Why Isn’t (Purely) Epistemic Autonomy of Value?

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1. A Disanalogy

When we make a decision, it is often important for us to make the right (or a right, or a sufficiently good) decision. And we have different ways of making it likely that we will. Sometimes, such ways involve a role for others. This role may be that of someone we turn to for advice, or someone we run our arguments by to see how strong they are, but it may also be something like outsourcing: We may, at times, just let someone else make decisions for us, or blindly follow the advice of another. This is how I may go about making decisions about, say, retirement savings plans. And while sometimes people think that such outsourcing is problematic from the point of view of the value of autonomy, I don’t think that this is so – far from being in tension with my autonomy, such outsourcing, in the right circumstances, may be a manifestation thereof (and may be rationally required, to boost). After all, what is important to me in making a decision about retirement plans is just that I make the right one (in terms of risk, how much to save, how to invest, and so on), and, as I fully recognize, outsourcing maximizes my chances of making the right decision1.

Not all decisions are like this, though. With some decisions, getting them right is not the only thing that matters. With some decisions, it also intrinsically matters who makes them. In particular, in some of my decisions, it matters greatly that I make them. An oft-given example here is the choice of a romantic partner. With such a decision, it seems important that the person whose romantic partner is at stake make the decision. Undoubtedly, this is at least in part for instrumental reasons – making such decisions for yourself often increases the chances of the choice being a good one (according to whatever parameters make the choice of a romantic partner good). But just as clearly,

* For comments on earlier versions, I thank Dani Attas, Ittay Nissan-Rozen and Levi Spectre. This paper was presented as one of the Burman Lectures at Umeå, and at the annual conference of the Israeli Philosophical Association. I thank the participants for the helpful discussions that followed.

1 If you sense a hint of Raz’s service conception of authority here, you’re right. But I am not here committed to all of its details, and I’m not really discussing authority here. For some discussion, see my “Authority and Reason Giving” (2014).
the instrumental considerations don’t exhaust things here. Even in those cases – and how sure are
we that they are farfetched? – in which the chances of a good choice are higher when the choice of a
romantic partner is outsourced, we still think that there’s importance in making the choice for
ourselves. This importance need not always outweigh all other considerations – if I’m just terrible at
choosing romantic partners, and if outsourcing the choice to my mother can guarantee for me
eternal romantic bliss, perhaps it would be rational for me to outsource. The important thing for
our purposes here, though, is that this is not always and necessarily the case – there are cases in
which it makes perfect sense to refuse to outsource, even when outsourcing will bring about a
better (expected) decision or choice, cases in which the identity of the decision maker makes a non-
instrumental difference.

It is natural to think about such cases in terms of the value of autonomy. It seems of (not
merely instrumental) value that we be part-authors of our life stories, that we shape our lives
ourselves. And while such autonomy may be consistent with outsourcing choices about retirement
savings plans, it does not seem consistent with outsourcing choices of romantic partners. And
because an autonomous life is – other things being equal – a better life than a non-autonomous life,
it makes sense for one to be willing to pay a price in other values in order to secure more autonomy
for oneself. Presumably, this is what one does when one refuses to outsource at least sometimes
even when outsourcing will yield greater returns in other values.

Of course, I don’t want to pretend that anything is simple here – in particular, it would be
good to have an explicit, non-metaphorical story distinguishing cases where outsourcing is
consistent with one’s autonomy and cases where it isn’t. And as things will turn out later in this

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2 See Raz’s (2006, 1014) independence condition.
3 In the text I put things as if the matters are dichotomous – either outsource, or not. But these are really
matters of degree – I may ask my mother for advice, I may ask her to make a tentative decision but also share
her reasoning, I may fully outsource.
4 In the text I focus on the case in which it matters that the decision maker is the person whom the decision is
about. There may also be cases in which the identity of the decision maker matters when it’s not going to be
that person either way – when a decision is outsourced, it may sometimes (non-instrumentally) matter whom
it is outsourced to. But I won’t be discussing such cases here.
5 Raz (1986, 369).
paper, I’ll have to qualify even some of the things already said. But for now, these claims about the practical case will do. Let’s turn to epistemology.

When we wonder whether something is the case, or deliberate\(^6\) what to believe, it’s important for us to believe the truth on the relevant matter, and to avoid falsehoods. We have ways of making it likely that we will – different epistemic methods, like relying on perception, using inferences, and so on. Some of these ways involve a role for others: We may ask for their opinion on the matter or on related matters, we may ask how things look from their perspective, we may run our inferences by them to see how strong they are. At other times, we may rely on others in a stronger, outsourcing kind of way – we may just take their word for it, and form a belief entirely on the basis of their testimony. This is how we form – and should form – almost all of our beliefs about scientific matters we’re far from experts on, about historical events reported in books, etc. Some seem to think that when we outsource belief-formation in this way, this is in tension with something worth calling “epistemic autonomy”, but this just seems false to me right off the bat – and the analogy to the practical case helps to see why. Just like relying on others is one of the ways in which I may exercise my autonomy in improving the quality of my decisions, relying on others may be one of the ways in which I improve on the quality of my belief-formation. (I return to this in the next section.)

So far, then, the analogy between the practical and the epistemic holds rather unproblematically\(^7\). But let’s now ask whether there are epistemic analogues of the choosing-a-romantic-partner case. Are there cases, that is, in which it is not-merely-instrumentally important that I form my own belief without outsourcing, that I “think for myself”, and furthermore, where I should be willing to pay a price in epistemic value just for that? Suppose, then, that I’m trying to

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\(^6\) Terminology is difficult here. It’s not clear that we actually \emph{deliberate} about what to believe. Typically, we wonder \emph{whether} \(p\), not \emph{whether we should believe} \(p\) (I discuss Transparency below). And we don’t really ever \emph{decide} to believe, so even if we do deliberate about what to believe, this deliberation does not conclude (as it presumably does with practical deliberation) with a decision. I think my points in the text do not depend on any tendentious choice of terminology here.

\(^7\) In the epistemic case too matters are not as dichotomous as the test here seems to indicate. See footnote 3 above.
make up my mind whether some given mathematical formula is a theorem, or whether the currently suggested judicial overhaul in Israel is anti-democratic. Suppose I can either try to figure out these things for myself, or rely on others who, as I myself concede, are significantly more reliable than I am on such matters. I have a colleague who is (as I know) much better than I am at mathematics, say, and another who is (as I also know) much more reliable than I am on constitutional and political matters. Now suppose it seems to me – having surveyed the (first-order) evidence, and based on my own devices alone – that the formula is indeed a theorem, and that the judicial overhaul is not anti-democratic. But suppose that my colleagues report otherwise (on both matters). Remember that I recognize their superiority over me in terms of reliability on these matters. So I also recognize that my chances of getting to a true belief – as well as my chances of avoiding a false one – go up if I rely on my colleagues than if I stick with the beliefs, or perhaps credence levels, called for by only procedures of my own device. Is it ever epistemically rational for me to nevertheless stick to my own devices here?

In the practical case, we saw that sometimes it makes sense to refuse to outsource even when one fully realizes that outsourcing increases the chances of getting a good decision. In the epistemic case, though, this does not seem possible. If you believe that your chances of reaching the truth and avoiding falsehood on the question of theoremhood of the relevant formula are highest if you just take your colleague’s word for it, and yet you insist on not outsourcing and instead “thinking for yourself”, you are necessarily being epistemically irrational. Depending on the details, you may be downright incoherent (if you simultaneously believe this formula is a theorem and Given my colleague’s input, this formula is more likely not to be a theorem than to be one. I return to this incoherence below). In the relevant respects, the situation is not different from one where you insist

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8 It is often important to ask whether the relevant superiority should be understood in terms of their actually being more reliable, my believing that they are, or my justifiably so believing. (See section 5 of my “Not Just a Truthometer” (2011).) Here I am trying to avoid these complications by stipulating that all of these conditions are satisfied in the example in the text.

9 If we’re talking in terms of credence levels, we may need to add something like accuracy to the list of epistemic values. I don’t think this makes a relevant difference here.
on forming a belief about the temperature of a liquid by dipping your finger in it and going by how it feels, rather than by relying on the reading of a thermometer that you yourself recognize is much more accurate and reliable. If this is how you form your belief, it cannot be epistemically justified, and even if you fluke your way onto the truth, your belief will not amount to knowledge. And this seems true perfectly universally, regarding any proposition or subject matter. (Though the political case does seem harder. More below.) In the practical domain we noted that the presence of cases in which it makes sense to refuse to outsource even at a price seem to reflect the value of autonomy. If it’s true, though, that in the epistemic domain there can be no such cases, this seems like an important disanalogy. Epistemic autonomy does not seem to be a thing.

