Humeanism and the categorical character of epistemic normativity

Consider:

The **Humean view**: Any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in her having conations of a certain kind. (**Conations** are desires or desire-regulating systems, both understood broadly.) [1,2,3]

The **unity view**: Basic reasons form a genuine kind that subsumes both basic practical reasons and basic epistemic reasons. [4]

The **epistemic categoricity view**: No subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is ever grounded even partly in her having conations of any kind. [5]

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[1] Hume himself may not have accepted this view, but advocates of the view (such as Williams (1979), Dreier (1997), and Schroeder (2007)) consistently cite Hume's influence; hence the label.
[2] Some theories in this broad vein, like the theory of Williams (1979), appeal not to the subject's *actual* conations, but to the conations that she *would* have if suitably informed about the world. If one wishes to classify such views as Humean, then one may loosen the definition accordingly.
[3] The Humean may, if she wishes, add that the full ground of any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ also includes her being able to φ. I will work with the formulation in the text for simplicity.
[4] Many endorse or express sympathy for some idea like this. See for example Korsgaard (1996, p. 21), Schroeder (2008, p. 70), Kearns and Star (2009, pp. 219-221), Street (2009), Skorupski (2010, p. 22), and Forcehimes (2015).
[5] Sympathizers with something like this claim include Kelly (2003) and Kearns and Star (2009, p. 215). Even some who oppose the claim find it attractive – see for example Kornblith (1993, p. 373).

I find each of these claims extremely attractively for reasons that I will describe shortly (§2-§3). But they appear to be jointly incompatible, and there's the rub. For if the Humean view and the unity view are true, then apparently any subject's having a basic *epistemic* reason to φ must also be fully grounded in her having conations of a certain kind, *contra* the epistemic categoricity view.[6] It is thus unsurprising that many Humeans and non-Humeans alike seem to agree that Humeans must choose between the unity view and the epistemic categoricity view (§4). In fact, as far as I can tell, *no* theorists to date have simultaneously endorsed the Humean, unity, and epistemic categoricity views.[7,8]

I find it bitter to choose just two of these three claims. But we need not make the bitter choice, for these three claims are perfectly compatible: that is the central thesis of this paper. To demonstrate the point, I will construct a theory, the **telic theory**, that accommodates all three claims (§5). The telic theorist's key innovation is to accommodate the unity view not by treating all facts about basic reasons as being fully grounded in facts about conations, but by treating all

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[6] Kearns and Star endorse an argument in this neighborhood: "Some think *reasons for action* can be analyzed in terms of (ideal) desires, but most of the very same philosophers would be unhappy with the idea that *reasons for belief* could also be analyzed in terms of desires (ideal or otherwise). No unified analysis of reasons seems possible" (2009, p. 215). Also consider Kornblith, whose theory accommodates the Humean view and the unity view but not the epistemic categoricity view. He remarks, "Some will, I believe, hanker after a stronger grounding for epistemic normativity, an account which would make the injunction to seek the truth not merely hypothetical, even if universal, but categorical instead. I would not be hostile to such an account, but I do not currently see any way of giving substance to it" (1993, p. 373).

[7] Williams (1979), Kornblith (1993), and Schroeder (2007) endorse the Humean and unity views but not the epistemic categoricity view. I am aware of a few extant theories – namely, those presented in Velleman (2000), Schroeder (2012), and Finlay (2014) – that might initially appear to endorse the Humean, unity, and epistemic categoricity views simultaneously. However, I explain in fns. 37 and 40 why I believe that none of these theories does in fact endorse all three views.

[8] Another common objection to the Humean view is that it cannot accommodate the categorical character of certain practical reasons, such as moral reasons. That objection has been much discussed – see for example Dreier (1997), Schroeder (2007), and Finlay (2014) – and it is not the topic of the present paper. However, I will later explain why the Humean might still want to accommodate epistemic categoricity even if she cannot accommodate practical categoricity.

facts about basic reasons as being fully grounded in facts about the subject's personal psychology more generally. Facts about basic practical reasons may then be fully grounded in facts about conations even while facts about basic epistemic reasons are fully grounded in psychological facts – in particular, facts about cognition – that do not pertain to conations at all.

Though I take the telic theory to be theoretically powerful and extensionally plausible, I will give no explicit argument to that effect. This paper is primarily a possibility proof: a proof that there exists a theory that embraces the three claims stated above while also remaining faithful to what I regard as the best motivations for those claims (§6-§7). The possibility proof matters because it reveals the existence of an elegant, unified, yet overlooked theory of basic reasons.

1. Terminology

If we are to understand the attractive but apparently incompatible claims, two notions must first be clarified: the notion of full grounding and the notion of a basic reason.

