

## Wishful Thinking as Responding to Non-Epistemic Theoretical Reasons

Allan Hazlett  
allanhazlett@gmail.com

Draft

Consider Jim Dixon. He has just concluded a phone call with his nemesis, the insufferable Bertrand Welch. Dixon's academic employment rests precariously in the hands of the daft and irrational Professor Welch, Bertrand's father. But this has not stopped Dixon from phoning the younger Welch and impersonating a newspaper reporter, as a first step in a "campaign" to humiliate his enemy. Immediately following this, Dixon pauses to consider his chances at success:

Before making any move ... he threw back his head and gave a long trombone-blast of anarchistic laughter. It was all so wonderful, even if it did go wrong, and it wouldn't. The campaign against Bertrand that he'd fantasized about ... had begun, and with a dazzling tactical success. A warning voice told him that this campaign, even so far, was too dangerous for a man in his precarious position, that the joy of battle was submerging his prudence, but he drowned it in more laughter of the same sort. (Amis 1976, p. 103)

Dixon engages here in (some kind of) wishful thinking: he believes that his campaign will be a success (that it will not "go wrong") at least partly because it is "all so wonderful," i.e. at least partly because he very much wants it to succeed. He ignores evidence to the contrary – his "precarious position – by "drowning" the "warning voice" that tells him to temper his optimism. However, Dixon has two good reasons to believe that his campaign will be a success. First, Dixon has compelling reasons to engage in his campaign: to allow Bertrand's pretentiousness to go unpunished is out of the question, and to forsake revenge against the Welches, in general, is even worse. Without confidence of victory, Dixon's resolve simply won't hold up: he doesn't have that sort of bravery. He needs to believe that he stands a good chance of success, if he is to stand any chance of success. So given his interest in a successful campaign against Bertrand, Dixon has reason to believe that said campaign will be a success.

Second, Dixon suffers intensely from an under-expressed rage against and contempt for the intolerable Welches, and Bertrand in particular. To concede the likelihood of defeat in his campaign against Bertrand, for this reason, would be painful and depressing. Dixon cannot bear the thought of not succeeding in his campaign, so believing that he'll succeed allows him to avoid a great amount of suffering. Given this, Dixon has reason to believe that said campaign will be a success.

Now I think we can add something that, though it is not explicitly part of Amis' story, is consistent with it, and I think suggested by it: that Dixon responds to these reasons by believing that his campaign will be a success. In other words, a plausible extension of the story says that that these are among his reasons for believing; they are part of the basis of his

belief; he believes because of these reasons. He cannot proceed without confidence, and so he is confident; he cannot bear the thought of defeat, and so he believes he will not fail.

Many philosophers would say that the story, so amended, is impossible. Some would say that it is impossible that someone have a reason to believe  $p$  unless that reason involves evidence that  $p$  is true. But neither of the reasons that I adduced above, in defense of Dixon's believe that his campaign would succeed, were anything like evidence that his campaign would succeed. Other philosophers, while conceding that there may sometimes be reasons to believe  $p$  that do not involve evidence that  $p$  is true, would say that it is impossible for someone to believe  $p$  for these reasons, to *base* a belief that  $p$  on these reasons, i.e. to *respond* to these reasons.

This paper argues that these philosophers are wrong. There are reasons to believe  $p$  that do not involve evidence that  $p$  is true, and it is possible for someone to respond to these reasons.

[Summary of sections.]

## 1. Jargon

Some jargon will be helpful. A reason to believe some proposition is a *theoretical reason*. An equivalent characterization of a theoretical reason is as a reason for believing something.<sup>1</sup> An *epistemic theoretical reason* is evidence that some proposition is true.<sup>2</sup> A theoretical reason (a reason *to* believe something, or a reason *for* believing something) must be distinguished from a reason *that* a person believes something. (A similar distinction can be drawn between a reason to do something and a reason that someone did something.) If a wizard zaps me with his wand and causes me to believe that I am the King of France, then there is some sense in which the wizard's spell is the reason that I believe I am the King of France. If I am a paranoid schizophrenic, my disease may (partially) cause me to interpret the extra pickle in my take-out order as a sign that my mission for Mossad is completed, and so there is some sense in which the fact that I am paranoid is the (or a) reason that I believe that my mission is completed. But these sorts of reasons – mere causal reasons *that* I believe something – are different from the sorts of reasons that are of interest for us. The reasons that are of interest for us are reasons *for* believing something, reasons *to* believe something, i.e. reasons that *justify* or *warrant* belief, not just reasons *that* we believe something, which may or may not justify or warrant said belief. My reason *for* believing that my mission is over is the fact that the deli gave me an extra pickle; the reason *that* I believe that my mission is over, based on the fact that I got an extra pickle, is that I am a paranoid. The notion of a theoretical reason (a reason for believing something) is primitive, on my view, so I do not think a rigorous

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<sup>1</sup> Compare: a reason to perform some action, i.e. a reason to do something, is a practical reason. This terminology is lovely because it sits pretty well with the etymology of the words involved: practical reasons involve *praxis* (action), theoretical reasons involve *theoria* (contemplation, reflection, observation).

