

What are Epistemic Standards?  
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1. Identifying the phenomenon

Over the past two decades, a new concept has gained prominence in epistemology.<sup>1</sup> While consensus has now largely settled on the terminology of “epistemic standards” for this concept (White 2005, Schoenfield 2014), at various points it has gone by “epistemic rules” (Horowitz 2014, Boghossian 2008<sup>2</sup>), “epistemic systems” (Goldman 2010), “epistemic styles” (Flores 2021), “evidential standards” (Meacham 2016, Hedden 2016), “evidential policies” (Morton and Paul 2019), “starting points” (Feldman 2006), “frameworks” (Pritchard 2009, Callahan 2021), “methods of reasoning” (Titelbaum and Kopec 2019), “interpretations” (Decker 2012), or just “backgrounds” (Podgorski 2016). Unlike other technical concepts, epistemic standards were not introduced by definition. Instead, the concept was introduced because epistemologists needed some way of referring to whatever fills certain functional roles:

1. Epistemic standards reflect extra-evidential elements that take agents from their evidence to doxastic attitudes.
2. They are the kind of thing represented in a Bayesian formalism by “ur-priors” (also known as “hypothetical priors”).
3. They factor in explanations of why we form the beliefs that we do.
4. They explain reasonable disagreement among peers with identical relevant evidence, if and when this phenomenon occurs.

The last two roles are especially pertinent to the topic of the present volume. One might doubt whether real agents debating *empirical* matters ever come close to sharing common bodies of relevant evidence or even having equally good evidence.<sup>3</sup> But entrenched,

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<sup>1</sup> As we’ll indicate below, the concept arguably has roots in, e.g., James (1897), Wittgenstein (1969), Kuhn (1962), and Levi (1974). But we think it’s been newly isolated and made a target of explicit philosophical study.

<sup>2</sup> Boghossian (2008) is primarily concerned with how to understand “rules of reasoning” generally, not necessarily with the interpersonally-varying entities that others have in mind. It’ll become relevant later that Boghossian also uses “commitment” language to talk about rule following. He writes, “In rule-following there is, on the one hand, a commitment, on the part of the thinker to uphold a certain pattern in his thought or behavior; and, on the other, some behavior that expresses that commitment, that is explained and rationalized by it.” (p. 482)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Elga (2007a) for early doubts about whether common disagreements really involve “peers”; see also Matheson (2014), who claims “even small differences in evidence may call for quite large deviations in terms of how much conciliation is called for from the idealized (evidentially symmetrical) case.” (ibid. 324, parenthetical added).

long-standing debates among experienced philosophers don't seem to arise from differences in their evidence.<sup>4</sup> For one thing, some of these debates don't seem to turn on any empirical evidence at all. For another, to the extent that one counts *a priori* arguments and factors as evidence, all parties to such debates seem to be aware of the same considerations. The crucial difference seems to come in how they weigh up these considerations—different ways they interpret the shared evidence to draw philosophical conclusions. The extra-evidential elements that guide philosophers from their evidence to particular conclusions help explain those conclusions.

Notice that attributing (many) philosophical disagreements to differences in philosophers' epistemic standards entails, via functional role four, that philosophical disagreements are of the *right kind* to be reasonable, if any disagreements among those with identical relevant evidence are. But of course the reasonableness of so-called "peer" disagreement is itself controversial. As we'll discuss in the next section, we think this question is intimately bound up with questions about the normative role of epistemic standards. And as we'll ultimately reveal in section 5.5, we are hopeful that epistemic standards play a strong normative role—and therefore hopeful that there can be reasonable disagreement, including among philosophers. But our aims here are primarily of the ground-clearing variety. We want to understand what epistemic standards *are*.

And while the functional roles described above carve out a philosophical location for epistemic standards to occupy, we understand if a reader still doesn't feel she knows exactly what we're talking about. Perhaps it will help to have some illustrative examples from the literature of what epistemic standards are supposed to be like, and how they crop up in epistemological practice:

- Kelly (2013) suggests that an agent's epistemic standards reflect her personal tradeoff between the Jamesian (1897) goals of believing what is true and not believing what is false.<sup>5</sup>
- Titelbaum (2010) proposes that epistemic standards determine whether an agent projects hypotheses involving the predicate "green" or "grue".

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<sup>4</sup> Pace van Inwagen (1996) (and possibly King (2011), although King suspects broader failures of peerhood among philosophers too). Van Inwagen notes that we might either think of evidence as necessarily objective and publicly examinable, or else as possibly including "incommunicable states of mind" or "insights". If we think of evidence in the latter way, then van Inwagen suggests that, e.g., his own philosophical disagreements with David Lewis (and others) may be explained by differences in each philosopher's evidence. Van Inwagen surmises that, when it comes to, e.g., the incompatibility of free will and determinism, "I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight... that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis." (1996: 138)

We are skeptical that all disagreements among experienced philosophers can be explained in terms of "insights" properly treatable as evidence. At least some of these disagreements seem rather to involve particular ways of interpreting or weighting *other* evidence and arguments.

<sup>5</sup> To be clear: We read neo-Jamesians who explain peer disagreement in terms of differing truth/falsehood tradeoffs as invoking a particular kind of epistemic standard. Admittedly, peers may diverge in their Jamesian "goals" for practical reasons. But the "epistemic" in "epistemic standards" refers to the standards' role in mediating between evidence and doxastic attitudes. As we'll explain, epistemic standards need not be adopted for purely epistemic reasons—or even any reasons at all!

- In the Bayesian ur-priors tradition (Meacham 2016), epistemic standards are sometimes taken to reflect basic inclinations to believe, e.g. in theism, or in the trustworthiness of particular people or institutions.
- Differing Kuhnian paradigms (Kuhn 1962) among rival scientific communities may illustrate differing epistemic standards.<sup>6</sup>
- Schoenfield (2019) describes epistemic standards as determined by the non-normative “cognitive properties” that agents prefer their beliefs to have, when their only goal is accuracy.

At another point, Schoenfield suggests we might not need to know much about the nature of epistemic standards themselves:

What are an agent's epistemic standards? There are different ways of thinking of epistemic standards. Some people think of them as rules of the form “Given E, believe p!” Others think of them as beliefs about the correct way to form other beliefs. If you are a Bayesian, you can think of an agent's standards as her prior and conditional probability functions. Since what I will be saying does not rely on a particular understanding of what a standard it is, we can just think of a set of standards as a function from bodies of evidence to doxastic states. (Schoenfield 2014, p. 199)

While it may not be necessary for Schoenfield’s particular purposes, we believe that the broader epistemological dialogue has begun to suffer from not having a clearer understanding of epistemic standards. Epistemic “permissivists” (White 2005) who attribute reasonable peer disagreement to differing rational epistemic standards<sup>7</sup> among agents owe us a plausible account of what these things are supposed to be and what it takes for agents to have them. For if such an account cannot be given, permissivism<sup>8</sup> would seem to be untenable. And even the permissivists’ opponents, who believe only one set of epistemic standards is rational, should admit that people seem (irrationally) to *have* different sets of epistemic standards; people predictably form beliefs according to individual patterns, including making systematic errors. It would be nice to know what this individual patterning of belief-formation amounts to, if only to know how to criticize consistently irrational agents.