Now, this disanalogy calls for explanation. Why does it make sense to sometimes refuse to outsource in the practical domain, but not in the epistemic domain? What explains why practical autonomy is of value, and epistemic autonomy is not? The main task of this paper is to step up to this explanatory challenge.

Perhaps, though, you are not entirely convinced. Perhaps, for instance, you think that while refusing to outsource in the mathematical case is never epistemically justified, refusing to outsource in some other cases (like perhaps the constitutional-political one) may be epistemically justified. And I should immediately concede that things are not as clear-cut here as the previous paragraph makes them seem (and some qualifications will emerge as we proceed). Now, as long as you agree with me that some disanalogy is present here – perhaps just that refusing-to-outsource much more often makes sense in the practical domain than in the epistemic one, or that it’s less clear that it’s ever epistemically justified than it is that it’s often practically justified – you should already see that the disanalogy calls for explanation. Another, secondary task of this paper is to make more plausible the

10 Everything I say in the text is, as far as I can see, consistent with any plausible theory on peer disagreement. For my own, see “Not Just a Truthometer” (2010).

11 Zagzebski (2012) says that the ideal of epistemic autonomy is incoherent. But I don’t accept much of her reasoning. It’s not even clear we use the term “epistemic autonomy” in sufficiently similar a way. And notice that the related ideal Zagzebski does accept (and develops further in her 2013) – that of intellectual autonomy – is not directly related to my discussion here.
claim that epistemic autonomy is not a thing – or at least, that there is this initial epistemic-practical disanalogy\textsuperscript{12}.

In the next section (2), I clarify the issue and get some preliminaries out of the way. In the following two sections I discuss three possible explanations – one (3) in terms of incoherence, one (4) in terms of the distinction between the right and the wrong kind of reasons (for belief), and one (5) in terms of the different role value pluralism plays in the practical and epistemic domains. All three, I conclude, have some merit, but neither is fully satisfactory as an explanation of the disanalogy. In section 6 I revisit the disanalogy, arguing that there may be less of it than meets the eye. We can see that, I argue, once we are aware of the possibility that autonomy is, for the person whose autonomy it is, essentially a by-product. A somewhat disappointing conclusion follows.

2. **Distinctions, Distinctions, Distinctions**

In this section I clarify further the kind of case I’ll be focusing on, the epistemic case that manifests, so I claim, the disanalogy with the practical domain that calls for explanation. I do this mostly by utilizing a host of distinctions. Such a section is needed not just for general clarificatory reasons, but also because the term “epistemic autonomy” is used in the literature with somewhat different meanings, and it’s important not to conflate them.

2.1 **Nothing about Extreme Autarkies**

The first point has already been made in the introduction, so we can afford to be quick here: if the autonomy ideal – either in the practical or in the epistemic domain – is to be at all appealing, it can’t be about some extreme requirement that we all be minor autarkies, fully satisfying our own practical

\textsuperscript{12} There’s more than one way of developing a relation between the value of autonomy and the epistemic. One that I won’t discuss here is the claim that something like autonomy is a necessary condition for knowledge. I’m not sure what I think about this claim, but I suspect it has some interesting relations to some of the points discussed later in this paper (for instance, autonomy being essentially a by-product). For this claim about the relation between knowledge and autonomy, see Carter (2022). For a precursor, see Sosa (2003, 174).
or epistemic needs by ourselves. In both domains, we rely on others all the time, as well we
should.13

Why is it, then, that philosophers often seem to say the opposite? This may be because of
failures to appreciate some of the distinctions below, as I proceed to explain. Or perhaps they accord
too much weight to the plausible thought that there’s often something less impressive if one
reaches the truth by relying on others than if one reaches the truth on one’s own. Perhaps
outsourcing sometimes renders the true belief less of an achievement, less something the believer
should take pride in. This may be so – though perhaps sometimes we should take pride in realizing
our own limitations and acting on such realization (by outsourcing), and this in itself may be an
achievement, for imperfect creatures such as ourselves.14 But anyway, even if relying on others may
make the relevant belief (or decision) less of an achievement, it will still often be the right thing to
believe or do.15 (Compare: Even if it’s more impressive if someone can accurately tell the
temperature of a liquid simply by dipping one’s fingers in it, still usually using a thermometer is the
epistemically justified belief-forming method. And certainly, given a reading of the thermometer,
one is not often justified in overruling it because of how warm the liquid feels to one, especially not
because of the possible relevant achievement here.)

Be that as it may, when some epistemologists write about epistemic autonomy as if it
involves utter epistemic self-reliance, it is important to remember not only that the epistemic “ideal”
they are describing is no ideal at all, but also that neither is its practical analogue.

2.2 Global vs. Local Autonomy

The literature on (practical) autonomy sometimes distinguishes between autonomy understood
globally, as a feature of a life, and autonomy understood much more locally, as a feature of specific

13 See, for instance, Fricker (2006), Zagzebski (2012), Nguyen (2018), and Matheson and Lougheed (2022, 2-3)
and the references there.

14 For an argument utilizing this observation to defend moral deference, see my “A Defense of Moral
Deference” (2014).

15 The discussion of essential by-products below may be relevant here.
decisions or choices. (And there can be intermediate notions of autonomy, applying to a segment of a life, and so on.) We can draw an analogous distinction in the epistemic case.

For instance, those who complain about relying on others not being autonomous, or who praise thinking for oneself, may insist, highly implausibly, that on every occasion in which you form a belief, you have to think for yourself, or else you are in violation of your epistemic autonomy. Or, they can merely say – much more plausibly – that a life devoid of any thinking-for-oneself is, for this very reason, less rich and valuable as a life, that such a life lacks something by way of epistemic autonomy (all the while agreeing that in many specific cases it makes perfect sense to rely on others).

Now, as already emphasized, the sense of epistemic autonomy I am working with is somewhat different from the sense that requires that you think for yourself – my question is not so much whether you should think for yourself, but whether it is ever epistemically justified to believe according to such self-thinking even when you know that your chances of having a true belief go up by outsourcing. But I want to note here the following point: Even though there’s not much to the extreme autarky conception of autonomy, I do think that the more global intuition here expressed – that a life devoid of thinking for oneself is, other things being equal, less of value – is worth vindicating. We’ll have to see later on whether what we end up saying about epistemic autonomy can deliver on this promise. Still, the kind of case I am focusing here is local: you are trying to form a specific belief – about whether a certain formula is valid, or about the suggested judicial overhaul – and the question is whether it is ever epistemically justified to insist on doing it yourself rather than

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16 See, for instance, Oshana (2006, chapter 1).
17 Here’s Matheson (2022, 1) seemingly rejecting epistemic autonomy in the local context but expressing the autonomy intuition in the global context (without explicitly distinguishing between the two): “After all, when trying to find an answer to a question, we should take the best available route to the answer, and the most reliable route to the answer to most questions is to rely on the minds of others. At the same time, there is something defective about an intellectual life that outsources nearly all of its intellectual projects, ...”
relying on others, when you acknowledge that the latter option is more likely to get you to the truth. This question is about local, not global autonomy\textsuperscript{18}.

2.3 Instrumental Considerations

It should be uncontroversial that there may be instrumental payoffs to thinking for oneself. Perhaps, for instance, sometimes refusing to rely on others can help improve one’s own cognitive abilities. Or perhaps it is sometimes important that people think for themselves so as to achieve some social good, like perhaps the payoffs of a marketplace of ideas. Or perhaps something along these lines is true not of people in general, but of some subset thereof, like experts – that is, perhaps the reliability of experts as a class, or the epistemic health of a field, depends on each expert forming their opinion to an extent independently, and anyway, not by all relying on the best expert\textsuperscript{19}.

I want to distinguish clearly between the question I’m interested in – whether it is ever epistemically justified to refuse to rely on others one acknowledges are more reliable than oneself in forming a belief – and instrumental questions of this kind. Two points are relevant here.

First, we can invoke the distinction between epistemic and pragmatic reasons for belief. I discuss it below, but for now all we need is some of the intuitive data underlying such more sophisticated discussions: If I wonder whether the suggested judicial overhaul is anti-democratic, and you show me how useful it will be for me to believe that it is not (there is such a shortage of people with respectable academic credentials supporting the government on this topic, so if I support the overhaul I can become quite central), you have not supplied me with evidence that the overhaul’s democratic credentials are impeccable, and if I form that belief on the basis of what you said my belief will not be justified in the standard, straightforward sense of justification, and it will certainly not amount to knowledge (even if true). Similarly, then, if you show me all the instrumental

\textsuperscript{18} Let me flag a possible complication here. If we end up insisting that epistemic autonomy is not of value locally but is of value globally, we may be close to self-torturer-paradox (Quinn 1990) territory, where the iteration of seemingly rational local decisions amounts to a clearly irrational global strategy. I return to this paradox briefly below.