<sup>2</sup> This is an oversimplification, but it won't make a difference here. None of the reasons I call "non-epistemic" below would count as "epistemic" on plausible broader conceptions of the "epistemic." Mine is unlovely terminology, from an etymological point of view, because *episteme* is a species of knowledge or understanding.

account of the difference between a reason for belief and a reason that someone believes something could be given. (But more on the notion of a theoretical reason below.)

This distinction is important, because what I defend in this paper is that a person can believe something for non-epistemic reasons, such as that believing will be pleasant, or that believing is necessary to achieve some (non-epistemic) goal. I am not defending the (weaker, perhaps obvious) claim that these kinds of considerations can be the reason that a person believes something. I am defending the stronger, controversial claim that these kinds of considerations can be a person's reason for belief.

To say that a person *responds to some reason (or set of reasons) in believing*  $p$ , i.e. that she responds to some theoretical reason or reasons, is the same as to say that she believes  $p$  for that reason (or for those reasons), or that she bases her belief that  $p$  on that reason (or on those reasons), or that that reason (or those reasons) tell us why she believes  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> In my view, the notion of reasons-responsiveness is primitive, and can't be analyzed in terms of anything else. We can understand the notion, however, by considering its relation to some normative vocabulary: in virtue of appropriately responding to your reasons, in  $\Phi$ ing, one can be *warranted* or *justified* in  $\Phi$ ing. Assessment in terms of reasons-responsiveness is a basic kind of *normative evaluation*: we evaluate people's performances not merely on the basis of whether they, in and of themselves, were good (e.g. a true belief, an action that saves someone's life), but also in terms of whether the performance was done *for good reasons* (e.g. a belief based on good evidence, an action performed because it would save someone's life). Someone who  $\Phi$ s for good reasons deserves *praise* or *credit*, in a sense that someone who fails to respond to reasons deserves *censure* or *blame*. So there is a primitive and necessary connection between reasons-responsiveness and this species of normative evaluation.

All this terminology is controversial, and some philosophers would argue that it is a big mistake to start out using this terminology. I have found that there are two main alternatives to the terminology I've chosen, and I should like to describe them here, and then briefly defend my choice.

Some say (or speak as though) any non-epistemic reason (to believe something, for example) would have to be a practical reason. (Harman, epistemologists) But my terminology leaves open the possibility of non-epistemic, non-practical reasons, namely, non-epistemic theoretical reasons. So, one might argue, my terminology is at best misleading and at worst confused.

But this worry is not a significant problem: we need to distinguish between two senses of "practical." In one sense, "practical" is more or less synonymous with "prudential" or "pragmatic." But this is not the sense in which I am using the word in this paper. In this paper, I am using "practical" to refer to reasons for action. So my terminology is not confused, nor is it misleading, so long as we keep in mind that "practical" doesn't mean the same as "prudential" or "pragmatic."

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<sup>3</sup> Compare: to say that a person responds to some reason (or set of reasons) in doing  $x$ , in other words to say that she respond to some practical reason or reasons, is the same as to say that she does  $x$  for that reason (or for those reasons).

Some say or defend the claim that there are only epistemic reasons for belief. (Shah, McLaughlin,) Some would defend this claim by saying that theoretical reasoning (or belief) aims at the truth, and practical reasoning aims at the good. (Wedgewood, Shah and Velleman, Railton, E.J. Lowe,) Since my terminology leaves open the possibility of non-epistemic reasons for belief, some might argue, it is at best misleading and at worst confused.

This worry is more substantial. But my terminology is confused only if the claim that there are only epistemic reasons for belief is an *analytic* truth. If that is so, then one of the claims that I want to defend in this paper – that there are non-epistemic theoretical reasons – is an analytic falsehood. But how are we to figure out whether this claim is an analytic falsehood or not? What I should like to do in this paper is give an argument for this claim, by describing some cases in which, intuitively, someone has a non-epistemic reason to believe something. In the describing of these cases I aim for it to become clear that this description fits these cases. And I am pretty sure that, even if this is not the case, it will become clear that I am trying to defend *something* that is not an analytic falsehood, even if it is a falsehood.

It is not clear to me what motive one would have for saying that the claim that there are only epistemic reasons for belief is an analytic truth, as opposed to some other kind of necessary truth. I understand that this is something that one is meant to be able to establish *a priori*. But one might retain the view that, necessarily, there are only epistemic reasons for belief, and allow my terminology. Indeed, the view I have been considering can be smartly stated using that terminology:

*Strong Epistemic Authority (SEA):* Necessarily, all theoretical reasons are epistemic reasons.

None of this is meant to convince someone that she should give up the view that it is an analytic truth that all theoretical reasons are epistemic reasons. But the philosopher attracted to the idea that there are only epistemic reasons for belief should not necessarily be offended by my terminology, so long as she claims that this is a necessary, but non-analytic, truth.