Grounding is the relation that backs distinctively metaphysical explanations: its relata are facts, and for p to ground q is for q to obtain in virtue of p.[9] Grounds may be either **partial** or **full**, depending on whether q obtains partly or wholly in virtue of p. A single fact may have distinct full grounds, however, since sometimes p fully grounds r precisely because p fully grounds q and q fully grounds r. I will sometimes use expressions like *a's being F* to refer to *the fact that a is F*, or expressions like *the existence of an a* to refer to *the fact that an a exists*. The Humean

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[9] For recent influential discussions of grounding, see Fine (2001), Schaffer (2009), and Rosen (2010).

view and the epistemic categoricity view concern what does or does not ground our having certain reasons.[10]

Turn next to the notion of a reason. When I use this notion, I have in mind only reasons that are **normative**, *pro tanto*, and **objective**. Normative reasons determine the answers to questions like "What should I think/feel/do?" as asked from the first-personal deliberative perspective. These contrast with **merely institutional** reasons: if the codes of wizarding etiquette prescribe that human wizards are to treat house-elves as slaves, then Harry Potter has a reason with respect to the institution of wizarding etiquette to treat house-elves as slaves, but he has no normative reason to do so.[11,12] *Pro tanto* reasons, meanwhile, contrast with **conclusive** reasons – every conclusive reason in some domain corresponds to a requirement in that domain, while *pro tanto* reasons are just the building blocks of such requirements. Finally, objective reasons contrast with **subjective** reasons. Suppose that I desire to drink gin and reasonably believing that the liquid in the glass is gin when it is in fact petrol. Then I have a subjective reason to drink, but no objective reason to do so. To a first approximation, one's subjective reasons pertain only to the coherence of one's attitudes; not so for all objective reasons.[13]

Meanwhile, a **basic reason** to φ is a (normative, *pro tanto*, objective) reason to φ such that the subject's having that reason is not even partly grounded in her having any other reason(s). As we will see, the Humean view and the epistemic categoricity view are rightly formulated in terms of basic reasons rather than in terms of reasons *simpliciter*.

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[10] Few have posed metaphysical questions about reasons in terms of grounding, but see Chang (2013) and Forcehimes (2015).
[11] Rowling (2001).
[12] On institutional reasons, see Foot (1972); Joyce (2001). Not all thinkers use the terms "normative reason" and "merely institutional reason" as contraries, however – see Finlay (2006).
[13] The petrol example is from Williams (1979). On subjective reasons, see Jollimore (2005), Schroeder (2007, ch. 1), and Sepielli (forthcoming).

I can now clarify our three starting claims. I will also briefly explain why I find them so attractive – not with the intent of establishing the truth of the claims, but only with the intent of showing that the theory to be presented preserves these motivations along with the claims themselves.

2. The Humean view

Recall:

> The **Humean view**: Any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in her having conations of a certain kind.[14]

Conations are simply desires or desire-regulating systems, both understood broadly, but I use the term "conation" partly to remind the reader of this broad usage and partly to make a contrast with **cognitions**, which I will describe later. Note especially that the Humean view comments only on basic *practical* reasons. It is silent about basic (or non-basic) *epistemic* reasons.

I have built some flexibility into the definition of the Humean view for the following reason. Suppose that on the basis of my desire to be an excellent teacher together with a false and evidentially unsupported belief that publicly ridiculing my students will make me an excellent teacher, I form an irrational instrumental desire to publicly ridicule my students. Arguably my having this irrational instrumental desire does not fully ground my having any corresponding basic practical reason (recall that I use the term "reason" to refer exclusively to *objective* reasons). To allow the Humean to accommodate this idea if she wishes, I have defined the Humean view in terms of conations "of a certain kind," where this phrase is a placeholder for whatever

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[14] For some clarifications of this view, see fns. 1,2, and 3.

restrictions the Humean finds appropriate. The Humean who prefers to impose no restrictions may simply dispense with the placeholder.

I have also been careful to define the Humean view in terms of *basic* practical reasons rather than in terms of practical reasons *simpliciter*, for *non-basic* practical reasons obviously need not meet the Humean requirement. Suppose for example that I have a basic practical reason to stay healthy, and suppose that I can stay healthy only if I get regular dental treatments. Then I have a non-basic practical reason to get regular dental treatments, but any full ground of this fact must include something like the non-conative fact that getting regular dental treatments is the only way for me to stay healthy. My formulation of the Humean view ensures that it is not immediately refuted by this simple observation.

Note too that the Humean view concerns what fully grounds any subject's *having* a basic practical reason to φ. It does not concern what does or would fully ground the subject's *actually φ-ing*. The Humean can therefore allow that a subject might have a basic practical reason to stay healthy even though actually staying healthy requires more than having conations of a certain kind. The Humean might for example say that my having a basic practical reason to stay healthy is fully grounded in my having a certain kind of desire to stay healthy.

