***Is There an Epistemic Norm of Practical Reasoning?***

**Abstract**. A recent view in contemporary epistemology holds that practical reasoning is governed by an epistemic norm. Evidence for the existence of this norm is provided by the ways in which we assess (justify, judge and criticize) our actions and reasoning on the basis of whether certain epistemic conditions are satisfied. Philosophers disagree on what this norm is – whether it is knowledge, justified belief or something else. Nobody however challenges the claim that practical reasoning is governed by such a norm. I argue that assuming the existence of an epistemic norm of practical reasoning is neither the only nor the best way to accommodate the available data. I introduce and defend an alternative account that avoids the assumption. According to this account, the relevant epistemic assessments of action and reasoning are instrumental assessments relative to the regulation conditions of a non-epistemic norm.

**Keywords**: Epistemic norms; practical reasoning; instrumental rationality.

A recent view in contemporary epistemology holds that practical reasoning – reasoning aimed at deliberating about how to act – is governed by an epistemic norm. Such a norm would constrain the epistemic conditions under which it is appropriate to use propositions as premises in practical reasoning.[[1]](#footnote-1) Evidence for the existence of this norm would be provided by the ways in which we assess (justify, judge and criticize) our actions and reasoning on the basis of whether the relevant epistemic conditions are satisfied. Some philosophers argue that this condition is knowledge (Hawthorne 2004, 29-30; Hawthorne & Stanley 2008; Stanley 2005, 9-10). In support of this claim, they adduce considerations about our ordinary practice of assessing our actions on the basis of whether the agent knows the reasons for which she acts. For example, someone can be criticized for not paying her health insurance because she does not know she will not fall ill. Similarly, if asked why I turned left at the crossroad, I can appropriately justify myself by saying that I know that this is the right direction. By contrast, if I sell my lottery ticket for one cent I can be criticized as irrational since, even if the probability of winning is very low, I don’t know that I will lose. On the basis of similar considerations about ordinary assessments, other philosophers have suggested weaker conditions, like justified belief (Littlejohn 2009; 2012, ch.6), or contextually variable conditions, stronger than knowledge in some circumstances while weaker in others (Brown 2012b; Gerken 2011, 2015).[[2]](#footnote-2)

The contemporary debate focuses on which epistemic condition constitutes the norm of practical reasoning. However, nobody seems to challenge the claim that there is some such epistemic norm. This assumption seems to be confirmed by our ordinary assessments of action and reasoning. As Littlejohn has recently written: “It’s clear that there is an epistemic norm that governs practical reason, one that determines whether it’s epistemically proper to treat something as a reason to *F*. It’s not clear what this norm is” (2014, 135). My primary aim in this article is to argue, against this received view, that we do not need to postulate epistemic norms in order to account for the relevant epistemic assessments. Assuming the existence of some epistemic norm is neither the only nor the best way to accommodate the available data. To this end, I will introduce and defend an alternative account of such assessments that avoids this assumption.

My account partially relies on the notion of *regulation condition*. Regulation conditions concern the ways in which agents can do what norms require, permit or forbid. These consist of a set of descriptive conditions about the epistemic position, intentions, motivations and environment of the agent, the satisfaction of which enables or helps her to follow a norm – both in the actual and in most relevantly similar circumstances. Some assessments in our evaluative practice concern these conditions. For example, while we assess someone who keeps a promise as doing the right thing, if that person didn’t make any effort to keep the promise and happens to comply with it by mere accident, we also criticise her for conforming to the promise-keeping norm in an improper way (i.e., without taking the means that lead to the norm satisfaction in most similar circumstances). According to my account, the relevant epistemic assessments of action and reasoning don’t concern the satisfaction conditions of an epistemic norm, but the regulation conditions of a non-epistemic norm. More precisely, they are instrumental assessments relative to the regulation conditions of a specific norm according to which it is appropriate for someone to use a proposition *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning about whether to *F* iff *p* is a reason for her to *F*/not-*F.*

Here is the plan for the paper: in §1 I introduce my account of epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning. In §2 I argue that this account has several advantages over competing accounts. In §3 I address some possible objections to the account. The upshot is that the full contemporary debate on epistemic norms of practical reasoning relies on a mistaken understanding of the nature of the relevant epistemic assessments, and of the relation between these assessments and norms of practical reasoning. My positive account shows that we do not need to postulate epistemic norms in order to explain such assessments.