The motivating question for this chapter then is the titular one: what *are* epistemic standards? But for reasons we discuss in §3, we will approach this question by asking a slightly different one: what are the real phenomena in virtue of which an agent counts as having a particular set of epistemic standards? We’ll eventually consider the possibilities that agents have their particular epistemic standards in virtue of their beliefs, their epistemic dispositions,

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<sup>6</sup> See discussion of Kuhn in connection with the question of whether “epistemic reasons” alone are sufficient to rationalize belief, in Boghossian (2006: chapter 8); see also Jacoby (2023).

<sup>7</sup> That is, permissivists who subscribe to what Li (2019) calls the “Epistemic Standard View” or what Callahan (2021) calls “Subjectivist Permissivism”.

<sup>8</sup> More carefully, *subjectivist* permissivism would seem untenable; see previous footnote.

their epistemic goals or desires, and their epistemic (“confirmational”) commitments. We ultimately find the last possibility most promising.

First, however, we spend a bit more time in §2 considering what epistemic standards are meant to be like, according to the recent literature. §3 clarifies some terminological ambiguities. We then ask, in §4, what psychology might tell us about epistemic standards, before proceeding in §5 to the examination of the particular candidates just listed.

## 2. What standards are like: idealization, stability, and reasons

Beyond the functional roles and illustrative examples above, we have found a number of recurring themes in the literature’s discussion of epistemic standards. Whatever candidate we settle on, as that-in-virtue-of-which-people-have-standards, it would be nice for it to make sense of these philosophical conversations.

First, standards don’t reflect *all* extra-evidential influences on belief. No one thinks that Christensen’s famous restaurant case (2007), in which two agents calculate different tip amounts for the same lunch bill, is a case of those agents’ having different epistemic standards. Rather, we assume that at least one of the agents simply makes a performance error, despite both agents’ being competent to do the math correctly and having uniform standards for doing addition.

Relatedly, epistemic standards are somewhat *idealized* or *normative*. An agent’s epistemic standards don’t reflect exactly the way she in fact would (or does) form beliefs. One can fail to follow or “live up to” one’s epistemic standards, such as in the case of performance errors. One can also, seemingly, fail to understand or misunderstand one’s own standards, believing that one reasons in a particular way while in fact reasoning according to quite different patterns.<sup>9</sup> Given that agents may not have immediate introspective access to their standards, the best way to determine the content of someone’s standards might require going beyond just asking them—interpreting how they reason, the conclusions they draw from evidence, etc. While this aspect of epistemic standards seems to have received less attention in the literature, it is supported by the fact noted above, that part of the functional role of epistemic standards is to explain why people (actually) form the beliefs they do – and not just their rationalizations.

Next, epistemic standards have some diachronic consistency. They don’t change willy nilly or even very frequently. Some authors – especially those who reach for metaphors like “initial credences” – seem to think of epistemic standards as fixed facts in our history, thus

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<sup>9</sup> Schoenfield (2019: 289) also suggests that standards needn’t be consciously accessible.

totally static or immutable in the present.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some argue that standards *shouldn't* ever change – at least not for rational agents who are “immodest” in a Lewisian sense.<sup>11</sup>

Yet others seem to assume epistemic standards are things we can discuss or debate, that we can be convinced of or learn over time. Consider Feldman (2006), an early inspiration for reflection on “fundamental claims about the world or epistemological principles about how to deal with evidence” (p. 205). Feldman writes:

Once people have engaged in a full discussion of issues, their different starting points will be apparent. And then those claims will themselves be open for discussion and evaluation. ... Once you see that there are these alternative starting points, you need a reason to prefer one over the other. (p. 206)

Feldman’s claim that standards (“starting points”) can be open to discussion and evaluation certainly suggests the possibility of change.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Feldman’s claim that “you need a reason” to have a particular set of epistemic standards rather than an alternative set suggests that epistemic standards are the sort of thing that *ought not be arbitrary*. This point is also somewhat unsettled in the literature. Some (e.g., Callahan (2021), Simpson (2017)) agree that standards ought not be arbitrary – in at least some sense of “arbitrary”. But others seem more sanguine about the idea that we each *just have or just find ourselves with* a particular set of epistemic standards. Perhaps we need to accept that reasons inevitably “run out”, or that we couldn’t possibly have reasons or evidence determining the proper ways to interpret and evaluate evidence. (Cf., e.g., Titelbaum (2010), Schoenfield (2014: 201-2).)

Finally, regardless of whether epistemic standards are themselves things for which we have reasons, epistemic standards play an important role in determining an agent’s (theoretical/epistemic) reasons. This takes a bit of spelling out, because objectivists may assess that role differently from subjectivists/permisivists. But let’s start with points of agreement. Everyone admits that at least *some* epistemic standards are irrational or normatively defective in some way and have no interesting relationship to what a subject has reason to believe. (Even a maximally subjectivist Bayesian thinks ur-priors should satisfy the probability axioms.) But everyone also admits that some sets – i.e., at least one set – of epistemic standards are *non-defective*. And we think that for the non-defective standards, everyone will moreover agree with the following two normative theses:

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g., Meacham (2013: 1187). Here it’s important to note the distinction between what Titelbaum (2022, Section 4.3.2) calls *ongoing* and *ultimate* epistemic standards. Suppose I ask you, “If you somehow learned that the Federal reserve will increase interest rates in the last quarter of 2024, would that increase or decrease your confidence that the U.S. economy will experience a recession in 2025?” This is a question that you might give different answers to at different times, in part in response to additional evidence you gained about the economy along the way. This question about how evidence bears on beliefs queries your *ongoing* standards, which are susceptible to evidential influences, and which no one doubts do and should change over time. *Ultimate* epistemic standards—the subject of this chapter—are meant to lie at a deeper level, and are meant to reflect evidentially isolated factors bearing on your assessments of evidence in general. There is a real question about how diachronically constant these standards are and should be.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Greco and Hedden (2016).

<sup>12</sup> See also Callahan (2021) on extending, refining, or precisifying standards, and Flores (2021) on agents’ switching epistemic styles across contexts.

- An agent who possesses rationally permissible epistemic standards has theoretical reason to believe what those standards say follows from her evidence.
- When an agent has a (theoretically) justified belief, that belief is justified in part *because* her rationally-permitted epistemic standards recommend that belief on the basis of her evidence.