I see the Humean view as having two major motivations; there is a third common motivation that I see as unsound and will not discuss here.[15] First, I am moved by considerations of parsimony and coherence with our best empirical theories to **naturalism**: the conclusion that any subject's having a basic reason to φ has some full ground, and indeed a non-normative full

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[15] This is the argument, due to Williams (1979), beginning with roughly the premises that (i) any reason can help to explain the behavior of a well-informed, procedurally rational subject, and (ii) a desire must figure in any such explanation. I explain why I reject this argument in [Author's Work B].

ground.[16] As long as conations can be understood non-normatively, the Humean view meets the naturalist constraint.

Second, I observe a tight and systematic correspondence between our practical reasons and certain of our conations. I have in mind our *non-instrumental desires* in particular and will often work with this suggestion in examples, though I will continue to speak of "conations of a certain kind" to leave room for other approaches. Plausibly, it might happen that I have a basic practical reason to see *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and you do not precisely because I have a non-instrumental desire to see it and you do not.[17] It is also plausible that the strength of my basic practical reason to see *The Force Awakens* corresponds to the strength of my non-instrumental desire to see it.[18]

Among naturalist theories, I believe that the Humean view best explains this correspondence. For example, the Humean theorist might say that any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in her having a non-instrumental desire to φ. Or she might make the quite different suggestion that the sole basic practical reason is a reason to act so as to satisfy one's non-instrumental desires, where the subject's having a desire-regulating system fully grounds her having this reason.[19] Regardless, the Humean may then add that any subject's having a non-basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in the fact that she has one or more basic practical reasons together with certain facts about the world, such as facts that bear on how she can best do what she has overall basic practical reason to do.

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[16] See Schroeder (2007, pp. 198-199).

[17] Schroeder (2007, pp. 1-2) offers a similar example.

[18] As Enoch observes (2011, pp. 439-440), though he ultimately rejects the Humean view. Schroeder (2007) defends the Humean view but resists the attempt to understand the strength of practical reasons in this way.

[19] Dreier (1997) endorses something like this second view.

It is standard to object, however, that the Humean cannot account for the categorical character of our *moral* practical reasons. For even a subject whose desires are in no way furthered by acting morally still seems to have at least some practical reason to act morally. In response, the Humean may concede that every subject has moral practical reasons and claim that the Humean view can accommodate this idea, or the Humean may flatly deny that every subject has moral practical reasons.[20] Since my task here is not to defend the Humean view, I will not attempt to adjudicate between these responses.

I raise the issue only because, given that the Humean manifestly cannot accommodate categorical basic *practical* reasons, one might wonder why she should bother trying to accommodate the epistemic categoricity view, which posits categorical basic *epistemic* reasons. I answer that it is usually considered costly to deny the existence of certain categorical practical reasons and also costly to deny the existence of certain categorical epistemic reasons, and the Humean may as well *minimize* her costs. Still, I will make no detailed comparisons between the Humean theory to be constructed here and other Humean theories. I will show only that it can do something that standard Humean theories cannot, namely, accommodate the unity and epistemic categoricity views.

Let us turn to these views, then.

3. The unity and epistemic categoricity views

According to our second starting claim, the **unity view**, basic reasons form a kind that subsumes basic practical reasons and basic epistemic reasons.[21] I find this view attractive in light of the

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[20] Schroeder (2007, chs. 6-7) tentatively attempts the first approach. Williams (1979) and Dreier (1997) take the second approach. So does Finlay (2014), for he holds only that every subject has reasons *with respect to the institution of morality* to act morally.
[21] For some advocates of views like this, see fn. 4.

structural relationships among these reasons. For example, a subject's basic reasons help to determine how she ought to behave in general, while her basic practical and epistemic reasons help to determine what the subject ought to do or believe in particular. Moreover, if a subject is rational and well-informed, then her basic reasons will play a certain role in her deliberations about how to behave in general, while her basic practical and epistemic reasons will play that same role in her deliberations about what to do or believe in particular.

Our third and final starting claim was the **epistemic categoricity view**, which has it that any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ cannot be even partly grounded in her having conations of any kind.[22] I find this view plausible for the following reason: perhaps the fact that believing that *p* will help a subject fulfill her desires provides her with a *practical* reason to believe that *p*, but by itself it does not seem not to provide her with any *epistemic* reason to believe that *p*. Perhaps you will pay me handsomely to believe that climate change is not caused by human beings; even so, that by itself seems to give me no epistemic reason whatsoever to believe that climate change is not caused by human beings.

The suggestion is not that *all* epistemic reasons are categorical. For suppose that I am in a position to know by introspection that I want to see *The Force Awakens*. Then I presumably have an epistemic reason to believe that I want to see *The Force Awakens*, or at least an epistemic reason *not* to believe that I do *not* want to see *The Force Awakens*. But this epistemic reason is not categorical. After all, my having this reason is partly grounded in the conative fact that I want to see *The Force Awakens*.