**1. The account**

My account of epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning relies on two premises. One concerns the nature of norm regulation and the assessments relative to it. The other is the assumption of a specific non-epistemic norm governing the appropriate use of propositions as premises in practical reasoning. I will outline and motivate these two premises in §1.1 and §1.2. In §1.3 I will develop the account.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***1.1. Norms, norm-regulation, and normative assessments***

Norms in general involve *regulation conditions*.[[4]](#footnote-4) While norms tell us *what* to do (believe, desire…) or not to do (not to believe, not to desire…), regulation conditions concern *how* to do what norms require – i.e., the ways in which we can follow norms. They consist of a set of descriptive conditions about the agent’s epistemic position, intentions, motivations and environment whose satisfaction enables her to follow a norm, or which at least constitute facilitating steps bringing an agent to the point where she can follow a norm.

Regulation conditions must not be confused with the *satisfaction* (or *conformity*) *conditions* of norms. Consider a norm N prescribing an agent A to *F* in conditions C. The satisfaction conditions of N are the sufficient and jointly necessary conditions that A must satisfy in order to comply (act in conformity) with N. In the case of N, the satisfaction condition is that *A F-s in C*. In many circumstances, A must satisfy several *regulation conditions* in order to follow N:[[5]](#footnote-5) she must know that there is such a norm and that it is directed to her, what N requires and whether C obtains; she must accept and be motivated by N and intend to F as a consequence of this motivation (or to realize certain means necessary for F-ing); A’s psychological system must work well during all the process of recognition, acceptance and motivation; the environmental conditions should allow A to comply with N; and so on.[[6]](#footnote-6)

I am here particularly interested in the regulation conditions concerning the agents’ epistemic status such as, for example, the epistemic access to the satisfaction and application conditions of a norm. Consider, by way of example, the following norm:

(RL) Drivers ought to stop when traffic lights are red

(RL) requires a specific action (stopping) in a specific condition (when a driver meets a red traffic light) by a specific set of agents (drivers). However (RL) is silent on the specific conditions enabling its satisfaction. For example it doesn’t say which specific actions one should perform in order to follow it (e.g., pressing the brakes until the car stops). Importantly, (RL) also doesn’t mention what the epistemic position of the subject should be in order to follow the norm: in most cases, in order to stop at a red light, and thus comply with the norm, a driver must know the traffic regulations, realize that there is a light on her route and that it is red, and so on. In particular, in the wide majority of circumstances, (RL) can be followed only by *seeing* that a light is red. However, seeing the red light is not something that (RL) requires. What it requires is the mere performance of an action in a context: stopping when the lights are red. (RL) is entirely silent on how one can follow it, including on the epistemic conditions necessary for doing so.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Let me add a couple of remarks on regulation conditions. First, not every circumstance requires the satisfaction of regulation conditions in order to conform to a norm. For example, in some cases one may conform to a norm by chance, by merely fulfilling its satisfaction conditions. Someone who takes a plane, ignoring that it’s forbidden to smoke on board, but who does not smoke for some other reason (for example because she dislikes smoking on a plane) acts in conformity to the norm even without being aware of it and trying to comply with it. While in some circumstances the satisfaction of several regulation conditions is necessary for an agent to be in the position to conform to a norm, for other norms and in other circumstances the satisfaction of regulation conditions may be unnecessary, and even frequently so – compare typical examples involving street regulations and promises to the no-smoking regulation example.[[8]](#footnote-8) This variability depends on factors such as the character of the norm (e.g., in general it is relatively easier to involuntarily conform with certain prohibitions than with obligations requiring active performances) and the specific circumstances (if all passengers on a plane are addicted smokers, it will be more important that they satisfy regulation conditions in order to conform to the no-smoking regulation).

 Second, not all circumstances require the same regulation conditions in order to follow a norm. For instance, in situations of poor visibility a driver will have to perform special actions (e.g., driving slower than usual) and satisfy special epistemic conditions (e.g., looking ahead more carefully) in order to comply with (RL).[[9]](#footnote-9) In this respect, what the regulation conditions for a given norm are is a contingent matter, which depends on features such as environmental circumstances, particular physical and psychological conditions of the agent, and so on.