These theses admit of stronger or weaker interpretations depending on whether one is an objectivist (non-permissivist) about rational belief. The first thesis asserts simply that two things match: what an agent with rational standards has reason to believe, and what those standards say follows from her evidence. For the objectivist<sup>13</sup>, the single set of rationally-permissible epistemic standards dictates what all agents have theoretical reason to believe, so any agent who possesses those standards will be driven by them to believe correctly. The objectivist will then read the second thesis in terms of something like a doxastic versus propositional justification distinction. Whether or not an agent possesses the correct standards, those standards detail what she has propositional justification to believe on the basis of her evidence. But in order to deploy that justification—to believe on the basis of the theoretical reasons she truly has—she must possess the correct standards and believe on the basis of those standards applied to her evidence. (An agent whose evidence supported belief in  $p$  relative to the correct standards, but who believed  $p$  on the basis of incorrect standards, or by misapplying the correct standards, would not have a doxastically justified belief in  $p$ .)

A subjectivist permissivist will read the second thesis more strongly. According to her, there are multiple rationally-acceptable epistemic standards. Thus even once an agent's total evidence is specified, that agent's reasons to believe will still depend on her epistemic standards. An agent's possessing particular epistemic standards helps *make it the case* that she has particular theoretical reasons; parts of her evidence support particular beliefs *because* she has the standards she does. For the subjectivist, epistemic standards affect not only an agent's ability to achieve doxastic justification, but also what that agent is propositionally justified in believing.

We submit that both subjectivists and objectivists ought to prefer a view of epistemic standards that makes the stronger reading at least *plausible*. At the end of the day, the objectivist will deny that epistemic standards in fact determine what beliefs are propositionally justified for a subject (and thus the strong reading of the second thesis). But she should still prefer a view of what epistemic standards are, and how agents possess them, that makes the subjectivist's view an *understandable* mistake. Why? Basically: to grant as much sense as possible to the debate she's been having with the permissivist. If an objectivist were to cast epistemic standards as the kind of things that are patently unable to confer propositional justification on particular attitudes, then she would seem to need an error theory sufficient to explain why subjectivists all missed the obvious. But the debate between subjectivists and

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<sup>13</sup> Again, we assume "the" objectivist is a uniqueness theorist. There is a possible position holding that rationality is objectively permissive, but it is not well-represented in current literature. Strictly speaking, we take uniqueness [permissivism] to be the claim that there is only [more than] one legitimate set of epistemic standards; and we take objectivism [subjectivism] to be the claim that an agent's epistemic standards do not [do] help make it the case that she has the particular theoretical reasons she has. Cf Callahan (forthcoming)

objectivists is entrenched and nuanced. It would be surprising if epistemic standards were just a wholly unpromising kind of thing to play the strong normative role subjectivists think they play.

In any case, it's clear that epistemic standards interact with theoretical reasons in an important way. This feature will turn out to be quite an instructive one, when we turn to evaluating candidate mental phenomena later in the paper.

### 3. Standards and *having* standards

One further complication in the literature bears special mention. Some authors talk of epistemic standards in a way that makes them sound like mental states figuring in agents' psychologies, while other authors depict them as abstract entities to which agents might be significantly related by way of the mental states they possess.<sup>14</sup> We think both the abstractions and their related mental states are important, and we will discuss both in what follows. But simply to employ a consistent terminology, we will stipulate that "epistemic standards" are abstracta that recommend doxastic states on the basis of evidence.<sup>15</sup>

This immediately brings up the next ambiguity, generated by the plural noun in "epistemic standards". It's tempting to think that an agent's epistemic standards must ultimately consist of a set of rule- or principle-like items, each expressible as something like a proposition, and each of which counts as a single "epistemic standard". (E.g., "Trust perception absent defeaters" or "Conciliate with peers and defer to experts".) However, we want to resist this temptation. There may be isolated cases in which agents form beliefs on the basis of clear principles (academics in certain methodological communities being perhaps the best examples). Yet it's fairly clear both from common experience and from the psychology literature (about which more presently) that most agents don't employ anything like enumerable rules in belief formation. Patterns, values, considerations, and even intuitive faculties come into play in complex, overlapping fashions.<sup>16</sup> So we will use "epistemic standards" to refer to an abstract mapping from evidence to attitudes, without presuming that this overall entity is decomposable in the manner its surface grammar might suggest.

Finally, we want to distinguish these admittedly abstract standards from the (even more abstract?) formal abstracta sometimes used to represent them. One often sees epistemic standards characterized as a *function* from possible bodies of total evidence to overall agential belief states (along the lines of Christensen's (2010) "Über-rule"<sup>17</sup>). Yet real individuals'

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<sup>14</sup> To see an example of this ambiguity, look back at the first two "ways of thinking of epistemic standards" listed by Schoenfield in our earlier quote from her (2014). If epistemic standards are "beliefs about the correct way to form other beliefs," then they are—*qua* beliefs—actual mental states of agents. On the other hand, if epistemic standards are "rules of the form 'Given E, believe p!'" then (being *rules*) they are abstracta to which agents' psychologies might be related in various ways.

<sup>15</sup> This regimentation of the terminology has a further advantage: Thinking of epistemic standards as abstracta rather than as psychological states, one might ask whether entities that lack human-style psychologies could still possess epistemic standards in some sense. For instance, we think there might be a sensible way to talk about Large Language Models' enacting particular epistemic standards, although the LLMs would be related to those standards differently than we are, and the normative situation would be very different.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Kinzel & Kusch (2018).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., Dogramaci and Horowitz (2016: 131), Pollock and Cruz (1999:123), Daoust (2019: 13), Li (2019: 1229), and Ye (2021: 657).

epistemic standards are probably not that detailed; they take a stand on the significance of various features of evidence (and perhaps their interplay) without being rich enough to entail full belief sets for every possible total evidence specification.<sup>18</sup> So while, for instance, a real-valued probability distribution over a complete Boolean algebra of propositions may be an elegant Bayesian tool for representing the epistemic standards of idealized agents, an *ur*-prior is probably not a realistic representation of actual agents' epistemic standards. (Something like a partial function, or a set of distributions, might come closer.)<sup>19</sup>

We aren't going to say much more than this about the metaphysical nature or ontological status of epistemic standards, largely because we don't see much else it would be helpful to say. We will focus on a different question instead. Li helpfully distinguishes "the question of what an epistemic standard *is* from the question of what it takes to *have* a particular epistemic standard." (2019, p. 1229, emphases in original) He is ultimately unable to find a theory of epistemic standards that both yields a plausible story about how agents can possess them and honors their normative roles (relating to epistemic reasons). Below we will survey a number of candidates for a relation in which an agent could stand to a set of epistemic standards that would make those standards "hers" in a manner that secures the overall desideratum of making sense of current philosophical debates; we are more hopeful than Li about the prospects for at least one of our candidates (commitment). We also hope our conclusions will allow the reader to circle back and get a better grasp of what epistemic standards are to begin with.

#### 4. Insights from psychology and related sciences?

Given that we are interested in the real mental phenomena that might establish agents' relation to their epistemic standards, it seems to make sense also to ask what, if anything, *psychologists* and *social scientists* have had to say about (things like) epistemic standards.