\textsuperscript{19} Dellsen’s (2022) central claim is that thinking for ourselves increases the reliability of experts.
payoffs of refusing to outsource, you will have perhaps given me reasons not to outsource, but you
haven’t made it the case that I’ll be epistemically justified in ignoring the (second-order) evidence,
and that I should go with the belief that I myself acknowledge is less likely to be true\textsuperscript{20}.

Second, recall the disanalogy again. In the practical domain, the strong intuition was that
there’s something \textit{intrinsically} important about making one’s own choice (of a romantic partner, for
instance). This is what explains why it makes sense sometimes to be willing to pay a price in the
goodness of the decision just in order to make it on one’s own. True, it’s possible to insist that it
does make sense to pay a price in the goodness of the decision in order to make it on one’s own, but
that what explains this are \textit{other} instrumental payoffs of making one’s own decisions. But this will
not be fully loyal to the underlying intuition. So if the best that can be done to vindicate something
like epistemic autonomy is to offer such instrumental considerations, this will leave the disanalogy
between the practical and the epistemic case intact, and thus far unexplained.

2.4 Politics

Discussion of epistemic autonomy sometimes seems to come with a political twist\textsuperscript{21}. Thinking for
oneself seems politically important, perhaps as an antidote to anti-liberal tendencies to blindly
follow the leader.

The first thing to say about this is that really, this is a particular instance of the previous
point – such justifications of refusing to outsource are instrumental, and so the discussion in the

\textsuperscript{20} In the text I’m drawing together practical instrumental reasons for belief with such reasons for following an
epistemic procedure (such as outsourcing). The two are not always on a par – for one thing, one may argue
that while there’s some category mistake in offering practical reasons for belief (see, e.g., Berker (2018),
there’s no such mistake in offering a practical reason for following an epistemic procedure, which is, after all,
an action.

\textbf{(Perhaps relevant here – the current lit on norms of inquiry?)}
But I think I can afford this in our context. If you rely on, say, the reading of a measurement device because
you have some evidence it’s reliable, beliefs formed in this way may very well be epistemically justified and
may amount to knowledge. If, however, you rely on the reading of the measurement device for practical,
instrumental reasons (I gave it to you as a gift, and you know how happy I’ll be if you rely on it in your
experiments), a belief formed in this way will not be epistemically justified.

\textsuperscript{21} ...
previous subsection applies\textsuperscript{22}. But this particular instance nevertheless merits discussion for the following reason.

The cases of interest here are cases where you consider deferring to someone whom you take to be more reliable, or whether you can ever be epistemically justified in ignoring them, and proceeding to form a belief in a way that you know is less reliable. This question is very different from the question whether you should defer to those in positions of political power\textsuperscript{23}. And this is important here, for it may be the beginning of a debunking explanation of intuitions in favor of epistemic autonomy. Perhaps, that is, what many people are really – and justifiably – concerned about is not epistemic outsourcing in general, but rather epistemic outsourcing to those in positions of power. If so, we should recognize this concern (instrumental though it is), and in our context just put it to one side. For our context is one in which the controversial outsourcing is to those characterized by their epistemic, not political credentials. Indeed, the tendency to conflate the two may explain why outsourcing in the case of the belief about the anti-democratic nature of the suggested judicial overhaul seems more problematic than outsourcing in the case of a belief about some mathematical formula being a theorem. It is relatively rare that people in positions of political power show interest in mathematical theorems and in who believes them. In such a context, political concerns about epistemic outsourcing are less serious. When it comes to the current political-constitutional events in Israel, though, all politicians have an interest. Political concerns – including about outsourcing – take center stage. And in many ways, they should. But we can still assume them away, if need be explicitly, by stipulating that our question is about outsourcing to the reliable, not the powerful, even when the topic is political.

\textsuperscript{22} Perhaps with the following complication: You may think that while deferring in the relevant cases makes mistakes less likely, it makes the worst mistakes more likely. (This needs to be supported, of course). If what characterizes the worst mistakes is that they are, say, politically dangerous, then all of this is entirely practical and instrumental. But if the criterion for the worst mistakes is epistemic, then the case becomes more borderline – it remains instrumental, but it’s at least in the epistemic ballpark, it’s epistemish. See the discussion of purism and impurism below.

\textsuperscript{23} See Nguyen (2018, 111) for a related point.
In fact, at this point we already have considerable resources for a debunking explanation of intuitions about epistemic autonomy: Those who seem to be for it may conflate global with local autonomy, may allow instrumental considerations a role where they shouldn’t play one, and may let their legitimate concerns about deferring to political leaders to infiltrate our discussion of deferring to those whose credentials are epistemic. Even if the combined effect of these debunking explanations is quite significant, though, so that there’s less pressure to attribute value to epistemic autonomy, we still need an explanation of the disanalogy between the practical and the epistemic case.

2.5 Paternalism

The discussion of epistemic autonomy in the literature is often and understandably bound up with a discussion of epistemic paternalism. Without committing to any specific, precise definition, cases of epistemic paternalism are cases in which the paternalizer somehow intervenes in a believer’s belief-forming in order to benefit the believer epistemically. For instance, suppose you know I’m way too impressed with TV personalities who speak in a deep voice, tending to give much too much weight to their opinions in forming my own. So you make sure that I am otherwise occupied when the most charismatic, deep-voiced, government-supporting TV person is on. You’re doing this because you know that the judicial overhaul is anti-democratic, that I am likely to be misled by that person, and you care about my epistemic status, perhaps about my epistemic wellbeing. This, it seems to me, is a paradigmatic case of epistemic paternalism, and it is very natural to think that it involves an offense against my epistemic autonomy, in a way closely analogous to that in which practical cases of paternalism offend against the relevant agent’s practical autonomy.

I agree, of course, that epistemic autonomy and such cases of epistemic paternalism may be interestingly related. Still, it’s important to see that the topics, even if related, are nevertheless distinct. The question about paternalism is whether, or when, anything about my epistemic

24 See, for instance, Jackson (2022).
autonomy gives you a reason not to intervene (even in order to improve my epistemic situation).

The question I am interested here is whether my autonomy gives me a reason to form a belief in one way (by myself) rather than another (outsourcing) even when I realize that the latter is more reliable. When I insist that epistemic autonomy may not be a thing, I insist on a negative answer to the latter. This is consistent with a positive answer to the former. (One way of understanding the discussion below of autonomy as essentially a by-product is as supporting this combination of claims.) If so, the disanalogy between the practical and the epistemic domains stands when it comes to first-person judgments (whether my own autonomy gives me a reason for action or belief), but the third-person questions (whether you should intervene) gets an analogous answer in the two domains.

Let me note here another point about epistemic paternalism. I do think that the intervention in the example above offends against the believer’s autonomy, and furthermore, that this is a reason not so to intervene (though it may, at times, be outweighed by other reasons, of course). What is much less clear, though, is that the relevant offense involved is against the believer’s epistemic autonomy, at least not in my intended sense. So we need to be clearer about the intended, perhaps purer, sense of “epistemic” that I’m working with.

2.6 More Generally: The Purely Epistemic

Miranda Fricker (2007) defines epistemic injustice as injustice directed at someone in their capacity as a knower. Such injustice is, of course, a moral violation, as indeed all injustice is. But because it essentially involves the victim’s capacity as a knower, and perhaps for some other reasons as well, it is natural to call it epistemic injustice. (And indeed, it is one of Fricker’s contributions to show that the moral and the epistemic are more closely related than we may have thought25). Still, there is a narrower, perhaps purer sense of “epistemic”, in which cases of epistemic injustice are not exactly

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25 Relevant here are also discussions of moral encroachment and of doxastic wrongdoing. See, for instance, Enoch and Spectre “There Is No Such Thing as Doxastic Wrongdoing” (forthcoming).
epistemic – they are not directly about what beliefs or credences are justified given a specific body of evidence. Of course, there’s no point to fighting over terminology\textsuperscript{26}, so I’m not trying to convince you that cases of (for instance) epistemic injustice are not epistemic at all. I’m just trying to convince that we can make sense of the narrower category of the purely epistemic.