The suggestion is merely that all *basic* epistemic reasons are categorical. The content of such reasons is controversial, but for illustration suppose that I have a basic epistemic reason to

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[22] For some advocates of views like this, see fn. 5.

believe all and only what is true. This basic epistemic reason is plausibly categorical even if my *non-basic* epistemic reason to believe that I want to see *The Force Awakens* is not categorical.

Of course, after reflecting on such cases the Humean theorist might want to resist drawing the moral that even basic epistemic reasons are categorical. She might want to draw some other moral – perhaps the moral that basic epistemic reasons are instead **universal** in the sense of being shared by all subjects (or at least all subjects anything like us).[23] For example, the Humean might suggest that managing one's beliefs in a certain way will tend to promote the satisfaction of any desire at all. Perhaps, then, any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to believe (e.g.) all and only the truth is fully grounded in her having any desires at all, regardless of the particular content of those desires.[24] Alternatively, the Humean might suggest that any subject necessarily has a desire to believe (e.g.) all and only the truth; any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to believe (e.g.) all and only the truth is then fully grounded in her having this desire.[25]

I believe that these suggestions face serious objections. In particular, I believe that the first suggestion faces problems parallel to those facing rule utilitarianism: at best it can explain why I have an epistemic reason to manage my beliefs in certain ways *when doing so will help me to satisfy my desires*, but it is powerless to explain why I have an epistemic reason to manage my beliefs in certain ways when doing so will not help me to satisfy my desires – as when I am bribed to hold false beliefs about climate change and do not care about the truth. And I believe that the second suggestion is implausible as a piece of descriptive psychology and further makes false predictions about how practical and epistemic reasons interact.

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[23] For other Humean or Humean-compatible responses, see Stich (1993), Leite (2007), Steglich-Petersen (2011), and Finlay (2014, ch. 7).
[24] See Kornblith (1993) and Schroeder (2007).
[25] See Whiting (2012). Velleman (2000) also uses a nuanced variant of this strategy.

But I will not attempt to press these criticisms here. Indeed, I have not tried to present a rigorous argument for any of our three starting claims – the Humean view, the unity view, or the epistemic categoricity view. I have mentioned why I find them all plausible only so as to set up my task, which is purely positive: to construct a theory that embraces all three claims together while also remaining faithful to the motivations that I have described.

4. The problem

It may appear impossible to construct such a theory, given the following argument by *reductio*:

1. Any subject's having a basic *practical* reason to φ is fully grounded in her having conations of a certain kind. (The Humean view, assumed for *reductio*.)

2. Basic reasons form a genuine kind that subsumes basic practical reasons and basic epistemic reasons. (The unity view, assumed for *reductio*.)

3. No subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is ever grounded even partly in her having conations of any kind. (The epistemic categoricity view, assumed for *reductio*.)

4. Any subject's having a basic *epistemic* reason to φ is fully grounded in her occupying some suitable conative situation. (From 1 and 2.)

3 contradicts 4, so – apparently – one of our three assumptions must be false.[26]

But the argument is a howler. 4 does not follow from 1 and 2; it is not even particularly well-supported by them. Compare:

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[26] For some advocates of this argument, see fn. 6.

5. Something's being a mammal is fully grounded in its being a living being with a mammalian evolutionary history. (Assumption for *reductio.*)

6. Animals form a genuine kind that subsume reptiles and mammals. (Assumption for *reductio.*)

7. Something's being a reptile is not even partly grounded in its being a living being with a mammalian evolutionary history. (Assumption for *reductio.*)

8. Something's being a reptile is fully grounded in its being a living being with a mammalian evolutionary history. (From 5 and 6.)

7 contradicts 8. Must one of our assumptions be false, then? Of course not – it is a mistake to infer 8 from 5 and 6.

More generally, the claim that all entities of distinct kinds K_1 and K_2 belong to some common kind K provides little evidential support for the claim that what fully grounds the existence of an entity of type K_1 must also fully ground the existence of an entity of type K_2. There are many other ways for all entities of distinct kinds K_1 and K_2 to belong to some common kind K. For example, if K_1 and K_2 are distinct species of a single genus K, it may be that something's being *F* fully grounds its belonging to K; something's being *F* and *G* fully grounds its belonging to K_1; and something's being *F* and *H* fully grounds its belonging to K_2. In such a case, Aristotle might have said that *being F* characterizes the genus, while *being G* (or *being H*) characterizes the differentia within that genus.[27]

So the argument by *reductio* should not stop us from simultaneously endorsing the Humean view, the unity view, and the epistemic categoricity view. Still, it is certainly not obvious

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[27] Of course, there are other relations of kind to sub-kind, as well – think of the determinable-determinate relation. The argument by *reductio* may thus fail in other ways.

what kind of theory can reconcile all of these views, especially if the theory must also respect the motivations given above for these views.