The answer to that question is subtle. People outside philosophy do not appear to use the term "epistemic standards" in the way philosophers do. And given that epistemic standards are somewhat *idealized*, as we reviewed above, one might be pessimistic about the ability of purely empirical and descriptive investigations of belief formation, to illuminate them.

We are intrigued, however, by three aspects of social scientific research on differences in "people's characteristic and typically preferred modes of processing information,"<sup>20</sup> which employs the labels "cognitive styles," "thinking styles," or "thinking dispositions."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Schoenfield (2019: 289-291).

<sup>19</sup> The paragraph in the main text complains that an *Über*-rule or a Bayesian prior is too rich to represent realistic epistemic standards. But there's another sense in which those formalisms are not rich enough. When it comes to individuating epistemic standards, a functional representation will do so *extensionally*: any standards that assign the same attitudes in light of the same bodies of evidence will count as one and the same set of standards. But humans may reason to the same conclusion in quite different ways, as when two people complete the same mental arithmetic problem using different algorithms or heuristics. The interpretation of standards as sets of principles—for all its other flaws—at least begins to capture this kind of richness.

<sup>20</sup> Sternberg and Grigorenko (1997: 700)

<sup>21</sup> See Kozhevnikov (2007) for an overview of the development of research on cognitive styles.



Let's be clear: we don't think that psychologists' cognitive styles are *identical* with philosophers' epistemic standards. For one thing, there is the normative vs. descriptive issue already mentioned. We take it that thinking dispositions – even good ones – do not necessarily give people *reasons* to believe in certain ways; this is an issue on which the psychology is silent. But there are also issues of granularity and completeness. Having a “dogmatic” thinking style or falling at a particular point on the “holistic-analytical” dimension of cognitive styles does not seem sufficient to explain why an agent would interpret grass as green rather than grue.

But even so, the research on cognitive styles is interesting, first, because it validates the idea that people differ systematically from one another in their evaluations of evidence. We don't just all make performance errors (though that is also true); we differ in patterned ways.

Second, (some of) the research highlights the importance of difference *levels* of cognition, whether because researchers explicitly equate thinking dispositions with reflective, high-level dispositions<sup>22</sup> or because researchers address individual differences at multiple levels of cognition.<sup>23</sup> The distinctness of “low” and “high” levels of cognition, famously described respectively as “System 1” and “System 2” thinking by Kahneman and Tversky<sup>24</sup>, may pose a challenge to philosophers looking for a *unified* set of epistemic standards, performing important explanatory roles across both. We still think there would be value in a unified picture, and we'll consider options below that seem promising on both more and less reflective levels. But we note the possibility that epistemic standards may need to be multiply grounded in different levels of the mind.

Finally, some sociological research suggests there are significant *social* influences on cognitive styles and cognitive processing more generally, hence (plausibly) significant social influences on an agent's epistemic standards. Brett and Miles (2021) argue that individuals differ in their tendencies to deploy System 1 versus System 2 cognition based on their cognitive styles, which in turn may vary along demographic lines such as education, age, and gender. While we won't explore this question further, it seems highly plausible that an agent's “individual” epistemic standards would be highly influenced by her sociocultural surroundings.

In sum, while psychologists and other scientists don't address the having of epistemic standards *per se*, they do provide a bit of encouragement for the thesis that people differ in their thinking in systematic ways, and they do suggest a few additional guidelines for answering the question what standards are: namely, having standards should be able to explain the particularities of quite distinct kinds or levels of cognitive processing (System 1 and System 2), and culture or society can significantly influence an agent's standards.

## 5. Evaluating candidates

It's time to evaluate some candidate answers to our question: how *is* a person related to her epistemic standards? We'll start with arguably the two most natural candidate answers, also discussed in Li (2019): by virtue of her *beliefs*, or by virtue of her *dispositions*. We'll then turn to

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<sup>22</sup> For Stanovich et al. (2010), thinking dispositions capture “variation in people's goal management, epistemic values, and epistemic self-regulation – differences in the operation of *reflective mind*” (p. 378, emphasis added)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. e.g., Miller (1987); see discussion in Kozhevnikov (2007: 473-5).

<sup>24</sup> For an accessible overview, see Kahneman (2011).

a few possibilities inspired by action theory and value theory: perhaps people have epistemic standards in virtue of their epistemic *aims/goals/desires*, or else their *intentions/plans*. Finding all of these options somewhat wanting, relative to discussions of standards in recent philosophical literature, we will propose our favorite candidate: *commitments*.

## 5.1 Belief

Perhaps a person *believes* that, in evidential situations WXY, she ought to adopt attitude Z. Or she believes, of some set of maxims (“conciliate with peers”, etc.) that it is the best and most accuracy-conducive set. Most generally, perhaps a person has beliefs about the right way to form other beliefs (Elga ms.<sup>25</sup>, Goldman 2010, Ye 2021, Jacoby 2023, Balin ms.). And, so the suggestion goes, perhaps this is why she counts as having the set of standards she has – she *believes* that they represent the right way to form attitudes.<sup>26</sup>

The first problem with this proposal is that it doesn’t seem people have beliefs like this.<sup>27</sup> The folk certainly don’t have explicit or occurrent beliefs about the propriety of “green” over “grue”, or even about the proper standard of evidence for believing your partner has cheated on you. Might they have tacit, implicit beliefs about such matters? Perhaps, but there does seem to be an intuitive cost to positing myriad beliefs about concepts and evidential thresholds for every human agent. And bearing in mind the previous section, it’s unlikely that system 1 judgments are shaped by anything that could even be called implicit beliefs.

The second problem with the belief view of relating to epistemic standards is that it fails to capture or explain standards’ relationship to evidence and reasons. Recall that one of the basic functional roles of epistemic standards is to reflect extra-evidential elements that take agents from their evidence to doxastic attitudes. Because epistemic standards play this evidence-interpreting role, they themselves have a rather complicated relationship with reasons and evidence, sparking the debates we mentioned above about whether and in what way epistemic standards are doomed to arbitrariness or are able to respond to evidence.

But, in general, *beliefs* don’t have a complicated relationship with evidence, and *beliefs* aren’t plausibly doomed to arbitrariness. We generally expect or demand that an agent have reason or justification for her beliefs; beliefs are arguably *constitutively* responsive to evidence.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, beliefs are the kinds of doxastic attitudes our epistemic standards are meant to *rationalize*, on the basis of our evidence.

Now, one might respond that our epistemic standards arise from a very special subset of our beliefs, themselves immune to standards-based evaluation.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps epistemic standards

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<sup>25</sup> This view is often attributed to Elga (e.g., in the Schoenfield (2014) block quote from section 1). But in personal correspondence Elga has clarified that this was only a suggestion and not something he took himself to be strongly endorsing.