When I claim that epistemic autonomy is not of value I use “epistemic” in this narrower sense. I don’t think, in other words, that anything about one’s autonomy directly affects which beliefs one is justified in holding, what credences what is justified in having, etc. I remain open to the possibility that the value of autonomy makes a difference in all sorts of ways, perhaps even “in our capacity as knowers”, or in a way relevant to the norms of inquiry\textsuperscript{27}. Return, then, to the paternalism example. The intervention – hiding some evidence that is likely to mislead a believer, precisely in order to make it more likely that their beliefs are true and justified, and perhaps amount to knowledge – clearly offends against the believer’s autonomy, something that is here of at least some value. And it does so in a way that is directly relevant to the believer’s capacity as a knower. Perhaps this is enough, then, to conclude that what’s being offended is the believer’s epistemic autonomy, and that it is of value. Even if this is so, though, it doesn’t show that epistemic autonomy in the narrower sense is of value\textsuperscript{28}. It doesn’t show that considerations about autonomy should play a role in forming beliefs, or that they are directly relevant to whether a belief is justified. When I claim that epistemic autonomy is not of value, it is this narrower sense of epistemic autonomy that I have in mind.

This applies to some of the previous subsections here. Perhaps autonomy in one’s capacity as a knower is politically important, or perhaps more generally it’s important for practical,

\textsuperscript{26} I used to insist that only the narrower sense is really about the epistemic, and that the broader sense is best referred to as practical things in the vicinity of the epistemic, or that are just epistemically relevant (2016, 31). I have now clearly lost that minor and unimportant terminological battle.

\textsuperscript{27} ...

\textsuperscript{28} In the text I don’t distinguish between the relevant autonomy being epistemic, and autonomy having an epistemic value. Perhaps for some purposes such a distinction is important: We can perhaps ask about the general kind of autonomy whether it’s (also) of epistemic value, or about epistemic autonomy whether it’s of moral value. But I think for my purposes here – really, asking about epistemic autonomy whether it’s of purely epistemic value – I don’t need to worry further about this distinction.
instrumental reasons. If you want to call that “epistemic autonomy” and assign it value, I will happily grant you this way of speaking, but I will insist that this way in which autonomy is of value is not purely epistemic, it is not directly relevant to what beliefs one is justified in having.

Armed with this distinction – between the narrower, purely epistemic significance of autonomy and its wider possible significance – we can now more clearly see what’s wrong with attempts to reject the explanandum of this paper, namely, the claim that autonomy has a kind of practical value that it lacks in the (purely) epistemic case. On the epistemic side: it is now clear that one can consistently accept the wider epistemic significance of autonomy while denying it the more purely epistemic value (insisting that one can’t be epistemically justified in believing a proposition while rejecting, for reasons of autonomy, an epistemic procedure that one acknowledges is more reliable, and its opposite deliverance). And this observation should undermine any temptation you may have had to secure autonomy a more purely epistemic role. And on the practical side: The disanalogy survives. For in the practical domain, the value of autonomy seems to be relevant in (the analogue) of this narrower sense as well\textsuperscript{29} – this, after all, was the point of the example of choosing a romantic partner.

Before concluding this section, let me address a worry. In this section, and to an extent elsewhere in this paper, I rely on a distinction between purely epistemic and other considerations. In the current epistemology literature, though, it seems that impurism is gaining grounds. Thoughts of pragmatic encroachment, of doxastic wrongdoing, and perhaps other thoughts as well, have been used to challenge the purity of the epistemic. Now, I have deliberately avoided assuming anything like epistemic impurism: I remain here neutral on the possibility of other considerations encroaching on the epistemic. I merely insist that even if they do, we can still isolate, at least sometimes and in the cases relevant here, the more purely epistemic from its environment. But perhaps impurists

\textsuperscript{29} Things are a little complicated here by the fact that whereas in the epistemic case we can perhaps distinguish between the (purely) epistemic and the practical significance of autonomy, in the practical case the distinction between the narrow and the wider sense occurs within the practical. But I don’t think this complication matters here.
should reject even this more minimal assumption? If so, and if impurism is true (or at least plausible), that could spell trouble here. Fortunately, then, I don’t think that impurists should have any trouble with my minimal assumptions here. All that’s needed to render such assumptions plausible are the intuitive examples I’ve been using: the personal and political payoffs of believing that the judicial overhaul is democratically kosher leave a narrower, purer sense of “evidence” or “reasons for belief” or “epistemically justified” unaffected; Even if we shouldn’t hide evidence from people in order to promote their epistemic wellbeing, and even if this is so because of their autonomy, this falls short of showing that they should ignore, for reasons of their own epistemic autonomy, more reliable sources; and so on. If impurism requires rejecting such intuitive claims, so much the worse for impurism. More plausible versions of impurism will not reject them, and should therefore be entirely on board with my minimal assumptions about the purely epistemic.

2.7 Sovereignty and Non-Alienation

The value of autonomy is the value, perhaps roughly, of living one’s life according to one’s own values and deep commitments, of shaping one’s life with one’s decisions. But in many contexts it is important to distinguish between two different values here. One – which I call non-alienation – is the value of living one’s life according to one’s values and deep commitments. Another – the one I call sovereignty – is the value of having the last word on relevant matters, of being the one whose decision is, so to speak, law on those matters. Very often, these two values coincide, for in many cases if you get the last word on some issue, you’re going to decide according to your deep values and commitments, and in many cases, allowing you to have the last word is an excellent way of making sure it’s your commitments and values that shape things. But this is not always the case, and when the two values come apart – when, for instance, the best way of securing non-alienation
requires not letting you have the last word (perhaps because you are weak-willed) – the distinction becomes important\textsuperscript{30}.

When we’re discussing epistemic autonomy, are we talking about sovereignty or non-alienation (or perhaps about both)? I think that both may be relevant, but in different cases in different ways.

In many cases, sovereignty is not really at stake. Even if you decide to outsource, and form a belief purely on someone else’s word, it’s still you who are making the final call here, as it were. Your sovereignty is not more threatened by outsourcing to another person than it is by “outsourcing” to a thermometer. Still, sovereignty may be relevant: First, perhaps this is a natural way of thinking about the paternalism case. Hiding some evidence from you may be the epistemic analogue of feeding you misinformation about the alternatives you have to choose from or restricting your options, cases which may be thought of as a violation of your practical autonomy in the sense of sovereignty. But these aren’t the cases I mostly focus on. Those, recall, are cases in which you yourself wonder what you should believe, and whether anything about your autonomy is ever a relevant consideration.

Second, recall again the choosing-one’s-romantic-partner case. There, insisting that it’s important that it be \textit{my} decision does seem to be at least partly about sovereignty, even though the point above applies – even if I let my mother choose my romantic partner for me, it will still be me who lets her do that. This seems to indicate that at least some sovereignty concern remains in such cases. And this may apply to the epistemic cases I started with – where the question is whether it’s important that I make up my own mind (rather than outsource) in the kind of way that can make a difference to which beliefs I’m justified in having.

Non-alienation too may be epistemically relevant. Suppose that Bas is deeply committed to inference to the best explanation not being an epistemically good rule of inference\textsuperscript{31}. Now suppose

\textsuperscript{30} I discuss the distinction in “Hypothetical Consent and the Value(s) of Autonomy” (2017). I discuss the relations between sovereignty and non-alienation in “Autonomy as Non-Alienation, Autonomy as Sovereignty, and Politics” (2022). The distinction – or one very close to it, sometimes put in other terms – is also used by Brudney and Lantos (2011).

\textsuperscript{31} Van Fraassen (1989).
that Bas wonders whether the suggested judicial overhaul in Israel is anti-democratic. He can try to reason to a conclusion all by himself, of course. But he doesn’t think he’s very reliable on such questions. In fact, he recognizes that Gil is more reliable on such matters. But he also knows that Gil routinely uses inference to the best explanation, and is likely to do so here as well. Can Bas be justified in ignoring Gil’s testimony (say, that the overhaul is anti-democratic) and believe that the overhaul is not democratically problematic, for the reason that Gil’s reasoning is not in line with Bas’s deepest epistemic commitments? Can Bas justifiably think something like “Yeah, relying on him will make it more likely that I believe the truth on this matter, but it’s also important that I form beliefs according to my own epistemic commitments, so I’m going to ignore Gil’s testimony?”. To insist on epistemic autonomy in the sense of non-alienation being of value is to answer in the positive. I, of course, don’t. In many practical cases, though, analogous concerns do make sense—think of “this wouldn’t be my style” as a reason for action. (But see the discussion of pluralism below). So the disanalogy between the epistemic and the practical domains is still in need of explanation.

2.8 So:

We are in a position, then, to conclude this long, perhaps somewhat tedious section, and state precisely what it is that I deny when I deny that epistemic autonomy is of value.