5. The telic theory

I propose a theory that treats basic reasons as a genus that includes basic practical reasons and basic epistemic reasons as species:

> The **telic theory**: Any subject's having a basic reason to φ is fully grounded in her having a *personal psychological element* with a certain kind of aim to φ. Whether that aim is the right kind of *conative* aim or the right kind of *cognitive* aim then determines whether the basic reason is practical or epistemic.[28,29]

I devote this section to clarifying the telic theory; in the next section I show that it accommodates our three starting claims and the motivations for them that I have described. That is all that I will do in this paper; I will not offer anything like a full-scale defense of the telic theory.

Let me clarify the theory, then. The telic theorist distinguishes two types of elements within the subject's personal psychology: conations and cognitions. She suggests that, roughly speaking, conations (i.e., desires or desire-regulating systems, both understood broadly) are those parts of the subject's personal psychology with a "world-to-mind direction of fit." More precisely, for a personal psychological element to be a **conation** is for it to have a **conative aim**: either an

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[28] For other broadly telic theories in epistemology, see Plantinga (1993), Graham (2012), and Neta (2014). But these accounts are quite different from mine, for they all explicitly refrain from treating basic epistemic reasons as genuinely normative.

[29] The telic theorist may wish to add that the full ground of any subject's having a basic reason to φ also includes her being able to φ. For further clarification, see fn. 3.

aim pertaining to making the world conform to its content, or an aim pertaining to making the world conform to the content of the personal psychological elements that it governs. Desires are personal psychological elements with the first kind of conative aim, while desire-regulating systems are personal psychological elements with the second kind of conative aim.[30]

In contrast, cognitions are those parts of the subject's personal psychology with a "mind-to-world direction of fit." More precisely, for a personal psychological element to be a **cognition** is for it to have a **cognitive aim**: either an aim pertaining to conforming its content to the world, or an aim pertaining to producing or maintaining personal psychological elements with contents that conform to the world. Beliefs and credences are among the personal psychological elements with the first kind of cognitive aim, while belief- and credence-regulating systems are among the personal psychological elements with the second kind of cognitive aim.

In stating these definitions, I have used the phrase "pertaining to" so as to leave open the precise nature of conations and cognitions. For example, I wish to leave open whether belief aims at evidential support, truth, knowledge, etc. I note further that the exact aim of a conation or a cognition may differ depending on the kind of conation or cognition at issue. Successful desires and successful fears presumably behave quite differently, even if both are conations.[31] I also allow that some personal psychological elements may have aims that are neither conative or cognitive. Perhaps the subject's having such personal psychological elements fully grounds her having basic reasons that are neither practical nor epistemic. And I even allow that a single personal psychological item may be both a cognition and a conation: perhaps a fear aims both to conform

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[30] As I intend for the term "content" to be used permissively to include non-propositional items, the assumption that every conation has a content should not be too controversial.

[31] But doesn't a fear that *p* aim not at bringing it about that *p*, but precisely at *preventing* that *p*? Perhaps – but then I would say that properly speaking, what we call "fearing that *p*" involves having a conation whose content is that *not-p*. Sinhababu (2015, esp. §7) makes a similar point about conations such as love.

its content to certain facts about danger and to make the world such that the subject avoids the relevant dangers.

I have expressed the distinction between conation and cognition with the metaphor of the aim, which must be given a literal interpretation. Generalizing Aristotle's notion of *telos*, I say: for something of a given kind to have a certain **constitutive aim** is for that thing to be successful *qua* member of that kind if and to the extent that it fulfills that aim. Intuitively, the idea is that for something to have a constitutive aim is for certain standards to apply to it in virtue of its belonging to a certain kind. Perhaps the chef's knife in my kitchen has a constitutive aim of cutting certain foods under certain conditions. If so, then it is successful *qua* chef's knife if and to the extent that it does cut those foods under those conditions.[32]

Some elaborations. The notion of success at play here has no interesting relation to normativity in general or to reasons in particular. A nuclear weapon may have a constitutive aim of wreaking enormous destruction even if the fulfillment of that aim is bad and no one has any reason to promote it. In addition, something may have multiple constitutive aims, either because it belongs to multiple kinds or because a single kind to which it belongs is associated with multiple standards for success. Finally, having a constitutive aim is not merely a statistical matter. Sperm have a constitutive aim of fertilizing an egg though almost none succeed at it.[33] A predominance of frustration in our desires and of ignorance in our beliefs would therefore not block these from having the respective constitutive aims of satisfaction and knowledgeability.

An interesting nuance is that some paradigmatic cognitions, such as certain beliefs, seem also to have conative aims and therefore to qualify as conations as well. Further, fulfillment of

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[32] In this context, any talk of "aims," "goals," and the like is merely metaphorical, and a metaphor may be legitimately used in many different ways. I thus need not be in any substantive disagreement with those, like Smith (1994, ch. 4), who understand the subject's "goals" solely in terms of her conations.
[33] The example is from Millikan (1984).

these conative aims of belief may even conflict with fulfillment of the cognitive aims of belief. Perhaps some beliefs aim to boost self-esteem, for instance. After all, psychologically healthy individuals tend to discount evidence casting them in a negative light and inflate evidence casting them in a positive one; depressives, though psychologically maladjusted, tend to have much more accurate beliefs about their abilities. I will explain in due course why this does not block the telic theorist from accommodating the epistemic categoricity view. But for now just note that the telic theorist says that what fully grounds a subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is her having a personal psychological element with a certain kind of *cognitive* aim to φ. Any further *conative* aims of that element do not figure in this full ground.