<sup>26</sup> The *dispositionalist* about belief might just skip down to the discussion of dispositions, below.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Li (2019: 1234-5) on the failure of belief to satisfy the “applicability criterion” for epistemic standards.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Flores (forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> Elga (2007b) defends the idea that fundamental rules, policies, and methods have a special entitlement to be dogmatic. He is writing in the context of the disagreement debate, defending the view that conciliationists should be dogmatic about conciliationism itself. We have reservations about this argument but cannot detail them here.

could be something like Wittgenstein's "hinge" beliefs.<sup>30</sup> And perhaps it *is* rather complicated to say whether such "fundamental" or "basic" beliefs are themselves accountable to evidence and reasons.

But not all beliefs about the right way to form other beliefs should count as hinges. For Wittgenstein, hinges are beliefs we hold fixed and do not submit to doubt, in order to effectively doubt and inquire about other things.<sup>31</sup> However, as we saw in section 2, there are at least some philosophers who think of epistemic standards as things that can develop and change over time – and the malleability of psychologists' "thinking dispositions" further supports this. If epistemic standards arise from beliefs about the right way to form other beliefs, then arguably these beliefs too develop and can be revised or doubted.

Finally, there is a third problem for the belief view of relating to epistemic standards – one that will ultimately plague most candidate views. The beliefs account of standards possession can't support the two normative theses we mentioned in section 2 on their strong reading. Suppose we say that an agent has particular rationally-acceptable epistemic standards by virtue of believing that she ought to respond to her evidence in particular ways. Notice that according to the subjectivist, this belief is true only because the agent believes it. (If she believed in different rationally-acceptable standards, it would be the case that she ought to respond in accordance with those.) This already suggests that the belief is being asked to do an atypical amount of work.<sup>32</sup> Now focus on what the belief is being asked to make true: on the strong reading of our second normative thesis, this belief is supposed to shape the normative landscape of theoretical reasons the agent possesses. Believing that she ought to form particular beliefs is supposed to make it so. But beliefs—even beliefs with normative content—clearly don't have this level of normative authority. (Believing I ought to punch you does not make it so; nor does believing (truly) I ought *not* to punch you make the prohibition valid.) Beliefs are not up to the normative task of relating agents to standards, if we want it to be at least *plausible* that standards play the normative role subjectivists think they play.

Now Li (2019) suggests that coherence requirements can straightforwardly explain the normative authority of beliefs about the right way to form other beliefs. Notice, however, that the belief that one ought to form beliefs in a certain way is not straightforwardly inconsistent with the body of beliefs one would form by following a different method. It's not like believing that *p* and believing that  $\sim p$ ; it is rather more like believing you oughtn't read your sister's diary and also believing that she saw her friend Suzy at recess yesterday (which you only came to know because you read the diary). One might try to put the higher-order and first-order beliefs into tension by endorsing an epistemic anti-akratic requirement. Such requirements have generated a great deal of controversy in the recent literature.<sup>33</sup> But even theorists who endorse them don't think that believing one ought to  $\phi$  *makes it the case* that one ought to  $\phi$ . At best,

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<sup>30</sup> Hazlett (2006), Wright (2004)

<sup>31</sup> Wittgenstein (1969).

<sup>32</sup> We realize some beliefs can be made true by believing them: for instance, the belief that can be expressed in English as "I have a belief that can be expressed in a sentence of exactly sixteen English words." But the belief in question doesn't seem to work like that. And as we're about to suggest in the main text, the way it *does* seem to work requires normative capabilities that beliefs don't seem to possess.

<sup>33</sup> To cite just one prominent foe of anti-akratic requirements, cf. Lasonen-Aarnio (2014).

anti-akratic requirements are wide-scope; one has the option either to  $\phi$  or to drop the belief that one ought to.<sup>34</sup>

We think that, whatever one proposes for the precise content of standards-conferring beliefs, a permissivist/subjectivist will reject that proposal on similar normative grounds. Will objectivists go along? If they don't—if they endorse the belief account of relating to epistemic standards—they will have to maintain that subjectivists were deluded to think the strong versions of the normative theses were ever on the table (that epistemic standards could ever determine an agent's reasons). And they will have to overcome the other problems for the belief account we listed above. So we think even objectivists should not hold that an agent possesses particular epistemic standards by virtue of holding particular beliefs.

To see all these problems with the belief account in a different way, consider the fourth functional role of epistemic standards: they explain reasonable disagreement among peers with identical relevant evidence, if and when this phenomenon occurs. Assume for the moment that there *is* reasonable disagreement among peers, suppose peers A and B share relevant evidence bearing on some question whether- $p$ , and yet A reasonably believes that  $p$  while B reasonably suspends judgment on the question.

How could this be? The belief view of how agents relate to their epistemic standards will explain that A and B just have different beliefs about the right way to form other beliefs. But it's not clear that in cases of peer disagreement, agents always have such meta-beliefs. Even if they do, the account of peer disagreement on offer seems awfully flat-footed: the agents differ in their beliefs about  $p$  because they have different beliefs about what they should believe about  $p$ . We might have expected a deeper story about how and where the difference arises in their psyches; something like what the "hinge beliefs" story tries (and fails) to give. And finally, even if the beliefs story about disagreement proves both true and explanatorily adequate, it still seems normatively false. Given that there's no general normative requirement to behave how one believes one ought to behave, it is not clear why beliefs about how one ought to *believe* would suffice to explain how A and B could both be reasonable.

One last point here, about credences. For reasons similar to everything we've said about belief, we also reject the idea that an agent possesses particular epistemic standards by virtue of assigning particular credences. This rejection might look like it conflicts with the second functional role of epistemic standards: they're the kind of thing represented in the Bayesian formalism by "ur-" or "hypothetical" priors. Yet the appearance of conflict is generated by a confusion about the nature of ur-priors. In previous decades, an agent's ur-priors were discussed as if they represented credences (that is, actual belief-like mental states) that an agent assigned at some point in her early life, a time before she possessed any empirical evidence. (This accounts for the "initial credences" terminology mentioned above.) If epistemic standards are represented by ur-priors, and ur-priors in turn catalog credences assigned by the agent at an earlier time, then it looks awfully like an agent possesses the standards she does by

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<sup>34</sup> See Balin (ms.) for a particularly sophisticated wide-scope complaint about epistemic standards understood as beliefs.

virtue of her credence assignments (albeit, her credence assignments at a particular privileged time).

But contemporary Bayesianism has almost universally abandoned the initial priors myth. There was never a time when any real human agent adopted opinions absent all empirical information. Hypothetical priors, formally coded as regular probability distributions over some space of possibilities, are now seen as abstract representations of an agent's current standards, not as snapshots of some earlier belief-like state. So we may still question what about the agent's present mental state relates her to the standards thus represented.

We have dwelt at some length on the possibility that an agent is related to her epistemic standards by her beliefs. Our discussions of subsequent candidates for that relation will proceed more briskly, as our critiques of those proposals will often echo those given here.