The question whether epistemic autonomy is of value – in the sense I intend it to have here – is the question whether a believer is ever justified in believing or forming a belief for an autonomy-related reason, if need be at the expense of likelihood of truth. The questions is a local one – about a specific belief – not about a general global belief-forming strategy; it’s entirely about epistemic

\[32\] Harman (1965).

\[33\] Anyway, not for first-person cases. Perhaps third-person cases are different – perhaps, for instance, an intervention may be justified partly because it helps someone form beliefs more in line with their deep epistemic commitments. But first, even in the third person, I’m not sure this is ever the case – at least not at the expense of truth (or some such epistemic aim). And second, the discussion below of epistemic autonomy as essentially a by-product is relevant to this use of the distinction between first- and third-person perspectives here.
justification – not about anything instrumental; political considerations having to do with deferring to those in power are strictly speaking irrelevant one way or another here; more generally, the question concerns the purely epistemic; it is not in the first instance about a possible decision to think for oneself, but it’s related to it, of course; and it may be either about sovereignty (about forming my belief all by myself) or about non-alienation (about reasoning styles, perhaps, or anyway about one’s own deep epistemic commitments).

Much of the (not too big) literature on epistemic autonomy focuses on other phenomena. But there are in the literature also discussions that come very close. One example is Dellsen’s (2022) “puzzle of epistemic autonomy” (though it is primarily not about which beliefs are justified in the presence of autonomy considerations, but about the status of a general strategy of thinking for oneself). Another is Huemer’s (2005, 526) emphasis on the agent-centeredness that has to characterize epistemic autonomy. For if we do accord weight to epistemic autonomy, it follows that in the same circumstances, privy to the same evidence, different people may be justified in having different credences and beliefs: If Bas and Gil are both justified in giving greater weight to their respective “styles” of reasoning when it comes to inference to the best explanation, they may end up with different justified beliefs on many occasions. And even if it’s ok for you, say, to resist the testimony of those you concede are much more reliable than you are in order to think things out for yourself, and even if the belief or credence you end up having is justified, still this is clearly not a reason for me to endorse that credence or belief. Putting things in this way makes it even clearer how implausible it is to attribute value to epistemic autonomy.

34 See Matheson and Lougheed (2022, 1).
35 I briefly discuss epistemic permissiveness in the next section. But the point here is stronger: Assuming epistemic autonomy is of value, we can presumably describe cases in which it’s not merely permissible for two believers to differ in their beliefs or credences, but rather it’s required of each to have a different belief or credence (as is probably the case in the practical domain, where one may be required to give some weight to one’s own autonomy).
And there’s another complication here. It may be thought that even if IBE is a good rule of inference, Bas’s belief that it isn’t defeats his initial justification (which he as just like the rest of us) for using IBE. If this is so, then this will ground another way – different from the one in the text – in which people with the same evidence may be justified in different beliefs or credences.
36 It is, of course, unobvious how agent-relativity is to be understood. For my own attempt, see my “Backgrounding Agent-Relativity” (manuscript).
So we still need an explanation of the practical-epistemic disanalogy.

3. **Possible Explanation: Wrong Kind of Reasons**

It is common to distinguish – across a wide range of attitudes, of which belief is central – between reasons of the right kind and reasons of the wrong kind for having them. The ontological argument for the existence of God gives, if successful, a reason of the right kind for belief in God’s existence: If successful, it gives evidence supporting the existence of God, it makes such a belief epistemically justified, it could render it knowledge, it’s a reason for which one may directly believe that God exists, it has the right kind of connection to truth. Pascal’s wager, though, even if successful, doesn’t give a reason of the right kind for belief in God. Perhaps it manages to give a reason for such a belief (though even this is controversial\(^{37}\)), but even if it does, it doesn’t give evidence for the existence of God, it may make such a belief justified but not epistemically justified, it could not render that belief knowledge, arguably it’s not a reason for which one can directly believe that God exists, it arguably does not have the right kind of relation to truth. A lot here is controversial, including how to best give a theoretical account of the distinction between reasons of the right and the wrong kind, when it comes to beliefs, and more generally\(^ {38}\). But it is not controversial, I think, nor should it be, that some distinction along these lines is important in many contexts.

You wonder whether that formula is a theorem. Reasons are offered to think that it is: a (purported) proof – but you are, of course, fallible about recognizing validity; the testimony of an expert; perhaps the fact that it’s structurally very similar to formulae already known to be theorems; how good it will make you feel to believe it’s a theorem; that you are more likely to get a good grade in that test if it is (because that’s what you wrote there). It seems clear – intuitively, pre-theoretically – that the first three (proof, testimony, some inductive claim about structure) are, if successful,

\(^{37}\) Again see Berker (2018).

\(^{38}\) See, for instance, Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), Hieroymi (2005), Schroeder (2012).
reasons of the right kind to believe that the formula is a theorem. The others (having to do with some pragmatic payoff of believing it’s a formula, and with wishful thinking) are, even if successful, reasons of the wrong kind for belief. Notice that they remain reasons of the wrong kind for belief even if offered by the believer herself. (“Why do you believe it’s a theorem? Well, believing that it is just makes me so happy.”) We can sometimes make sense of such an answer, but it’s very hard to think of it as a serious epistemic justification, or even an attempt at one. Suppose, then, we ask you why you believe that the formula is a theorem, especially given that those you acknowledge are much more reliable than you say otherwise, and you respond with “Sure, relying on them makes it more likely that I’ll reach the truth here, and I understand that they say it’s not a theorem. But it’s important for me to think for myself. And to me, this proof (the one the experts are saying is fallacious) seems valid.” Or perhaps you answer with “Yes, I understand they’re more reliable, but their style of reasoning is not mine, and it’s important that I stick to my style.”, or something of the sort. Do these reasons sound more like the paradigmatic reasons of the right kind for belief (proof, testimony, etc.) or more like those of the wrong kind (wishful thinking, etc.)?

In terms of the (soft, non-committal) criteria above: Do these autonomy-based reasons give evidence for the claim that the formula is a theorem? Could they render that belief epistemically justified? Could they render it knowledge? Can you believe that it’s a theorem directly for such reasons? Do they have the right kind of connection to the truth of that belief? Myself, I answer all of these questions in the negative. (I return to the fact that not everyone will in a minute.) If so, autonomy-reasons are reasons of the wrong kind for beliefs.

This may already justify some suspicion towards epistemic autonomy. But it may do more than that – it may explain the disanalogy between the practical and the epistemic significance of autonomy. For no similar wrong-kind-of-reasons intuitions arise when autonomy is invoked in the practical domain. If I say something like “I understand that my mother’s choice of a romantic partner for me may be better than my own, but still, it’s important that the choice be mine.”, and I offer this as a reason for choosing one partner rather than the other, this in no way feels like the wrong kind
of reason for that choice. If so, we have this clear difference between the practical case, where the value of autonomy grounds reasons of the right kind, and the epistemic case, where the reasons (if any) grounded in the value of autonomy are of the wrong kind. And this, it may seem, is a good explanation of why it is that the value of autonomy plays out differently in the practical and the epistemic cases.

But this, as an explanation, won’t do. One reason for this is that intuitions about right and wrong kind of reasons sometimes vary, so that the starting point of this suggested explanation may be challenged – someone who is more into epistemic autonomy than I am is likely to insist that the autonomy-based reasons above may after all be epistemic reasons of the right kind. And given the controversy about how the distinction is best captured and what tests better indicate reasons of the wrong (or right) kind, it’s going to be hard to make progress on this. Relatedly, and more problematically still: This explanation too immediately raises another explanatory challenge – for why is it that autonomy-reasons are reasons of the right kind in the practical domain and reasons of the wrong kind in the epistemic domain? And here, it seems, this question is so very close to the question we started with, that it doesn’t seem like any explanatory progress has been made.

A possible way to defend this explanation at least to an extent would be to offer some substantive answer to the question it raises – why autonomy generates right-kind-reasons in the practical case but wrong-kind-reasons in the epistemic case – that is sufficiently “far” from the current concerns, so as to generate independent plausibility. Perhaps one plausible line of thought here utilizes Transparency, the claim, roughly, that deliberation whether to believe p typically reduces to deliberation whether p. Because for most propositions p, autonomy considerations are

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39 This may be because there are no wrong-kind reasons for actions, but I’m not sure about this. For attempts to draw similar distinctions within the practical, see Schroeder ... Raz ...

Assuming something like the distinction applies within the practical, the tests for what qualifies as a right kind of reasons will for the most part have to be different in the epistemic and practical cases – obviously, nothing about the relation to evidence, truth, or knowledge is directly relevant in the practical case. But this doesn’t show that no analogous distinction between right and wrong kind of reasons applies. And some of the tests from the epistemic case may apply in the practical one as well – for instance, we can still ask whether a reason is one the agent can directly respond to with the relevant action.

irrelevant to whether $p$, granting them weight in the deliberation whether to believe $p$ will amount
to a violation of Transparency. Perhaps this is what makes autonomy reasons wrong-kind-reasons
when it comes to beliefs. But nothing analogous to Transparency applies in the practical domain, so
autonomy-reasons may very well be right-kind-reasons in that domain. If this explanation works –
and if the fact that Transparency applies in the epistemic but not the practical domain is not deeply
mysterious, or is perhaps a good explanation stopping point – then perhaps the explanation in terms
of the distinction between the right and wrong kind of reasons can carry some of the explanatory
weight here after all.