A corollary of SEA is that it is impossible that someone respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. In other words:

*Exclusive Epistemic Authority (EEA):* Necessarily, if someone responds to some reason R in believing *p*, then R is an epistemic reason.

But one might endorse EEA for other reasons. In any event, EEA is widely endorsed. It is ubiquitous in epistemologists' discussions of Pascal's wager, for example. Pascal has prudential reasons to believe in God, many will admit. But he cannot believe in God *for* those reasons; he cannot respond to those reasons. What he can do, the standard picture says, is respond to the prudential *practical* reasons he has: reasons to act in ways that will bring it about that he believes in God. Pascal himself seems to agree; he suggests taking holy water and going to masses, as this will "make you believe and stupefy you." Faith, Pascal says, "is a gift of God," not a "gift of reasoning."

In this paper I argue that EEA is false – that it is possible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons.

## 2. Two kinds of non-epistemic reasons for optimism

I offer the case of Dixon, above, as a case of someone's responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. Dixon, I say, has two distinct reasons to believe that his campaign will be a success. If this is right, then SEA is false.

Hume.

First, I maintain that he has a *strategic reason* to be optimistic. Unless he believes that his campaign will be a success, he will not (or is less likely to) be motivated to continue acting in ways necessary for the campaign's success. He has practical reasons to continue acting in those ways (this is something I will assume here), and since believing that he will succeed makes it much more likely that he will act in those ways, he has a reason to believe that his campaign will succeed.

There is considerable evidence from social psychologists that we often have strategic theoretical reasons of this kind. (Taylor and Brown, Brown and Dutton) Belief that one will succeed in a task (as well as over-estimation of one's positive qualities and over-estimation of one's degree of control over events) is positively correlated with increased effort and motivation. The best explanation of this goes via mood: optimism (and positive self-conception and belief in personal control) bring about positive affect (being a good mood, subjective wellbeing, etc.), which in turn is known to be positively correlated with effort and motivation.

Studies also suggest that such reasons are not only present, but that most people's beliefs are in line with their strategic theoretical reasons. (Ibid.) Most people estimate their chances of succeeding in their goals as higher than their peer's chances, most people estimate their personal qualities as above average (by comparison with their peers), and most people over-estimate their degree of control over events. An exception to this general trend is the class of clinically depressed subjects, whose beliefs about themselves are either accurate or overly negative.

Second, I maintain that Dixon has an *emotional reason* to be optimistic. This idea is familiar, and described well by H.H. Price when he writes of cases in which someone "cannot afford to believe" some proposition. (Price 1954, pp. 6-9) In some such cases, "a man cannot afford to believe [p] from an emotional point of view[, because h]is existing emotional attitudes and desires commit him, so to speak to some other proposition q; and he is aware that if p were true, q would be false, or its probability would be greatly decreased." (Price 1954, p. 8) Dixon is aware that he lacks sufficient evidence to think that his campaign will succeed, indeed he suspects that it is "too dangerous for a man in his precarious position." But the campaign is also "all so wonderful," too wonderful, in fact, to give up believing in it. As Price would put it, Dixon cannot afford to believe that he will fail. The reason for this, to put it simply, is that giving up his optimism would be very painful and depressing, given Dixon's psychological makeup.

To sum up, Dixon has two non-epistemic reasons to believe that he will succeed. He has a strategic reason, namely, that maintaining his optimism greatly increases his chances of success. And he has an emotional reason, namely, that abandoning his optimism would be painful and depressing.

To say this is not to deny that Dixon has practical reasons to act in ways likely to bring it about that he believes that he will succeed. Given that he has practical reasons to engage in his campaign, and given that believing he will succeed would be instrumental in achieving that goal, he has a practical reason to act in ways likely to bring it about that he believes that he will succeed. But he also has, *in addition*, a theoretical reason to believe that he will succeed. We should not say that this reason to believe is a practical reason, because its “source” is Dixon’s practical reasons to engage in his campaign, or because Dixon’s having this reason to believe is explained by his having reasons to engage in his campaign. That would be like saying that I have a theoretical reason to renew my library card, on the grounds that I have a theoretical reason to believe truly about historical events, and that renewing my card will make this more likely. A practical reason is a reason for action, and a theoretical reason is a reason for belief. Dixon’s strategic and emotional reasons for believing that he will succeed are perhaps “practical” in the other sense, mentioned above, on which “practical” is synonymous with “prudential” or “pragmatic.” But *this* alone does not entail that they are not theoretical reasons.

It might be argued that reasons for belief (i.e. theoretical reasons) must be epistemic reasons, because to believe  $p$  is to believe that  $p$  is true.<sup>4</sup> But this is wrong. To desire  $p$  is to desire that  $p$  is true, but this does not mean that there are only epistemic reasons for desire.

As well, we can see that these strategic and emotional reasons are not merely reasons *that* someone may believe something. For someone might fail to believe in line with her strategic and emotional reasons: Dixon might be overwhelmed by the evidence suggesting that he will fail, for example. The strategic and emotional reasons described above, in that case, would not be reasons that he believes he will be successful, simply because he does not believe, in that case, that he will be successful.

