us in epistemological theory by narrowing down the range of acceptable norms. None of the views we have looked at – dilemmism, the knowledge norm, uniqueness, Bayesianism, sharpness, and so on, is ruled out by this way of thinking about guidance.
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