4. Possible Explanation: Incoherence?\footnote{For discussions relevant to this section, I thank Ittay Nissan-Rozen and Levi Spectre.}

You’re wondering, then, whether the suggested judicial reforms are anti-democratic. You review the
(first-order) evidence, and come to tentatively conclude that they are not. You also realize that this
colleague of yours is much more reliable on such matters, and that she is strongly convinced that
these reforms are anti-democratic. You understand that relying on her will get you a much better
chance of reaching the truth. She is likely right, as on such matters she often is (much more often
than you are, as you realize). But you choose not to outsource, for autonomy-related reasons. What,
overall, do you believe about the judicial reform? On the one hand, you believe that it is not anti-
democratic. On the other hand, you have such beliefs as that it is more likely that it’s anti-
democratic than that it isn’t; that it’s probably anti-democratic; that your colleague’s belief that it’s
anti-democratic is likely true; that your belief that it isn’t is likely false. Let’s focus, then, just on
these two conjunctions: The reforms are not anti-democratic, but I’m probably wrong about that; or
The reforms are not anti-democratic, but it’s more likely that they are anti-democratic than that they
are not. These are not contradictions, exactly, but they are very close: You both believe a proposition
and that it is less likely to be true than its negation. This seems incoherent (as I quickly noted in the
introduction). The autonomy consideration – even if (as we’re assuming for reductio) gives you a reason to refuse to outsource, does not render your overall beliefs here coherent. And it’s very hard to see how your beliefs can be described here without such incoherence.\[42\]

In the practical domain, though, no similar incoherence is involved. You have tentatively decided on a romantic partner (Bachelor #1) you want to pursue. You also know that your mother voted otherwise – for Bachelor #2 – and that she is much more likely to be right on the matter than you are. So you believe that Bachelor #2 is likely the better romantic partner for you, but you intend to choose Bachelor #1. This belief-intention combination is perhaps not the model of coherence (more on this shortly), but it is surely not as badly incoherent as the combination of beliefs in the previous paragraph.

Perhaps this, then, is the explanation we’re after for the disanalogy between the role autonomy plays in the practical and the epistemic domains. In the epistemic domain, according weight to autonomy will result in incoherence. Not so in the practical domain. This is why autonomy cannot play in the epistemic domain a role analogous to that it plays in the practical domain. If this is so, what initially seemed like a substantive, evaluative disanalogy is reduced to a formal one – which would in itself be an interesting result.

It’s not entirely clear that there’s no incoherence in the combination of the belief that Bachelor #2 is the better choice and the intention to choose Bachelor #1. True, it’s not the same incoherence there is in the combination of beliefs above, but perhaps this is just a function of the fact that the epistemic case is, well, epistemic, so that it’s all about beliefs, whereas the practical case is about actions (and beliefs). We shouldn’t expect, then, the incoherence to be precisely similar. And it does seem that if there’s no further explanation, combining the intention to choose Bachelor #1 with the belief that Bachelor #2 is the better choice (and perhaps even the belief that

\[42\] I’m sure that this is closely related to some of the topics discussed above, like for instance Transparency, and the distinction between reasons of the right and the wrong kind.
one should choose Bachelor #2, or that Bachelor #2 is likely to be the better partner) at the very least gives rise to a tension.

The natural thing to say, though, is that there is no incoherence after all in the practical case, but for another reason. When you decide to go for Bachelor #1, the considerations you take into account – your utility function, if you will – include not just all the merits of Bachelor #1 compared to those of Bachelor #2. Rather, you also assign value to your independence, or autonomy. The alternatives you have to choose between are not Bachelor #1 vs Bachelor #2, but rather, roughly, Bachelor #1 + autonomy vs Bachelor #2 (without autonomy). And as between these options, you prefer the former. Your mother, however, merely prefers (and is likely right in so preferring) Bachelor #1 over Bachelor #2. In this way, no incoherence remains: It’s possible that Bachelor #2 is better than Bachelor #1, but that Bachelor #1 + autonomy is better than Bachelor #2 without it.

But this means that, first, the disanalogy is not after all formal – it’s really about whether autonomy is of value in the relevant domain, whether it’s included in the agent’s utility function, or some such. And second, of course: This means we’re really back at square one. Assigning autonomy value in one’s practical deliberation does not result in incoherence, whereas in the epistemic domain it does. This is, pretty much, what we set out to explain. It’s hard to see that progress has been made.

5. **Possible Explanation: Pluralism**

Talk about the optimal choice of a romantic partner (for one) is always suspicious, regardless of who it is who is actually making the choice. And the reason is very clear – there is a huge number of factors that go into making a romantic partner a good romantic partner. And there are different ways in which a romantic partner can be good. It is highly implausible to think that there’s a single,

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43 On this picture, the relevance of the value of autonomy is optional, it depends on whether the relevant agent cares about autonomy. Otherwise, it has not value in the relevant case. I’m not sure whether this is a problem.
unique way of factoring in all of them so as to reach a precise ordering of possible romantic partners, from best to worst. It is much more plausible to think that when it comes to a choice of romantic partners, there is a pluralism of relevant values, and a wide range of incommensurability: Even just for you, there are many good romantic partners (of course, there are also many bad ones), who may be very different from each other, good in different ways to different extents, and yet such that none is better than the other (nor need they be equally good). Even if two potential partners are not incommensurably good – even if one of them is better than the other – it’s still probably true that the less good one has many good-making features. And it’s natural to think that this combination of pluralism and incommensurability opens up room for the value of autonomy to play its role: For when it comes to a choice between incommensurably good potential partners, autonomy can reign unchallenged. And even in cases of one potential partner being better than another, the good-making features of the less good candidate still make choosing him intelligible, perhaps a permissible option. It makes no sense, the thought seems to be, to give weight to the value of autonomy even when this will lead to a choice of a clearly bad option over a clearly good one. It’s just that when it comes to choosing a romantic partner, this is hardly ever the case. On this picture, then, and perhaps roughly, autonomy is of value only in pursuit of the good (even if not necessarily the optimal). As a result, only in the presence of value pluralism and incommensurability (very common in the practical domain) does it make sense to assign one’s autonomy value in one’s deliberations.44

If it can plausibly be argued, then, that there are no analogues of pluralism and incommensurability in the epistemic domain, this will be the explanation we need for the disanalogy between the role of autonomy in the practical and the epistemic domains. And pluralism does seem far less plausible in the epistemic domain. Just think of the multiplicity and variety of good-making features of, say, romantic partners. There is nothing resembling this kind of richness when it comes

44 This picture is, of course, very Razian. I don’t want to commit to any precise details here about how best to understand Raz, and I intend to address in detail Raz’s view in future work. For now, let me note that the claim that autonomy is only of value in pursuit of the good, and the close connection between autonomy, pluralism, and incommensurability, all come from Raz (1986, chapters 14 and 15).
to beliefs, at least when those are evaluated in the purely epistemic way highlighted above. Truth is one such value, of course. So is avoidance of falsehood (more on this below). And what else? Perhaps accuracy is of such purely epistemic value, and perhaps it’s not entirely reducible to the value of truth. Perhaps understanding is\(^{45}\). But this is pretty much it. Furthermore, in the purely epistemic domain, even these values play only a non-instrumental role – even if it can be shown, for instance, that if you believe that the relevant formula is a theorem this will maximize your true beliefs or understanding over time, this is not any reason (of the right, purely epistemic kind) so to believe\(^{46}\). Even if there is some room for pluralism (and with it, for incommensurability) in the epistemic domain, there’s much less of it compared to the practical domain. So is this all the explanation we need for the disanalogy between these domains when it comes to the value of autonomy?

This explanation predicts that in epistemic cases in which pluralism is in play, autonomy may after all have a role to play. So think of cases in which it matters greatly how much weight the believer assigns to reaching truths and how much weight they assign to avoiding falsehoods. These comparative weights will affect how risky they are willing to be in forming beliefs: Someone who is most concerned about avoiding falsehoods will approximate the Cartesian policy of getting rid of all uncertain beliefs, whereas someone who places more weight on having true beliefs will be willing to take greater risks in their belief-forming. It’s not implausible to think that there’s more than one epistemically permissible way to go here\(^{47}\). Perhaps some different ways of assigning relative weight to these two epistemic values – reaching truths and avoiding falsehoods – are incommensurably good. And so perhaps here it makes sense for a believer to assign some weight in her epistemic

\(^{45}\) In the context of a discussion of moral deference, for instance, many insist on the epistemic significance of understanding. See Nickel (2001), Hopkins (2007), and Hills (2009).