Even if SEA is wrong and there are non-epistemic theoretical reasons, the question remains open whether EEA is true. If there are such things as non-epistemic theoretical reasons, is it possible for people to respond to them?

### 3. Basic unconscious wishful thinking

I said above that Dixon engages in some kind of wishful thinking. The species of wishful thinking I am most interested in here – which I’ll call *basic unconscious wishful thinking* – has four important features, which ensure that some cases of basic wishful thinking are plausibly cases of responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. These four points serve to characterize this species of wishful thinking.

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<sup>4</sup> Or, more plausibly, ... Velleman.

First, basic wishful thinking does not involve the desire to believe. There are cases that could be plausibly described as cases of wishful thinking in which someone believes that  $p$  as a result of her desire to believe that  $p$ . Alfred Mele describes a case in which a professor, desirous of confidence in his teaching abilities, writes a deceptive entry in his own diary, knowing that he will forget about the deception later. (Mele 2001, p. 16) Mele's professor knows he will be better off if he believes that he is a good teacher, thus desires that he believe that he is a good teacher, and on this basis performs actions designed to bring it about that he believes that he is a good teacher. (Pascal's wager is a case of this kind.)

I don't want to rule out that a case of this kind – in which someone desires to believe  $p$ , and as a result comes to believe that  $p$  – might involve responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. But the cases I am interested in are different.

A person engages in wishful thinking only when she believes that  $p$  at least partly as a result of her desire that  $p$ , i.e. only when her believing that  $p$  is partially explained by her desiring that  $p$ .<sup>5</sup> In *basic* wishful thinking, one's desire that  $p$  partly explains one's belief that  $p$ , but the explanation doesn't go through an intermediary desire or intention to believe  $p$ . Mele's professor desires that he be a good teacher, and based on this, he desires that he believe that he is a good teacher. In the cases I'm interested in, there is no mediating desire to believe. Indeed, in these cases wishful thinking occurs without the subject ever desiring to believe anything. In any event, in basic wishful thinking, the desire that  $p$  is explanatorily relevant, and the desire to believe that  $p$  is absent or explanatorily irrelevant.<sup>6</sup>

Second, for this reason, basic wishful thinking does not involve belief at will. I have the ability to  $X$  at will only if I am able to  $X$  whenever I desire to  $X$ , so the ability to believe  $p$  at will would require the ability to believe  $p$  whenever you desire to believe that  $p$ . But basic wishful thinking does not involve the desire to believe, and therefore does not involve the ability to believe at will. (I will discuss an argument that belief at will is impossible, below.)

Third, basic wishful thinking involves an epistemically irrational response to one's evidence, not (mere) evasion or willful ignorance of evidence.<sup>7</sup> There are cases that could be plausibly described as cases of wishful thinking in which a person, because she desires that  $p$ , acts in ways designed to prevent her from acquiring evidence against  $p$ . I might believe, and very much desire, that my bank account is not overdrawn, and because of this avoid logging onto my bank's website, thereby avoiding exposing myself to evidence that disconfirms my belief. But the cases I am interested in are different.

An exemplary case of basic wishful thinking consists of a person in possession of evidence that speaks against her belief that  $p$ , who as a result of her desire that  $p$  does not respond to that evidence (in an epistemically rational way), but persists in her belief that  $p$ . As Price puts

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mele 1987, Chapters 9 and 10, 1997, and 2001, McLaughlin 1988, Johnston 1988, and Lazar 1999

<sup>6</sup> It is possible to desire to believe  $p$  but not desire  $p$ . This further supports carefully distinguishing between wishful thinking and the desire to believe.

<sup>7</sup> For those who would distinguish between a belief's being (ir)rational and its being epistemically (ir)rational, I'll always mean that a belief is epistemically (ir)rational, when I talk about its being (ir)rational.

it, such a person “refuses” to believe otherwise, because she is emotionally committed to believing *p*. The point here is that basic wishful thinking is a cognitive or doxastic phenomenon, and does not involve action. The difference between someone who engages in basic wishful thinking and someone who believes in an epistemically rational way is merely a mental difference.

This leaves open the possibility that one who engages in basic wishful thinking does (in some sufficiently broad sense of “does”) various things to resist believing in accordance with her evidence. So, for example, consider a person who dwells, in imagination, on her past successes, and spends little time considering her past failures. Her successes stand out more brightly in her memory than do her failures. And so she comes to an epistemically irrational view of her own abilities, or of her chances for success in the future, and so on.

Or consider someone who employs a strategy of selective interpretation of evidence relating to her own abilities. She has an accurate view of the relative ratio of her successes to her failures, but she attributes her successes to her own ability, but attributes her failures to chance, bad luck, circumstances, etc. And so she comes to an epistemically irrational view of her own abilities, or of her chances for success in the future, and so on.

Fourth, basic *unconscious* wishful thinking does not involve awareness that one is engaged in wishful thinking. In this respect, as well, basic wishful thinking is different from the phenomenon involved with Mele’s professor.