The difference between norms and their regulation conditions is reflected in different types of assessment. On the one hand, there are assessments associated with conformity to what a norm requires. These mainly concern therightness or correctness of the act or the agent, as well as other assessments related to norm conformity or violation – for example, we assess a driver who doesn’t stop at a red light as acting incorrectly and doing something wrong. On the other hand, regulation conditions are sometimes the object of instrumental assessments. More particularly, assessments relative to regulation conditions are instrumental assessments of a specific kind, concerning the means that facilitate the realization of what certain norms require.[[10]](#footnote-10) Such assessments (i) describe necessary or effective means to bring about or facilitate the realization of a further condition required by a norm, (ii) instruct agents to take these means given the further end of satisfying a norm, (iii) criticize agents not taking these means, or (iv) evaluate these means and the agents that take them. For example, we advise a driver to take the means necessary in normal circumstances to stop when lights are red (e.g., to pay sufficient attention to the lights), we criticise drivers who don’t take such means (e.g., as reckless, irresponsive to the law…), and we negatively appraise the circumstances in which certain conditions necessary to follow the traffic regulations do not obtain (e.g., a situation in which poor visibility prevents a driver from seeing whether lights are red).

We can distinguish between two types of assessments of regulation conditions: while some such assessments are relative to the specific conditions necessary to comply with a norm in actual circumstances, other assessments concern conditions that reliably lead to norm compliance in relevantly similar circumstances – an example of the latter is the driver criticised for not paying sufficient attention to traffic regulations.[[11]](#footnote-11) Both these assessments can be accounted for in instrumental terms, though the former concerns whether the means is appropriate to promote (or is reliably conducive to) norm compliance in the specific circumstance, while the latter concerns whether the means is appropriate in most similar circumstances.[[12]](#footnote-12)

As for instrumental assessments in general, these assessments originate from and fully depend on further normative reasons.[[13]](#footnote-13) That someone should stop when she sees red lights depends on the further fact that she is required by the traffic regulations to stop at red lights; and if these regulations were suspended, one shouldn’t stop when seeing red lights any more. Because of this dependence, instrumental assessments have a contingent character. In particular, the assessed conditions may depend on specific circumstances – for example, in a situation of poor visibility one must drive slower and be more careful in order to comply with street regulations. Similarly, when we assess conditions that reliably lead to complying with a norm, we look at relevantly similar circumstances in which contingent empirical features of the present situation are also present, including abnormal environmental or psychological conditions.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Let me stress here a consequence of my previous considerations, which is crucial for my further discussion: though all types of assessments considered in this section depend in some way on norms, they do not all bear on the satisfaction conditions of a norm. Sometimes they can be instrumental assessments bearing on regulation conditions. Thus a criticism for not *F*-ing is not an argument for the claim that there is a norm requiring one to *F.* This criticism could be an assessment relative to regulation conditions of a norm requiring something else – e.g., requiring an action *G*, where *F*-ing is necessary to bring about G in the actual or in similar circumstances.[[15]](#footnote-15) Similarly – and more importantly for our present purposes – a criticism for *F*-ing when a certain condition C obtains is not an argument for the claim that there is a conditional norm requiring one not to *F* if C (or to *F* only if not-C). The criticism could be an assessment relative to regulation conditions of a norm requiring something else – e.g., requiring not to *F* if a further condition D obtains, where C is a condition necessary in the actual or in most relevantly similar circumstances to bring about that the subject doesn’t *F* if D.

The latter point is particularly important here, since epistemic norms of action and practical reasoning take the form of conditional norms involving an epistemic condition. Consider an example illustrating the point. Tom is driving home with his wife Jane. Even though visibility conditions are perfect, he doesn’t notice that a traffic light in front of him is red and passes through the crossroad, fortunately without any bad consequence. Jane, who saw the red light, scolds him: “Why did you pass there? Didn’t you see that the light was red?” Jane’s criticism is perfectly in order here, even though what the law requires is not to stop when one *sees* red traffic lights, but when traffic lights *are* red. The criticism makes perfect sense even if seeing the red lights is not part of the satisfaction conditions of a traffic regulation (more precisely, it is not the condition of a conditional law requiring one to stop when one sees red lights), but it is a condition necessary to comply with a traffic regulation in the actual and in most similar circumstances – a regulation condition of the law requiring one to stop when traffic lights are red. This example illustrates a case in which the performance of an action *F* (to pass) given a condition C (seeing the red light) is challenged, but where not to *F* if C is not what the relevant norm requires. Rather, C is a condition necessary to comply in the actual or in similar circumstances with a further norm requiring one not to *F* if D (not to pass if traffic lights are red) – a regulation condition of that norm.[[16]](#footnote-16)