In terms I get to later in the text, I think that the most natural way to think of understanding, even if we acknowledge that it is of epistemic value, is as a state that is essentially a by-product.

\(^{46}\) I have to say this seems intuitively obvious to me, but I’ve learned that not to all. For some relevant discussion, see Berker (2013).

\(^{47}\) For some relevant discussion, see Weintraub (2013).
deliberation to what she can think of as her own style, or her own values and commitments, or to the ultimate belief being determined by herself, without outsourcing.

I’m not sure what exactly to say about such cases. I agree that attributing weight to epistemic autonomy is much more plausible in such cases than in others, where pluralism and incommensurability seem less plausible. Perhaps this already can serve as some confirmation of the explanation of the practical-epistemic disanalogy offered in this section48. Whether we should infer according to IBE, it seems plausible to assert, is not a matter for personal style. But how risky we should be in forming beliefs? Perhaps, within some bounds, that may be a matter of style, and if so, this allows for permissible variation across individuals.

In the practical domain, we insisted, it makes sense to sometimes be willing to pay a significant (if not unlimited) price in the quality of a decision just in order to make it oneself, or to have it reflect one’s deep commitments. If this is so, it means that autonomy comes into play in the practical domain even in cases where the relevant options are not incommensurable, indeed, when one of them is clearly better than the other. But perhaps this too can be fed into the suggested explanation of the practical-epistemic disanalogy: In the practical domain, it seems plausible to say that even the clearly inferior choice of a romantic partner has something to be said for them, they too will almost always have good-making features. Perhaps this is why autonomously choosing them is of value, even though it’s far from the optimal choice. In the epistemic domain, though, because there’s a relative paucity of relevant values, often inferior options will have nothing or very little to be said for them. Perhaps this is why autonomy in that context loses its value49.

48 I’m not entirely sure, though. Recall that the test for the value of epistemic autonomy was that it makes sense to be willing to pay a price in reliability (or some such) just in order to manifest sovereignty or non-alienation in one’s belief formation. In the case in the text, though, this is not precisely what’s going on – because the underlying commitments or values or choices are precisely about the relative values of truth and avoiding falsehoods (reliability, presumably, comes along with these). That is, the purported reasons of personal “style” are not weighed against reasons of truth and reliability, but are best seen as offering competing interpretations thereof.

49 Relevant here is also some unclarity in how to understand epistemic permissiveness exactly: Permissiveness is sometimes understood as the claim that more than one epistemic response (a belief, a credence, a suspension of judgment) is maximally rational (White 2005). At other times, though, it is more naturally understood as the claim that even less than maximally rational responses are nevertheless permissible (this, it seems to me, is the reading of epistemic permissiveness that is more closely analogous to moral
I am sure this story goes at least some of the way towards explaining the disanalogy between the practical and epistemic significance of autonomy. But I am not sure it’s all we need. One reason is that I have some doubts about the relations between autonomy, pluralism and incommensurability this story utilizes. I don’t deny such relations – I am just not convinced that the relations are *that* close. In particular, I think that autonomy is sometimes of value even in pursuit of the bad. But this is a matter for another occasion.50

My second reason for thinking that this may not be the entire story here is more speculative. On the suggested story, the fact that value pluralism characterizes the practical domain more clearly than it does the epistemic explains why autonomy is more clearly of value in the former than the latter. But this raises the question – why *is it* the case that value pluralism is such a clear feature of the practical, but not of the epistemic? What has been achieved is that one practical-epistemic disanalogy has been explained by reference to another, but now this other disanalogy stands in need of explanation. It is tempting to think that no progress has been made.

This would be too quick, though. First, local explanatory progress is still explanatory progress. That more progress remains to be made does not show that no progress has already been made. Second, explanatory chains have to come to an end somewhere, and not all points are equally good explanation-stoppers. It may be argued that the value-paucity of the purely epistemic – having to do with truth and falsehood, primarily, and perhaps some other closely related values – is as good a place as any to bring one’s explanatory chain to a halt. In other words, it may be argued that while it is not plausible to accept the disanalogy regarding the value of autonomy as brute, accepting the disanalogy regarding value pluralism as brute comes relatively painless.

These are legitimate dialectical moves, it seems to me. And so, the explanation in terms of value pluralism and its different role in the practical and epistemic domains clearly has some merit. But these dialectical moves do not render the objection entirely weightless. So this objection –

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50 “Revisiting Raz on Autonomy” (work in progress).
certainly together with the doubts about the relation between autonomy and pluralism – show at least that more may be hoped for.

6. Less of A difference than Meets the Eye?

In this section I don’t offer an attempt at an explanation of the practical-epistemic disanalogy. Rather, I argue that there may be less of it than meets the eye.

So far, I’ve been assuming a rather strong relation between the value of autonomy and it being reason-giving. I insisted that it doesn’t make epistemic sense for a believer to resist the truth or a more reliable epistemic method just for autonomy-related reasons, and from this claim – about epistemic autonomy not being reason-giving – I rushed to conclude that epistemic autonomy is not of value. And in many contexts the relation between values and reasons is indeed rather close – we often have reason to pursue what is of value. But not always.

An important – and quite large – family of cases where we don’t are cases Elster (1983) famously calls states that are essentially by-products (I will sometimes refer to them also as essential by-products). Such states “can only come about as the by-product of actions undertaken for other ends” (Elster 1983, 43). Spontaneity is one of Elster’s examples, as is sleep, political participation, forgetfulness, some aesthetic value, and much more51. Essential by-products may be of value, but even when they are, this doesn’t give us reason to pursue them, because pursuing them guarantees not getting them. The way to get them is to sneak up on them, intentionally pursue other things, thereby achieving the essential by-products as well. (And sometimes there are indirect means of self-management that may work – think, for instance, about intentionally having a drink in order to become more spontaneous).

51 Here is Elster in a hyperbolic moment: “… all good things in life are essentially by-products.” (Elster 1983, 108).
Might autonomy be an essential by-product? In particular, is epistemic autonomy? If it is, this will sever the tie between questions about reasons to pursue autonomy and autonomy being of value. Perhaps, in other words, it is of value – even if purely epistemic value – to shape one’s beliefs in accordance with one’s deep epistemic commitments, and by making one’s own mind without outsourcing, but perhaps this is the kind of value that can only be sneaked up on, or achieved indirectly? Perhaps it is only by pursuing truth (or avoidance of falsehoods, or accuracy, or some such) that one may come to instantiate the essential by-product value of epistemic autonomy? If so, this will explain why it is that it doesn’t make sense to refuse (e.g.) to outsource just in order to achieve epistemic autonomy, consistently with still attributing value to epistemic autonomy.

How plausible is it that epistemic autonomy is an essential by-product? To me, quite plausible indeed, perhaps partly because at least on many occasions this seems to me to be true about autonomy in general. Think, for comparison, of excellence. One can value excellence, I guess. But one doesn’t pursue excellence directly. Excellence is something that may characterize one’s pursuit of other things, and may be achieved in pursuing such other things. Excellence, even if of value, is not itself the end one pursues. Rather, excellence’s significance seems to be primarily adverbial, one pursues other things excellently. Of course, excellence itself can be pursued indirectly, one can utilize self-management tools in this way, and so on. But still, excellence is not, at least not primarily, itself an end, or something we have reason to pursue. I would say precisely the

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52 Elster (1983, 52) does briefly mention something about autonomy in this context. But he doesn’t argue that it’s an essential by-product.

53 We may want to distinguish between different ways in which essential by-products cannot be pursued intentionally and directly: Sometimes the impossibility is conceptual or logical, as is arguably the case, for instance, with spontaneity and forgetfulness. At other times the impossibility is empirical – Elster’s convincing example here is that of sleep, where there’s no logical impossibility to the thought of trying hard to fall asleep, but we know, on empirical grounds, that this is highly unlikely to succeed. (Elster (1983, 57) is explicit about the distinction between conceptual and empirical impossibility here.) Yet another kind of impossibility – Elster is not explicit about it, but some of his examples fit this description – are cases where there’s neither a conceptual nor an empirical impossibility to intentionally and directly pursue the relevant essential by-product, but doing so will defeat the purpose of doing so, will render the relevant thing achieved devoid of the value it sometimes has. It may be thought of, then, as a kind of evaluative impossibility or self-defeat. Think, for instance, of pursuing heartache because one believes that a life devoid of heartache is less rich, or Elster’s (1983, 59) examples of despair, some aesthetic values (1983, 79), and political participation (1983, 100). Pursuing excellence directly and intentionally is often empirically impossible, and sometimes it is self-defeating in the evaluative kind of way.
same about autonomy, at least as understood in the first-person. Autonomy is not, as it were, its own end or project. Rather, one engages in other projects autonomously. One achieves autonomy—the value of being a part-author of one’s own life—by shaping and telling a life story full of other value. Not—or not primarily, anyway—by pursuing autonomy directly. Indeed, there seems to be something objectionably fetishistic about someone guiding their actions and decision not by substantive values and projects, but merely by the aim of becoming autonomous or manifesting autonomy.\footnote{Here too I think that what we have is not the essential by-product that it’s logically or conceptually impossible to pursue directly. Rather, it’s a combination of the empirical impossibility of pursuing it directly, at least often, and the evaluative one—as is exemplified by the fetishism point in the text.}

This does not mean, of course, that autonomy may not be reason-giving. For one thing, one person’s autonomy may give another person all sorts of reasons.\footnote{See here Raz’s (...) claim that one’s wellbeing—for him, closely tied to the value of autonomy—gives reasons for actions not, or not primarily, for one but for others.} And even in one’s own case, the value of autonomy may give reasons for other actions—indirectly pursuing autonomy by sneaking up on it (say, engaging projects that are more likely to lead to an autonomous life). But it is, I tentatively conclude, quite plausible to think that autonomy is essentially a by-product.