Even so, the telic theorist seems to face a devastating objection concerning the relative priority of epistemic reasons and beliefs. For we often have epistemic reasons pertaining to beliefs that we do not yet hold: I might have strong epistemic reason to believe that climate change is caused by human beings, or at least strong epistemic reason *not* to believe that it is *not* caused by human beings, before ever considering the issue. But the telic theorist apparently cannot accommodate this point. For the telic theorist holds that my having any basic epistemic reason is fully grounded in my having personal psychological elements with certain cognitive aims, and before I form my belief I apparently have no personal psychological element with any relevant cognitive aim.

The telic theorist has several available replies, however. She may suggest that the cognitive aim is an aim associated with the subject's personal-level *seemings*. These may include doxastic, perceptual, or other seemings. Perhaps any seeming has a cognitive aim of supporting certain beliefs. Thus, perhaps a subject's having any seeming grounds her having certain corresponding (*pro tanto*) basic epistemic reasons – e.g., perhaps my seeming to see my own hands grounds my having a (*pro tanto*) basic epistemic reason to believe that I see my hands. These

seemings, and the corresponding basic epistemic reasons to form certain beliefs, would exist before the beliefs on which those reasons bear.[34]

Alternatively, or additionally, the telic theorist may suggest that there is a cognitive aim of the belief-regulating *system*: to pick just one example, perhaps the belief-regulating system has a cognitive aim to form and maintain only beliefs that amount to knowledge.[35] Since my belief-regulating system exists even before I form a belief about the causes of climate change, my having a system with the right kind of cognitive aim can be part of what fully grounds my possession of the relevant epistemic reason (with facts about climate change, and perhaps further facts about my evidence regarding climate change, being the remaining part of the full ground).

I should also note that the telic theory is a piece of whole cloth that can be tailored to fit substantive epistemologies of many different shapes. The telic theorist can endorse any number of claims about precisely what relevant cognitive aim(s) exist (aims pertaining to truth, knowledge, evidential support, etc.) and which personal psychological elements have those aims (seemings, beliefs, credences, doxastic systems, etc.). It is a thriving program to explain the truths of substantive epistemology in terms of cognitive aims, and that program is largely separate from my own meta-normative one.[36]

6. The possibility proof, part 1: The Humean view

I now offer the central possibility proof of this paper: I will show that the telic theory accommodates the Humean view, the unity view, and the epistemic categoricity view, as well as

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[34] I thank [name removed] and [name removed] for illuminating discussions of this view.
[35] Here I modify a suggestion from Whiting (2012).
[36] For a range of recent views about the constitutive aim of belief, see the papers in Chan (2013). I present my own view in [Author's Work A].

the motivations described earlier for each of these claims. In this section I tackle the Humean view and its motivations.

According to the telic theory, any subject's having a basic reason to φ is fully grounded in her having a personal psychological element with a certain kind of aim to φ. Whether that aim is the right kind of *conative* aim or the right kind of *cognitive* aim then determines whether the basic reason is practical or epistemic. This entails that any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in her having a personal psychological element with a certain kind of conative aim to φ. And this in turn is just a specification of the Humean view.

The telic theory also captures both of the motivations that I offered for the Humean view. The first motivation was that the Humean view is compatible with naturalism, the claim that any subject's having a basic reason to φ has a non-normative full ground. The telic theory is also compatible with naturalism. The telic theory makes no obvious reference to anything normative in its identification of the full ground of any subject's having a basic reason to φ – its characterizations of conation and cognition appear to be entirely non-normative, and I especially emphasized that its characterization of constitutive aims was non-normative. Now, the telic theorist must be careful: her theory does appeal to a certain kind of cognitive aim, and she must be sure not to specify this aim normatively. If she wishes to say that this aim has something to do with truth, evidence, or knowledge, for example, then she must offer non-normative accounts of truth, evidence, or knowledge. That is a real constraint, but many theories can satisfy it.

The second motivation for the Humean view was the tight correspondence between our practical reasons and certain of our conations. Now, because the telic theory entails the Humean view, it obviously captures this motivation. But the telic theory has a further advantage here: it does not overgeneralize the motivation. For it is not immediately plausible that there is any such correspondence between our *epistemic* reasons and our conations. It was precisely this apparent

lack of correspondence between our conations and our basic epistemic reasons that motivated the epistemic categoricity view. Thus, it is fitting that, as I will soon show, the telic theory does not fully ground our possession of basic epistemic reasons in our having personal psychological elements with *conative* aims of any kind.