This leaves open the possibility of a species of wishful thinking *with* awareness, but otherwise the same as basic wishful thinking. Call this *basic conscious wishful thinking*; we’ll return to this below.

#### 4. Responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons

I claim that some cases of basic wishful thinking are cases of responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. Why think this is so?

Consider a simple case in which someone has an emotional reason to believe something. (I’ll return to Dixon below.) Consider a devoted fan of the New York Knicks. At the start of a crucial, must-win game, she is confident (based on good epistemic reasons) they will win, but as the game goes on it becomes clear that they’re going to lose: the Knick players aren’t performing well, their opponents are, the Knicks are down by ten points at the start of the fourth quarter, etc. Despite this, the (otherwise epistemically rational) fan continues to believe that the Knicks will win, even though the epistemically rational thing to believe is that they are going to lose.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Philosophers are inclined to respond to this case by saying that “she wouldn’t really believe that they are going to win.” But this is a mistaken move. I am describing a case in which someone engages in wishful thinking and thereby irrationally believes that the Knicks will win. It makes no sense to say, of such a person, that *she* wouldn’t do that, since “she” is just a character in the hypothetical case I’m describing. (What people mean, when they object is this way, is that *they* wouldn’t believe it.)

In such a case, we can imagine, the fan has an emotional reason to believe that the Knicks will win: believing otherwise will be painful for her. And, plausibly, she engages in basic wishful thinking in believing that the Knicks will win. But why think that her belief is or could be responsive to her emotional theoretical reason?

The first thing to note about this case is that it is very different from a case in which, for example, a paranoid believes that she is being spied on, takes a special route to work, and so avoids an explosion on the highway that would have killed her. There is a sense in which the paranoid has a non-epistemic reason to believe that she was being spied upon: so believing, given the way the world was, kept her from being killed. But there is no sense in which the paranoid's belief was a response to this reason. The reason for this, I submit, is that the paranoid's belief ended up being (non-epistemically) reasonable just by luck. There was not the right kind of connection between the reason (that her belief is conducive to her safety, since the special route is safer than the usual route) and the belief (the belief that there were spies stationed along the usual route) for this to count as a case of reasons-responsiveness.

What would be sufficient? I want to suggest that the relevant difference between the case of the paranoid and the case of the fan comes down to the modal connection between belief and reasons, in the two cases. The fan's belief is both safe and sensitive, with respect of her non-epistemic reasons to believe, whereas the paranoid's belief is neither safe nor sensitive, with respect of her non-epistemic reason to believe. Consider the following two conditions, where  $R$  is some (perhaps non-epistemic) reason for believing  $p$ :

SAFE:  $S$  wouldn't believe  $p$  unless  $R$ .

SENSITIVE: If  $\sim R$ , then  $S$  wouldn't believe  $p$ .<sup>10</sup>

A person's belief that  $p$  is *safe with respect of*  $R$  iff it satisfies SAFE; and *sensitive with respect of*  $R$  iff it satisfies SENSITIVE.

The fan's belief is both safe and sensitive, with respect of the fact that believing otherwise would be painful for her. For she wouldn't believe that the Knicks are going to win, unless believing otherwise would be painful for her, and if it were not the case that believing otherwise would be painful for her, she would not believe that the Knicks are going to win. These two counterfactual truths flow from two suppositions: (1) that the fan's devotion to the team, her emotional commitment to their winning, or simply her strong desire that they win, explains why she believes as she does, and (2) that the fan is otherwise epistemically rational. Were she not a Knicks fan – if she were a neutral spectator, for example – then she would not believe the Knicks were going to win; she would believe that they are likely to lose. Indeed, we may easily imagine, were she a fan of the opposing team, she would epistemically irrationally overestimate their chances of victory, if the two teams' situations

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<sup>9</sup> The case could more accurately, but with more complication, be described in terms of degrees of belief. My degree of belief that the Knicks will win is higher than it ought to be, epistemically speaking, as a result of my emotional connection to the team.

<sup>10</sup> SAFE and SENSITIVE do not entail one another (Sosa 1999), but here I'll only be considering cases in which both are true, or both are false.

were reversed. In other words, the fan's beliefs are both safe and sensitive with respect to her emotional reasons for believing.

The paranoid's belief is neither safe nor sensitive, with respect of the fact that her belief is conducive to her safety. It is not the case that she wouldn't believe that there are spies along the usual route unless that belief were conducive to her safety. She would easily believe that there are spies along the usual route, we can imagine, even if the alternative route were *more* dangerous than the usual route. For the same reason, it is not the case that, were said belief not conducive to her safety, she would not have that belief.