## 5.2 (Idealized) dispositions

Consider a second possibility: perhaps we count as having particular epistemic standards in virtue of being *disposed* to form beliefs in various particular ways.<sup>35</sup>

This view has the virtue of not positing a host of hidden mental states in ordinary agents. But one immediate and novel challenge for this view is to vindicate the literature's assumption that an agent can *fail* to believe according to her standards and that there is an important distinction between an agent's actual beliefs and the beliefs her standards recommend.

The natural response to this sort of worry is to idealize the dispositions in question. Perhaps an agent's epistemic standards should be identified with the ways she would form beliefs *in ideal epistemic circumstances* (e.g. – at 10:00 in the morning with a cup of coffee on board and no major distractions) or *if she were maximally reflective*. But, as Li (2019) also presses, such idealization procedures are fraught. On the one hand, dispositions must be idealized enough so that it is possible for one to form beliefs in ways that diverge from one's standards. Indeed, we suggested in section 2 that standards must be idealized enough that people can misunderstand their own. On the other hand, dispositions must not be *too* idealized away from individual agents' actual belief formation; this would threaten (among other things) the possibility of significant variation across agents, as well as the explanatory power of dispositions relative to agents' actual beliefs. So finding the right balance seems tricky, to put it mildly. Moreover, idealization can seem to threaten normative significance – who cares how a *better* version of me would form beliefs?

We also think there is a deeper, though related, problem with seeing belief-forming dispositions as having the proper sort of normativity. If having epistemic standards is a matter of having certain dispositions, then failing to “live up” to one's standards is a matter of forming beliefs out of character. But why should what's “in character” be normative for one's beliefs

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. (Lewis 1980 p. 288): “What makes it be so that a certain reasonable initial credence function and a certain reasonable system of basic intrinsic values are both yours is that you are disposed to act in more or less the ways that are rationalized by the pair of them together.” Meacham (2016 p. 474) also considers the dispositional account.

(even if one's character is rationally permissible)? There isn't any general injunction to do the things that are "you," so to speak.

Consider why the dispositional view of having epistemic standards does an unsatisfying job of explaining reasonable disagreements (if such there be). Suppose that, as above, peers A and B disagree despite sharing relevant evidence. The dispositional view will explain that A and B just have different belief-forming dispositions. But one wants to ask, first, why this matters to their *reasonableness* – doing something characteristically or out of a disposition does not make one reasonable. At least on the strong reading of the normative principles reviewed in section 2, the dispositional view seems to be a nonstarter. Second, it is just not very *informative* to be told that A and B believe differently because... they are disposed to believe differently.<sup>36</sup> In sum, it is hard to see how belief-forming dispositions could be sufficient to explain or justify in-character beliefs that manifest them.

### 5.3 Intentions/plans

Perhaps, instead, we should think of agents as having standards in virtue of having *intentions* or *plans* to form beliefs in certain ways, conditional on receiving various batches of evidence.<sup>37</sup>

Problem: as with belief, we might worry that agents don't really have these plans.

Moreover, this view has the odd result that beliefs that fail to accord with one's epistemic standards – i.e., *irrational* beliefs, on many views – will always be *akratic*, or at least roughly akratic. One plans or intends to believe in a certain way, faced with a batch of evidence, but somehow one does not follow through on that intention when one encounters the actual circumstances. This strikes us as surprising. We would have thought that it was possible to make rational mistakes – e.g., committing the gambler's fallacy, or just feeling overly confident that you remembered to put coffee in the shopping cart – *without* doing anything with the flavor of weakness of the will.

Finally, this view also struggles with the normativity issue. Why believe according to your belief-forming intentions, even if your intentions are in some sense good ones?<sup>38</sup> Sure – by so doing one could avoid the just-mentioned problem of akrasia. But one can also avoid akrasia by revising one's intentions. There is no general injunction to do what one intends or plans. For this and other reasons, many authors (most famously Bratman 1987: §2.5) have argued that intentions are not capable of giving us reasons.

Relatedly, the view struggles to explain seeming cases of reasonable disagreement. Think again about A and B. The defender of the planning view might say that A and B disagree

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<sup>36</sup> One might claim the informativeness comes from the *generality* of the dispositions: It's not that A believes *p* because she is disposed to believe *p*; it's that A is disposed to believe propositions of type Z in evidential situations of type WXY, and her belief in *p* is an instance of this general disposition. But now the problem has simply ascended a level: What is there to say, on the dispositional account, about why agent A is disposed to believe propositions of type Z in evidential situations of type WXY, while agent B is not?

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Greco and Hedden (2016), who consider the view that to call a belief rational in some circumstances is to plan to have that belief should one find oneself similarly situated. There's also a strong tradition in the Bayesian literature (especially following Greaves and Wallace 2006) of construing updating rules as plans to adopt particular doxastic attitudes in response to particular possible future courses of evidence.

<sup>38</sup> Chang (2013: 86-92) inspired this argument.

(reasonably) because they had different evidential intentions/plans. But one wants to ask why their plans matter to what it is reasonable for them to believe.

#### 5.4 Goals/desires/aims

Perhaps instead we should see agents as having particular epistemic *goals*, or *desires*, or *aims*, in virtue of which they have the epistemic standards they do. We might think here of the Jamesian goals of believing truth and avoiding error, or perhaps desires for simplicity versus explanatory power in theory choice. Perhaps we might index these goals to particular subject matters and also think about desires for fancier epistemic states like understanding or wisdom or knowledge.

One major attraction of this view is that it is more promising with respect to the normativity issue. Many philosophers think that having goals and desires straightforwardly gives us (defeasible) reasons to act so as to achieve those goals or fulfill those desires. If this is so, then perhaps agents with different epistemic goals straightforwardly have differing reasons to suspend versus believe when evidence is mixed, or to believe in a simpler theory versus one with greater explanatory power.

Unfortunately, however, this view only seems promising with respect to explaining differences pertaining to higher levels of cognitive processing – those cases in which, e.g., agents are weighing a body of mixed evidence and deliberately trying to discern whether to be theists or atheists, or what plan for climate change amelioration is most promising. *These* are the sorts of cases where it makes sense to think agents have particular desires that would affect their belief formation. But do agents really have desires or goals that explain the propriety of green versus grue? Or the way they should update credences for rain, on the basis of particular cloud perceptions?<sup>39</sup>

Now we think it would be an interesting position to claim that epistemic desires give rise to *something like* “epistemic standards,” specifically for reflective cognition, and indeed something that could explain many seeming cases of reasonable disagreement. However, this would not do all the work we wanted from epistemic standards; in particular it would not singlehandedly map bodies of evidence to recommended attitudes. A defender of this position could perhaps grant that their solution does not do *everything* that’s wanted, but then point to the psychological literature, claiming that it was foolish of philosophers to expect a unified story of cognition regulation across more and less reflective levels of the mind.