7. The possibility proof, part 2: The unity and epistemic categoricity views

Now take the second of our starting claims: the unity view, which says that basic reasons form a genuine kind that subsumes both basic epistemic reasons and basic practical reasons. The telic theory easily accommodates this claim. For it treats basic reasons as a genus: any subject's having a basic reason to φ is grounded in her having a *personal psychological element* with a certain kind of aim to φ. Whether that aim is the right kind of *conative* aim or the right kind of *cognitive* aim then determines whether the basic reason belongs to the practical or epistemic species.

For basic reasons to form a true genus, however, the telic theorist must be able to appeal to a *single* "right" kind of aim (whether the aim is conative or cognitive) in her account of what fully grounds the subject's having any type of basic reason (whether the reason is practical or epistemic). To show that it is possible to meet this condition, I will simply mention one way of doing so. I need not argue for the correctness of this view to make this modest point about possibility.

The view is that the right kind of aim is a **final** aim: an aim whose existence and persistence are not even partly grounded in the existence and persistence of any other aim of an element within that subject's personal psychology. As a contingent matter of fact, the view adds, there are various final aims associated with elements of human personal psychology. On one

version of the view, each desire has the final conative aim of fulfilling its content, while each seeming has the final cognitive aim of supporting beliefs related to its content in certain ways. On another version of the view, the desire-regulating system has the final conative aim of satisfying our non-instrumental desires, while the belief-regulating system has the final cognitive aim of forming and maintaining each particular belief only if (e.g.) it amounts to knowledge.

Both versions of this view are compatible with the further claims that we have personal psychological elements with other final conative aims (perhaps pertaining to morality) and personal psychological elements with other final cognitive aims (perhaps pertaining to credences).

This specification of the telic theory, even if it is not correct, is surely *coherent*. That is enough to show that the telic theorist can specify a single kind of aim – final aims, according to this sample specification – such that the subject's having a personal psychological element with this kind of aim to φ fully grounds her having a basic reason to φ. The telic internalist can therefore treat basic reasons as a true genus, and *a fortiori* as a genuine kind.

The possibility proof requires one last part: I must show that the subject's having any basic reason is categorical in the sense of never being even partly grounded in her having conations of any kind. According to the telic theory, any subject's having a basic epistemic reason is fully grounded in her having a personal psychological element with a certain kind of *cognitive* aim to φ – perhaps a final cognitive aim to φ, for example. The subject's having any personal psychological elements with *conative* aims is no part of this ground. My having a personal psychological element with the conative aim that I strike it rich will therefore be no part of what grounds my having basic epistemic reasons regarding beliefs about climate change. Those reasons – perhaps reasons to believe the truth, to respect my evidence, or to form and maintain only beliefs that amount to knowledge – will instead be fully grounded in my having personal

psychological elements with cognitive aims of a certain kind. All basic epistemic reasons are therefore categorical according to the telic theorist.[37]

But earlier I conceded that some cognitions, perhaps including certain beliefs, might end up being conations, as well. Wouldn't this concession block the telic theorist from accommodating the epistemic categoricity view?

It would not, as I will show by working with an overly strong version of the concession. Grant just for the sake of argument that *every actual cognition* is also a conation, and recall that according to the telic theory, any subject's having *cognitions* of a certain kind fully grounds her having a basic epistemic reason to φ. Even so, it does not follow that any subject's having *conations* of a certain kind even partly grounds her having a basic epistemic reason to φ.

To understand why not, take a comparison. Suppose that every actual **cordate** (i.e., creature with a heart) is a **renate** (i.e., creature with a kidney),[38] and suppose further that

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[37] The theory of Finlay (2014) is the closest to mine, but here our theories part ways. Though the central features of Finlay's theory are clearly compatible with the epistemic categoricity view (see pp. 101-102), Finlay sums up his theory with the telling metaphor that "normativity is the shadow cast by our desires in the external world" (p. 250). Thus his theory appears to be incompatible with the epistemic categoricity view.

It is also fruitful to compare two works of Schroeder. Schroeder (2007) hypothesizes that any subject's having *any* reason, including an epistemic reason, is grounded at least partly in her having a suitable desire. So this theory cannot accommodate the epistemic categoricity view. In a later work, however, Schroeder suggests that "the class of right-kind reasons" – as opposed to wrong kinds of reasons – "with respect to any activity will need to depend on the nature of that activity" (2012, p. 483, emphasis his). Schroeder's examples of activities include believing, intending, and even tying knots. So this later view might accommodate the unity view (if a subject's having any basic reason is fully grounded in facts about activities) and the epistemic categoricity view (if a subject's having any basic epistemic reason is grounded at least partly in facts about the activity of believing, but not at all in facts about the activity of desiring).