Now this does not by itself establish that the fan is responsive to her emotional reasons, in believing that the Knicks will win. As I said above, the concept of reasons-responsiveness is primitive, so I am not proposing that safety or sensitivity (or both) as part of an analysis of what it is to be reasons-responsive in believing something. I would wager, though, that one or both of safety and sensitivity are necessary for reasons-responsiveness. My goal in arguing that the fan's belief is both safe and sensitive to her emotional reasons for believing is to motivate the intuition that the fan does believe that the Knicks will win for the reason that believing otherwise would be painful for her, by drawing out the contrast between the case of the fan, where there is a tight modal connection between belief and reason for belief, and the case of the paranoid, where there is no such connection. Since reasons-responsiveness is a primitive notion, I don't think anything more can be said in support of saying that the fan responds to her emotional reason for belief. But in the next section I want to criticize the most serious objection to the claim that it's possible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons. With this objection out of the way, I contend that there is no good reason to resist the intuition that responding to non-epistemic reasons is possible.

Here we should consider the connection, sketched above, between reasons and normative evaluation. The paranoid doesn't deserve praise or credit for believing prudently, from the prudential point of view her belief is not warranted or justified, although it was in fact the prudent thing to believe. But the Knick fan *does* deserve praise and credit, *from the perspective of subjective wellbeing*, anyway, for her belief, since from that perspective, the belief is (at least somewhat) warranted or justified.

This is by itself insufficient as a defense of the claim that the fan responds to non-epistemic reasons in believing that the Knicks will win. However, if reasons-responsiveness is a primitive notion, what sort of defense can be given? What I will do here is defend this claim against the most serious objections to it. My contention is that once these objections have been addressed, the claim that the fan responds to her emotional reasons to believe will appear correct (or, at least, as plausible as any alternative).

### **5. Three objections: judgment, awareness, and insensitivity**

Recall the following passage from Bernard Williams:

If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. (Williams 1973, p. 148)

What exactly does Williams mean here? And does he mean something that threatens the idea that it's possible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons? I suggest we take him to mean:

- (1) It is impossible to (i) form the belief that  $p$ , to (ii) take yourself to forming the belief that  $p$ , and (iii) to take yourself to not be responsive to epistemic reasons to believe  $p$ .

And, to get us to something that seems to threaten our thesis, add the following:

- (2) If it's impossible to  $\Phi$  and to take yourself to be  $\Phi$ ing and to take yourself, in  $\Phi$ ing, to be not responsive to reasons of type  $T$ , then it's impossible to  $\Phi$  based on reasons other than those of type  $T$ .

From these two premises it follows that:

- (3) It's impossible to form a belief based on non-epistemic reasons.

Call this (for reasons that will come out below) the *objection from judgment*.

Even if (3) is true, it's not incompatible with the claim that the Knick fan's belief is based on non-epistemic reasons, she did not *form* her belief for non-epistemic reasons, but rather *retained* her pre-existing belief for non-epistemic reasons. Two possible replies to this, both unsatisfactory. First, we might argue that our inability to consciously form beliefs not based on epistemic reasons is evidence not only against our ability to unconsciously form beliefs not based on epistemic reasons, but evidence against our ability to retain beliefs not based on epistemic reasons as well. But why accept that necessary features of belief formation are necessary features of belief retention? For example, it seems plausible to many that it's never epistemically rational to form a belief unless you have some evidence in its favor, but that it's sometimes epistemically rational to retain a belief absent evidence in its favor.<sup>11</sup>

Second, we might offer an analogue of (1) for belief retention:

- (4) It is impossible to (i) retain the belief that  $p$ , to (ii) take yourself to retaining the belief that  $p$ , and (iii) to take yourself to not be responsive to epistemic reasons to believe  $p$ .

But this is not plausible. Consider H.H. Price's example of the man who declares that he "refuses to believe" that his favorite politician Mr. A is dishonest and stupid. (citation) The man favors Mr. A, he believes that he is honest and intelligent, and when he comes to possess evidence against this, he consciously and explicitly rejects the evidence. He says that he simply cannot bear the thought of Mr. A being dishonest and stupid, and so he refuses to believe this, in spite of the evidence. (It's obviously important here to remember that the argument aims for the conclusion that it's *impossible* to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons, not that it's *irrational*. It's easy to get these two mixed up.)

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<sup>11</sup> Consider cases of forgotten evidence, or the doctrine of epistemological conservatism.

However, we should reject (2) as well. Roughly, the reason for this is that we should not conclude anything about the essence of  $\Phi$ ing from facts about the essence of conscious  $\Phi$ ing.  $\Phi$ ing “in full consciousness” might necessarily have various features not shared by  $\Phi$ ing in general. To take an imperfect case, it’s (psychologically) impossible (at least for most people) to consciously dance without worrying about how they look. But we should not conclude from this that it’s (psychologically) impossible (for those people) to dance without worrying about how they look. If they stop thinking about dancing, and just *dance*, their self-consciousness will disappear.

To take another imperfect case, it’s (logically) impossible to consciously  $\Phi$ , without being aware that you are  $\Phi$ ing, but from this we should not conclude that it’s (logically) impossible to  $\Phi$ , without being aware that you are  $\Phi$ ing.