And yet... our self-set task in this chapter is to consider what epistemic standards are, and how agents relate to them in general, given the constraints of current philosophical usage of that term. We are not quite ready to give up on finding a relation that *can* allow standards to play the roles philosophers think they do—ideally, a unified relation.

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<sup>39</sup> Kevin Dorst pointed out to us that biologists and cognitive scientists sometimes speak of low-level cognitive systems (like perceptual systems) as having aims, functions, or goals. It seems to us that the biological sense in which sub-agential systems have “goals” is fairly different from the sense in which action theorists (say) speak of agents’ having “goals”. It’s very unclear whether such sub-agential goals could play the normative roles required of epistemic standards, in part because they aren’t necessarily goals of the agent considered as a whole. In fact, the agent might explicitly have goals that conflict with—or require efforts to resist—the goals of some of her sub-agential systems (think here of subconscious biases, etc.).

## 5.5 Commitments

Here's our best shot: people are *committed* to believing in certain ways.<sup>40</sup> Whether at one point they explicitly, consciously decided to believe in those ways ("From here on out, I'm always going to trust what Marcia says...") or whether – as happens much more often – they simply find themselves with tacit commitments (to green versus grue, or to a high evidential threshold for religious belief), people are committed to a suite of cognitive methods, rules, or procedures. And it is in virtue of being so committed that people count as having epistemic standards. (As a shorthand for this relation, we can simply say that people are committed to particular epistemic standards. Or we can follow Isaac Levi's apt description of an agent's epistemic standards as her "confirmational commitments".<sup>41</sup>) We'll say just a bit first about what commitments are, on our view, before proceeding to defend the claims that we really have the relevant suite of confirmational commitments and that these could really explain the normativity of epistemic standards.<sup>42</sup>

We are inspired by Ruth Chang's work on commitment, where paradigm cases for her include internal commitments to romantic partners or commitments to a particular career path (say, being a philosopher or being a lawyer). Chang (2013) identifies four features of commitment that, she claims, any plausible theory of commitment must accommodate.

First, although a commitment needn't be occasioned by a decision, it is something one *can* decide to make. One may be committed to a career as a philosopher without ever having made the conscious decision to become so committed. But alternatively one *can* make conscious, deliberate commitments, whether to philosopherhood or to a romantic partner.<sup>43</sup>

Second, commitments comprise both discrete events of committing and ongoing states; commitments may sometimes pop into being, but they persist over time.

Third, commitments – unlike, arguably, beliefs – needn't be uniquely determined by one's reasons in order to be appropriate. You may have some reasons for preferring being either a lawyer or a philosopher to pursuing a number of other careers. And yet it might be that your reasons do not fully settle whether you should be a philosopher or lawyer in particular. Similarly, there may be reasons telling in favor of committing to your romantic partner as "the one" and reasons telling against commitment; though your reasons might not decisively favor either course. In such cases commitment – to philosopherhood, or your particular partner – isn't out of bounds or automatically inappropriate. We can commit even where reason does not *require* us to do so.

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<sup>40</sup> That is, they are committed to believing in certain ways *insofar as epistemic goals or norms are at stake*. One could also commit to (trying to) form beliefs in ways that lower your blood pressure or make you kinder to your family. But we are interested in people's *confirmational* commitments, as to the most *epistemically* fruitful or fitting ways of reasoning.

<sup>41</sup> Levi discussed "confirmational commitments" in a number of publications across the late 1970s, culminating in his (1980). The earliest place we can find him using the terminology is Levi (1974).

<sup>42</sup> As the ensuing discussion will make clear, we *don't* think of commitment as just a kind of belief. Flores argues that "epistemic style does not express epistemic commitments" (2021:44), but that's because (as best we can tell) she's using "epistemic commitments" as a way of talking about one's beliefs.

<sup>43</sup> Giacomo Molinari also brought up the intriguing possibility that one can incur commitments by making certain choices—entering a relationship, joining a particular group—without knowing exactly what the contents of those commitments will be. One might join a church and thereby be committed to its doctrines, or one might commit to meeting another person's needs without knowing exactly what those are, or will be.



Finally, “commitments explain why we have the special reasons we might not otherwise have without having made the commitment.” (Chang 2013: 80). For Chang, it is important that being committed to philosopherhood or to your particular partner can give you fresh reasons to, e.g., finish your dissertation or care for your sick partner, which are not simply drawn from the moral or practical reasons that would already/still be in play absent your commitment.

Fortunately for our purposes, we needn’t adopt a particular view of commitments or the way in which they give rise to “fresh” reasons, in order to see things satisfying those four minimal requirements as highly interesting for the epistemologist.<sup>44</sup>

Once we think of commitments as persisting states that we needn’t enter in a conscious and deliberate fashion, it becomes far more plausible to think that people really are committed to interpreting a certain color as green rather than grue. Just as we may be committed to slow, methodical chewing, or “cutting corners” when walking on curved paths, or brushing our teeth for the full recommended two minutes, we may be committed to certain manners of lower-level cognitive processing despite never having consciously reflected on or chosen them. And yet we may also be more reflectively and deliberately committed to “following the science”, or trusting our instincts, or what have you, in higher-level reasoning.

Similarly, while we may *sometimes* be first-personally aware of our confirmational commitments, at other times they may be more accurately detected by others’ observing and interpreting our behavior (where such “behavior” centrally includes what conclusions we draw from various types of evidence). Such interpretation is of course complicated by the possibility of performance errors; one will not always live up to one’s commitments. But note that the commitments account of epistemic standards admits the possibility of such errors – without chalking them all up to *akrasia*. For we can fail to fulfill a commitment by failing even to intend to do what we were committed to doing.

Since the commitments relating agents to their epistemic standards are not always consciously chosen, they may be influenced by a number of social factors, such as one’s culture or family. But importantly, confirmational commitments are plausibly underdetermined both by external factors and by the dictates of reason, allowing for variation among individuals. Even similarly-situated agents can differ in their commitments – whether their confirmational commitments, or their commitments to careers or partners – because commitments needn’t be fully dictated by reason.

Once we see that commitments are not necessarily dictated by reason, but can give people special reasons, we can understand how confirmational commitments play their distinctive normative role. When you ask an agent why she has the epistemic standards she does, she may describe to you features of those standards she finds attractive, or even reasons that speak in favor of those standards. But the subjectivist/permisivist will emphasize that: (1) those features/reasons are rarely strong enough to leave only *one* set of standards permissible; (2) the agent’s selection of a particular set of standards from among those compatible with her reasons *generates* theoretical reasons for her; and (3) the generated reasons are of an

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<sup>44</sup> Chang uses these four features to argue that commitments themselves cannot be comprised of normative beliefs, desires, dispositions, intentions, or plans. She instead proposes that commitment is a volitional activity, in which we *will* certain considerations to be reasons for us. This strikes us as an attractive metanormative view of commitment, although for our purposes we need not commit to it (ha!).

importantly different kind from the reasons that support her adopting the standards, and do not gain their normative authority from any instrumental or constitutive relation to those supporting reasons.