And this seems especially true of epistemic autonomy, on the assumption that it is of value. If one conducts one’s epistemic affairs—pursuing truth or understanding or some other purely epistemic aim, if there are any—according to one’s deep epistemic commitments, and utilizing one’s own devices, one will thereby be sneaking up on the value of epistemic autonomy. But this doesn’t mean that one should treat achieving epistemic autonomy as something one has (purely) epistemic reasons to do, and certainly not as something that can justify ignoring evidence, or in some other way paying a price in the hard currency of likelihood of truth. Doing that—pursuing epistemic autonomy directly in this kind of way—will amount to an instance of “the fallacy of striving, seeking and searching for the things that recede before the hand that reaches out for them.” (Elster 1983, 108).
I hope that you will agree that this way of thinking of autonomy in general and of epistemic autonomy in particular is interesting and promising. But how is it related to the task at hand, namely explaining the disanalogy between the role autonomy plays in the practical and the epistemic domains? As I said in the beginning of this section, these observations show how there may be less of a disanalogy here than meets the eye. For now we know that attributing value to epistemic autonomy is consistent with epistemic autonomy not being directly reason-giving, and so perhaps we should be more willing to attribute value to epistemic autonomy, at least sometimes.

Some disanalogy nevertheless survives. To see this, we can focus first on the reason side, then on the value side. First, then, reasons: In the practical case too, I think, autonomy is often an essential by-product. But not always: In the practical domain, it seems plausible to assume, at least sometimes the value of autonomy is directly reason-giving in the way that epistemic autonomy is not. This, after all, was what we said about the case of choosing one’s partner, where it seemed at least an intelligible possibility to refuse the (otherwise) optimal choice precisely because of the value one places on autonomy. This alone suffices to show that at least some disanalogy between the practical and the epistemic domain remains. And on the value side too, I am not sure that the two domains are exactly analogous. I find the thought that there is (not merely instrumental) value in shaping one’s life according to one’s commitments and values, and with one’s decisions, extremely plausible. I don’t find the epistemic analogue of this claim remotely as plausible, and this even when we fully appreciate that accepting such a value need not immediately commit us to it generating epistemic reasons (because epistemic autonomy may be essentially a side-constraint).

For both these reasons, then, I believe that some disanalogy between the evaluative and normative status of autonomy remains. But there’s less of it than we may have thought before appreciating the plausible possibility that epistemic autonomy is an essential by-product.

I find the idea that autonomy – epistemic and otherwise – is often essentially a by-product highly promising, and there’s much more to be said about it. I mention two further points in a long
footnote56. For our purposes here, though, the point above – about there being less of a disanalogy than we may have thought – will suffice.

7. Conclusion: Not All Explanations are All That Beautiful

We set out to explain the apparent disanalogy between autonomy’s role in the practical and the epistemic domain. An ideal solution would be one, clean, beautiful explanation that reveals something deep and clear about, perhaps, the nature of actions and the nature of beliefs, in a way that makes the disanalogy precisely what you would expect. This is the kind of explanation I wanted to come up with when I started thinking about this disanalogy.

But we don’t always get what we want. Instead, what we’ve arrived at is the following messier picture. First, there’s less of a disanalogy than meets the eye. Second, there’s a host of explanations, all perhaps shouldering some of the explanatory burden but none of them the ideal, one-swoop beautiful explanation that may have been hoped for. Considerations of incoherence and of the distinction between reasons of the right and of the wrong kind seem to render the disanalogy more intelligible, perhaps to place it in a wider context that makes some sense of it, which is already

56 Recall the distinction between local and global autonomy – both practical and epistemic. Perhaps it may be thought that both are of value, that local autonomy is essentially a by-product, and that global autonomy is sometimes directly reason-giving. That is, in the epistemic case, that on no specific case of shaping a belief does it make sense to treat one’s autonomy as giving a reason (not to outsource, say), but that it does make sense to directly take measures to shape one’s epistemic life so as to make it more autonomous. If so, there will be a tension between the local and the global – a strategy that is rational at each relevant local point (no weight to autonomy) will lead to a globally irrational strategy. If this is correct, then the problem here is similar in structure to that discussed in the context of the self-torturer paradox (Quinn 1990). Perhaps recognizing that sometimes a value is present in both the local and the global context, but is an essential by-product in one of them, can go some way towards explaining the problem in such cases – the general problem highlighted by the self-torturer paradox, not just in the context of epistemic autonomy – and perhaps even towards solving it. Recall also the distinction between right-kind- and wrong-kind-reasons. It is natural to think that there’s some relation between that distinction and the category of essential by-products. Perhaps reasons to directly pursue essential by-products are always of the wrong kind, or perhaps, more plausibly, some subset of them is (perhaps, for instance, those such that directly and intentionally pursuing them defeats their value; see footnote 50 above). Elster (1983, 51) himself seems to suggest something along these lines when he ties the fact that beliefs don’t respond to instrumental reasons with the fact that useful beliefs are essentially by-products. If there is such a relation, it is natural to expect some close relation to arise between the relevance in our context of the distinction between reasons of the right and of the wrong kind and the relevance of the category of essential by-products.
some explanatory progress, but it’s not clear how deep at the end of the day that progress is. The
fact that the practical is so rich in values compared to the relative paucity of epistemic values seems
to explain more here, though again, perhaps this explanation too does not deliver all the explanatory
payoff that could be desired. And perhaps that’s all that can be said by way of explaining the
disanalogy. At least, it’s all I now have to say about it.

Such messy explanations sometimes have advantages. Here’s one: Had we found the kind of
large and deep single explanation, in terms of a profound difference between the nature of beliefs
and actions, we would have been forced to accept the disanalogy as applying in a clean-cut way as
well – autonomy would have had to play one role in the case of all beliefs, and another in the case of
all actions. If I’m right, though, that the explanation is messy, it opens the door to interesting
hypotheses about the messiness of the explanandum: Perhaps, for instance, autonomy may be just
as normatively irrelevant in some action cases as it arguably is in the belief case. In some cases, I’ve
argued, it makes sense to be willing to pay a price in the quality of the decision just in order to make
it oneself, but perhaps this is so for some practical cases – perhaps personal ones like that of
choosing a romantic partner – but not in others. It does seem problematic, I think, to be willing to
pay a price in the quality of a moral decision just in order to make it oneself\(^{57}\). And perhaps this is
partly so because in moral decisions there’s less relevant pluralism and incommensurability than in
many personal cases (or perhaps for some other reason)\(^{58}\). And perhaps – though I can’t think of an
example – there are even epistemic cases that behave, in terms of the relevance of autonomy, more
like the practical ones.

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\(^{57}\) See my “A Defense of Moral Deference” (2014).
Notice that this points pulls, to an extent, in the opposite direction from the observation above (in section 2.4)
that in political contexts we seem to find outsourcing more problematic.

\(^{58}\) Relatedly, perhaps what does the difference here, at least partly, is that in many of the practical cases we’ve
been discussing the relevant reasons have to do with the agent’s own wellbeing or are in some other way
personal. Epistemic reasons seem – at least paradigmatically, but perhaps always – to be impersonal. And
moral reasons, or at least many of them, seem to be in this way more like the latter than like the former. I
thank Ittay Nissan-Rozen for relevant discussion.


Finnur Dellsen (2022), “We Owe it to Others to Think for Ourselves”, in Matheson and Lougheed (2022), 306-322.


(Manuscript), “Backgrounding Agent-Relativity”.

(Work in progress) “Revisiting Raz on Autonomy”.

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Jonathan Matheson (2022), “Why Think for Yourself?”, *Episteme* ...