When someone comes to believe that  $p$  consciously, we can say that she *judges* that  $p$ . Judgment, then, is a species of belief – it is belief plus conscious awareness of said belief.<sup>12</sup> Judgment and mere belief differ in a variety of ways. Judgment is active, belief is passive. Judging that  $p$  plausibly involves a deeper commitment to  $p$  than does merely believing that  $p$ . And what I want to suggest is that judging that  $p$  has a modal feature – it’s impossible to do it on the basis of reasons other than epistemic reasons – that believing doesn’t have.

There’s a closely related objection, to my claim that it’s possible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons, based on the idea that deliberation about what to believe “inevitably gives way” to deliberation about what is the case; Nishi Shah and David Velleman call this the “transparency” of doxastic deliberation to truth. (Shah and Velleman) Their premise, in other words:

- (5) Deliberation about whether to believe  $p$  is transparent to deliberation about whether  $p$  is true.

But as above, we need a premise that connects this claim with the impossibility of responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons:

- (6) If deliberation about whether to  $\Phi$  is transparent to deliberation about whether  $\Phi$ ing would have feature  $F$ , then it’s impossible to  $\Phi$  for reasons other than those that indicate  $\Phi$ ing would have feature  $F$ .

From (5) and (6), it follows that:

- (7) It’s impossible to base a belief that  $p$  on reasons other than those that indicate  $p$ ’s truth, i.e. on reasons other than epistemic reasons to believe  $p$ .

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<sup>12</sup> I ignore cases of doxastic alienation, in which someone is aware that she believes  $p$ , but thinks  $p$  is false. (Think of a reforming racist who finds it difficult to shake her racist beliefs, even though she rejects them upon reflection.) Here we have consciousness of the belief that  $p$ , but these are not cases of judgment.

As with (2), above, I think (6) is the culprit here.<sup>13</sup> We should not conclude anything about the nature of  $\Phi$ ing from facts about the nature of conscious deliberation about  $\Phi$ ing, since conscious, deliberative  $\Phi$ ing might have various unique features, not shared by  $\Phi$ ing in general.

This is all I'll say about the objection from judgment. What emerges at this point is the following caveat: it may only be possible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons *unconsciously* (i.e. in belief, rather than in judgment). Certainly that is the case in instances of basic unconscious wishful thinking. The second objection I wish to consider takes aim at this caveat, in its commitment to the possibility of unconscious reasons-responsiveness. The objection can be put simply:

- (8) It's impossible to consciously respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons.
- (9) Necessarily, if someone responds to reason  $R$  in  $\Phi$ ing, she must be consciously aware of  $R$ .

Therefore:

- (10) It's impossible to respond to non-epistemic theoretical reasons.

Call this the *objection from awareness*. I think the big problem here is (9): conscious awareness of reasons, I will argue, is not necessary for reasons responsiveness.

To see this, consider the case of responding to epistemic theoretical reasons, i.e. the familiar case of believing on the basis of good epistemic reasons. Here is a case in which someone believes  $p$ , on the basis of a good epistemic reason, but is unaware of that reason.

Jill is wearing new glasses, and as a result she "looks different." I know that something is different about her appearance. I know this because Jill is wearing different glasses; the reason for which I believe that something is different is that her glasses are different; this is how I know that something is different. My reason for believing that something is different is the fact that she is wearing new glasses, but I am not consciously aware that she is wearing new glasses. If asked why I think something is different, I admit that I don't know why I think that. When Jill eventually reveals that she is wearing new glasses, I come to know why I believed that something was different; I come to know how I knew that something was different. The reason for which I believed something was different about her appearance was that her glasses were different, but I was not consciously aware that her glasses were different.

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<sup>13</sup> There are considerations that speak against (5) as well: there seem to be situations, like the case of Mele's professor above, in which I consider whether to believe  $p$ , but ignore whether  $p$  is true. I leave that matter for another day; see Shah 2006 for a defense of (5) against these thoughts.

Recall the connection between reasons and normative evaluation, sketched above. Jill's belief, I submit, is obviously warranted or justified, and she deserves praise or credit (perhaps minimal) for knowing that something is different – for noticing the new glasses, even though she didn't know that this is what she was doing.

It seems to me that there are many everyday cases like this, in which you know something, without knowing exactly what reason supports your belief. We often know that something is bothering a friend, or that we have seen that person before, or that something bad is about to happen, etc., and we are often in such cases unaware of our reasons for belief, even though we do have reasons for belief, reasons that we may later find out about.

Another (perhaps overlapping) range of cases involve people who are sensitive to reasons as a result of training or habit, without understanding what reasons they are responding to. The familiar (if apocryphal) story of the chicken sexers is a case in point, but consider also the fact that I can tell whether a given sentence is ungrammatical or not, even though I can't give the reason for my belief. I "just know" that it's ungrammatical; if I do some research I come to find out what ungrammatical aspect of the sentence I was picking up on. Another case: at the Jerome Avenue station in the Bronx, if you hear a train coming in to the station, but you're still coming up the stairs, you can tell which direction the train is going based on the sound it makes. But you aren't aware of what it is about the sound that supports believing that the train is going to Manhattan, as opposed to going north. You can just tell, but you're not aware of the reason for your belief.