The problem, however, is that Schroeder has now dropped all talk of desire and explicitly claims to be agnostic about his earlier views (p. 485). Schroeder confirms this agnosticism in personal correspondence, saying, "I don't have an official current view about whether epistemic reasons are desire-based or not." Thus, Schroeder no longer endorses (or denies) the Humean view.

[38] The example is of course from Quine.

something's being a cordate fully grounds its having a blood-pumping organ. Still, grounding is the relation that backs metaphysical explanation, and something's being a renate need not even partly *metaphysically explain* its having a blood-pumping organ. We should not confuse sameness of extension with sameness of explanatory role.

It is in removing conations entirely from its *explanation* of the existence of basic epistemic reasons that the telic theory differs from another standard family of Humean views. A number of Humeans have, like the telic theorist, said that any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is grounded at least partly in certain cognitive facts about her. But these Humeans have tended to insist that any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is *also* grounded at least partly in certain conative facts about her. For example, some have said that any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is grounded at least partly in her having beliefs, but that her having beliefs is in turn grounded at least partly in her having a *desire* to (e.g.) accept certain propositions only if those propositions are true.[39,40] Another possible Humean approach of this sort would be to say

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[39] While some hold that partial grounding fails to be transitive in certain special cases – see Schaffer (2012), for example – partial grounding is still thought to be transitive in typical cases, and the Humean approach discussed in the text has none of the special features that would suggest that partial grounding fails to be transitive here.

[40] Whiting (2012, p. 282) holds this view. Velleman (2000, ch. 8) also offers a variant of it. He claims that "[r]easons for belief are dependent on a particular inclination" (p. 187), namely, the inclination to accept a proposition only if it is true (p. 184). And inclinations are "desires or dispositions to desire" (p. 171). Assuming that Velleman means that it is at least partly *in virtue* of a subject's having this inclination that she has any epistemic reasons, including any basic epistemic reasons, Velleman apparently must deny the epistemic categoricity view.

One nuance is that according to Velleman, a believer can "fail to care about the truth of [her] beliefs" (p. 185), for the inclination to accept a proposition only if it is true can be *subpersonal* (pp. 184–185). Since I have stipulated that conations must be *personal* psychological elements, doesn't Velleman's view then avoid fully grounding the subject's having basic epistemic reasons in her having conations? Perhaps – but then he also gives up the Humean view itself. The Humean view says that any subject's having a basic practical reason to φ is fully grounded in her having conations of a certain kind, where again conations are personal. But Velleman's account also allows for the subject's having any *practical* reason to be grounded in facts about her subpersonal psychology. Finally, if we loosen the definitions of "conation" and "cognition" so that subpersonal psychological elements can qualify as either, then for the

that any subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is grounded partly in certain cognitive facts about her and partly in certain conative facts about her (without the conative facts even partly grounding the cognitive ones).

Such Humean approaches fail to accommodate the epistemic categoricity view precisely because they treat our having basic epistemic reasons as being at least partly grounded in, and therefore as being at least partly explained by, our having conations of a certain kind. By contrast, the telic theorist insists that whether or not any actual cognitions are also conations, our having conations of any kind is no part of the ground, and therefore no part of the explanation, of our having any basic epistemic reasons. Thus, the telic theorist really does accommodate the epistemic categoricity view.

Yet an opponent may now protest that the telic theory still fails to capture the most robust sense in which our basic epistemic reasons are plausibly categorical. Isn't it that a subject's having a basic epistemic reason to φ is never fully grounded in any facts about her personal psychology, regardless of whether those facts are about her conations or her cognitions? Surely any subject, even one whose cognitions aim only at forming an aesthetically pleasing representation of the world, has basic epistemic reasons similar to ours. If so, then the telic theorist has failed to confront the real problem.

But it is far from clear that basic epistemic reasons are categorical in this especially robust sense. A subject with such a "cognitive" system – if that label is even appropriate – is arguably incapable of forming or maintaining beliefs at all. And a subject who cannot form or maintain beliefs presumably has no basic epistemic reasons for or against forming or maintaining beliefs, just as we have no basic reasons for or against forming or maintaining mental elements belonging

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reasons stated at the beginning of this footnote Velleman's theory again fails to accommodate the epistemic categoricity view.

to some exotic alien mental kind. Thus I contend that the telic theorist does accommodate the most robust plausible version of the idea that basic epistemic reasons are categorical.

8. Conclusion

By treating basic reasons as a genus, the telic theory embraces the unity view. By treating basic practical reasons as the conatively-grounded species of this genus, the telic theory embraces the Humean view. And by treating basic epistemic reasons as the cognitively-grounded species of this genus, while understanding cognitions and conations as metaphysically distinct existences playing distinct explanatory roles, the telic theory embraces the epistemic categoricity view. All the while, it remains faithful to the motivations that I have described for each of these views.

I do not conclude that the telic theory is correct. Still, this is no mean feat.

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