Here it's helpful once more to consider one's commitment to a friend or romantic partner. You might ask me why someone is my friend, and I'd have things to say about their attractive features. ("It's nice to have somebody in my life who shares my sense of humor...", etc.) But no one thinks those features are necessary and sufficient for me to pick out exactly this person as my friend. Moreover, once I'm committed to this particular friend, that commitment gives me new reasons to treat the friend in particular ways. And those reasons are not simply instruments to achieving whatever I find attractive about the friendship. I might give you my last cupcake because you're my friend. In doing so, I'm not giving you my cupcake because you uniquely provide what I hope to get out of friendships, nor am I giving you the cupcake because it'll help me secure and maintain a friendship with those features. I give you the cupcake *because you're my friend, because you like cupcakes, and because you'll enjoy it.*

People have all sorts of epistemic standards, historically attributable to all sorts of influences. Some standards they have explicitly chosen, some they just found themselves with. If you ask them what's good about reasoning in the way they do, they might have some things to say. ("I think it's important to balance simplicity with strength in theory-formation...", etc.) If the agent's standards are rationally permissible, then particular bodies of evidence furnish reasons for particular beliefs in light of those standards. The permissivist will say that the agent's commitment to those standards *makes it the case* that that evidence is a theoretical reason for that belief. But those theoretical reasons need not be mere instrumental implementations of the factors that she sees as speaking in favor of her standards. For one thing, those factors may underdetermine her selection of standards. Moreover, those factors may be of a very different type than the theoretical reasons to which standards give rise. (Those factors might even be practical reasons!) One might even take the position that there are no such things as theoretical reasons for an agent until she is committed to a set of epistemic standards.

Of course, our compatibility-with-underdetermination point is consistent with the possibility that confirmational commitments *are* fully determined. The objectivist can still see having standards as a matter of having commitments, if she specifies that appropriate commitments are fully dictated by publicly accessible reasons. The permissivist, on the other hand, is free to distinguish between those of her commitments that are so dictated and those that, as it were, she freely chose. She can think that *everybody* should be committed, as she is, to green vs. grue (and rejecting flat earth methodology, and avoiding the gambler's fallacy), while acknowledging that her commitment to ontological sparsity and theoretical desert landscapes is a personal commitment that not everyone shares.

If this picture is correct, it accounts both for epistemic standards' complicated relationship to reasons, evidence, and arbitrariness, and for standards' ability to satisfy the two normative theses mentioned earlier (including, plausibly, on their strong reading).<sup>45</sup> It also gives

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<sup>45</sup> Notice that the normative authority of epistemic standards recognized by the two theses (especially on their strong reading) *might* be accounted for by holding that there's a general, normative injunction to follow through on one's (broadly reasonable or permissible) commitments. But one might also adopt a metanormative theory on

us a more substantive story about peer disagreement than was afforded by either the belief-based or dispositional views.

Suppose A and B disagree about whether  $p$ , seemingly reasonably. The commitment theory explains that A and B are committed to believing in different (broadly reasonable) ways. We find this account deeper and more satisfying than most of those considered hitherto; it also explains more about why disagreements sometimes go the way they do. Confirmational commitments are more deep-seated features of an agent than one-off beliefs; they are part of her epistemic identity. While standards may change and can be revised over time, the asymmetry between an agent's commitments and beliefs keeps them from being straightforwardly related by wide-scope norms. (The options of drop-the-belief or drop-the-commitment will not be equally available or attractive from her point of view.<sup>46</sup>) Commitments tend to accrete and solidify as time passes; while one may occasionally take the radical step of breaking a commitment, in the usual flow of events they simply shape one's space of reasons going forward.

Obviously, there is much more that should be said, in a full defense of the commitment view of relating to epistemic standards. But we hope to have said enough to motivate the plausibility of the view and further interest in its defensibility.

## 6. Conclusion

What are epistemic standards? An agent's epistemic standards are the ways she's committed to forming beliefs on the basis of evidence. More carefully: Epistemic standards are abstracta governing competent belief formation (in the psychologists' sense of competence, not necessarily the virtue epistemologists' sense). A particular set of standards belongs to a particular agent by virtue of her *confirmational commitments*.

This bears on broader questions in epistemology. First, consider the question of whether rationality is permissive. Since we've argued there *is* a plausible characterization of how agents are related to their epistemic standards, subjectivist permissivism is not automatically untenable.<sup>47</sup> Permissivism isn't dead – but equally, it wasn't *easy* to sketch a relationship to epistemic standards that would make permissivism tenable. And endorsing our favored candidate for relating to epistemic standards – confirmational commitments – will require permissivists to sign on to some metanormative views that are not universally shared. So permissivists either need to endorse and defend these substantive metanormative views, or else they have (hard) work to do in defending some alternative candidate for relating to standards.

Second, our conclusion bears on the questions of how epistemic standards develop over time and how they ought to develop. This encompasses interesting sub-questions: how malleable/stable are standards? How do standards relate to higher-order evidence? And how, if

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which commitments can generate special reasons without deriving their authority from that of such a general principle.

<sup>46</sup> This is one regard in which the types of commitments we're discussing are often more deep-seated than the ones with which Shpall (2014) is concerned.

<sup>47</sup> Pace Li (2019)

at all, should epistemic standards evolve when agents confront situations in which their existing standards are insufficiently detailed to recommend an attitude?<sup>48</sup> We suggest that all these questions will be illuminated by questions about how *commitments* do and should change over time, including in response to higher order evidence and in the face of situations where existing reasons underdetermine action.

Finally, returning to the question of reasonable disagreement, our commitments hypothesis helps illuminate what's going on when the sharing of evidence and arguments meets an impasse in securing agreement. Think about philosophical disagreement in particular. At some point in a philosophical debate, disagreement seems to hit "bedrock," to come down to differences in the things we take to be important or the ways we see things (which might fit into patterns that pop up in other philosophical discussions, too). Our hypothesis takes a position on what such bedrock (or "different starting points" or "ways of seeing") really consists in, non-metaphorically: differing confirmational *commitments*.<sup>49</sup> While this certainly doesn't answer every question one might have about reasonable disagreement, it seems more satisfying than the undeveloped placeholder of differing "epistemic standards".<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Callahan (2021) for an answer to that question drawing on a commitments view of relating standards.

<sup>49</sup> There's a strong tradition in the commitments literature of seeing an agent's commitments as crucial to her identity. When one belongs to a group of philosophers who all work in the same area, and who are all aware of roughly the same arguments and positions, what tends to distinguish us from our peers is the questions we find interesting, and the approaches we take to answering them (what types of considerations we focus on, how we balance tradeoffs among those considerations, etc.). Thus there's a real sense in which our varying epistemic standards delineate our professional identities in that space.

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