At the outset, I said that an epistemic reason to believe  $p$  is evidence that  $p$  is true. If you think that it's impossible to *have* evidence that  $p$  is true without being consciously *aware* of said evidence, then this oversimplified account of an epistemic reason will need to be modified. For my part, I don't see a problem with saying that someone might have evidence, but not be consciously aware of it. But for those with a more narrow conception of evidence, we must revise the conception of an epistemic reason: an epistemic reason to believe  $p$  is something that is a reliable or trustworthy indicator that  $p$  is true. What I am arguing, then, is that someone can "have" (in whatever sense reasons are "had"), and indeed respond to, an epistemic reason to believe  $p$ , but not be consciously aware of said reason.

If that is right, then premise (9) of the argument from awareness is false. But I also think that premise (8) is problematic. Price's example of the consciously biased man, who favors Mr. A., is a counterexample. And the case of Dixon described above is a counterexample to (8) as well. For Dixon is at least partially aware that his belief – that his campaign against Bertrand will be successful – is based on non-epistemic reasons: his loathing for the Welches, the need for confidence in his campaign, the intolerable sadness that would come from conceding defeat, and so on. That he is aware of the non-epistemic basis of his optimism is evident given the fact that he consciously "drowns" the "warning voice" that tells him he is being irrational. So we should not accept this premise of the argument from awareness either.

I have said that some cases of basic unconscious wishful thinking (like that engaged in by the Knick fan) can be cases of responding to non-epistemic theoretical reasons (such as what I called above emotional reasons). The final objection I wish to consider takes aim at this

valorization of wishful thinking, on the grounds that wishful thinking isn't reliable for acquiring the relevant non-epistemic goods.

Consider the case of the Knick fan, whom I described as believing that the Knicks would win because believing otherwise would be painful for her. The thought was that her belief is warranted or justified, and she deserves praise or credit, from the perspective of her subjective wellbeing, because believing as she does will make her subjectively better off than believing otherwise.<sup>14</sup> However, so one could argue, her belief is actually not warranted or justified, *from that perspective*, and she does not deserve praise or credit, *from that perspective*, because her belief is sustained by a belief forming process, namely wishful thinking, that is generally unreliable at securing the subjective wellbeing of the believer. If she were to engage in wishful thinking at work, she would make all kinds of subjectively painful mistakes; if she were to engage in wishful thinking when deciding whether to wait for a bus or to drive home drunk from the bar, she would end up in traction; and so on. Call this the *argument from insensitivity*.

There are two possible replies here, and they both rely on the thought that non-epistemic reasons are not significantly different from epistemic reasons. So one thought would be to concede that warrant or justification, from the perspective of subjective wellbeing, requires being disposed to engage in wishful thinking *only in appropriate circumstances*. But if the Knick fan is so disposed – if she is the sort of person who forms beliefs rationally in situations in which it would be unwise to be irrational, but who forms beliefs irrational in other situations – then we should not hesitate to say that she is reasons-responsive.

[Psychological evidence that some typical human patterns of irrationality are exactly like that.]

The upshot of this is an analogy between responsiveness to epistemic reasons and responsiveness to non-epistemic reasons. A person can be unwise in her use of a cognitive strategy by using that strategy in an inappropriate circumstance or environment: it's foolish to try to reason when drunk, or to see in the dark, if your faculties aren't up to the task. Similarly, it's foolish to engage in wishful thinking when your life is on the line, but not when you're rooting on your favorite team.

A second and closely related reply would be to maintain that a cognitive strategy can yield warranted or justified beliefs (from either an epistemic or non-epistemic perspective), despite the fact that it's user might easily go wrong by using that same strategy in an inappropriate circumstance or environment. The strategy of taking experience at face value, and believing on the basis of sensory appearances, yields epistemically justified beliefs, despite the fact that this same strategy goes wrong when we employ it while dreaming, or when we've ingested hallucinogenic drugs, or whatever. (Cf. Sosa, Volume 1)

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<sup>14</sup> People will be tempted, as above, to say: "but of course she'll be pained when the Knicks eventually lose." Again, that's not the way hypothetical cases work. I'm describing a case in which someone is subjectively better off irrationally believing *p*, as opposed to the alternatives. In this case, I'm describing a person who isn't going to be (sufficiently) pained by the aforementioned confrontation with reality. Unless that's impossible, there's no ground for criticizing the case.

But, again, the point here is just that the insensitivity of wishful thinking – i.e. the fact that it could easily go wrong, from the perspective of subjective wellbeing – doesn't mean that one might not deserve a positive normative evaluation, from that perspective, for engaging in it, in those situations or circumstances or environments in which wishful thinking is reliably conducive to subjective wellbeing.

## **6. Conclusion**

I have argued that there are non-epistemic theoretical reasons (such as Dixon's strategic and emotional reasons for optimism, and the Knick fan's emotional reason to believe that the Knicks will win), and that it is possible for someone to be responsive to them (for example, through basic unconscious wishful thinking).