This point – that a criticism for *F*-ing given C is not an argument for the claim that there is a conditional norm requiring one not to *F* if C – is particularly important for my present purposes. As anticipated in the introduction, one of the most popular arguments for epistemic norms of practical reasoning infers such norms from considerations about epistemic assessments that seem intuitively appropriate in a situation. For example, from the fact that in a context it is appropriate to remark to someone “why did you *F*? You didn’t know *p*!”, it is argued that there is a norm requiring one to *F* only when one knows *p.*[[17]](#footnote-17) For the argument to be successful, normative assessments must be indicative of the satisfaction conditions of a norm. However this may not always be the case. One cannot conclude from an assessment involving condition X that there is a norm to the effect that one must satisfy condition X or must perform a certain action if, or only if, X. This is because some of such assessments are relative to conditions which are necessary, in the actual or in most similar circumstances, for the regulation of a norm rather than for its satisfaction. These are instrumental assessments whose normative force depends on some further norm requiring different conditions. This is precisely what I suggest is the case for epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning.

***1.2. When it is appropriate to treat something as a reason***

My account relies on the hypothesis that epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning don’t concern the satisfaction conditions of an epistemic norm, but the regulation conditions of a non-epistemic norm. In particular, I suggest that such assessments concern the regulation conditions of a norm that could be formulated as follows:

(RN) It is appropriate for S to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning about whether to *F* iff *p* is a reason for S to *F*/not-*F*

(RN) concerns *normative reasons* rather than motivating or explanatory reasons. A normative reason is a fact that speaks in favour of or against performing a certain action or holding a certain attitude.[[18]](#footnote-18) I remain open here on whether facts are true propositions or a different kind of entity that makes propositions true or false. I take it that the normative relation of ‘speaking in favour of or against something’ is sufficiently intuitive and familiar from the literature.

Let me illustrate (RN) with an example: Mary is planning to go out and is deliberating about whether to take an umbrella with her. Her overall preference is to take the umbrella if and only if it rains. As it happens, it doesn’t rain. This fact is a normative reason for Mary not to take an umbrella. According to (RN), it is appropriate for Mary to use the proposition that it is not raining as a premise in her reasoning about whether to take an umbrella.[[19]](#footnote-19)

 In favour of (RN), it seems intuitive that for making right choices we should take the reasons for or against the available options into account in our deliberation. The plausibility of (RN) is also supported by considerations about the nature of normative reasons. Normative reasons are the types of things that, by their very nature, are supposed to exercise some normative force on us, to guide and motivate us to act, believe, desire… in the right way, and they are such that they can perform this function by being premises in sound reasoning.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, in our deliberation about whether to *F* it is appropriate to take the reasons for or against *F*-ing into consideration, treating these facts as premises in our reasoning.[[21]](#footnote-21) Notice also that many philosophers consider the expressions “using as a premise in a reasoning” and “treating as a reason” as equivalent. If this identification is correct, and the expression “treating as a reason” is taken literally, then (RN) would be a mere instantiation of a more general and relatively plausible principle according to which it is appropriate to treat something as an X if and only if it is an X. The advantages of my account discussed in §2 can be considered as further arguments supporting (RN).

(RN) is not an epistemic norm. What makes a norm *epistemic* is that it involves epistemic conditions either in the satisfaction conditions or in the conditional clause. An epistemic condition concerns the subject’s epistemic standing with regard to a certain fact or proposition. The satisfaction condition of (RN) involves the mere performance of a certain action (using *p* as a premise in one’s practical reasoning), and the norm is in force in virtue of the mere obtaining of a certain fact which constitutes a reason for or against a certain action or attitude. There is no mention of an epistemic condition in (RN), neither in its satisfaction conditions nor in its conditional clause.

Someone may insist that (RN) is an epistemic norm. This norm requires, amongst other things, the obtaining of a certain fact, and thus the truth of a proposition in order to use that proposition in practical reasoning. The idea that truth figures in epistemic norms, goals or aims is familiar from the literature on the normativity of belief and assertion. However I think there are important disanalogies between these norms and (RN). While a truth norm of belief requires having true beliefs, or only true beliefs, (RN) merely requires using a proposition as a premise only if it is a reason. In order to comply with this norm, belief is even not required. It is sufficient to use as a premise in reasoning a proposition expressing a fact that is a reason relevant to the current deliberation, regardless of one’s mental attitudes about that proposition. More particularly, norm compliance may also be achieved by using as premises non-doxastic attitudes such as guesses or acceptances.[[22]](#footnote-22)

There are also important disanalogies between (RN) and the truth norm for assertion. Philosophers take epistemic norms of assertion as dependent on genuine epistemic standards, distinct from prudential, moral and other non-epistemic normative standards (e.g., Williamson 2000, ch.11, Brown 2008c). I do not conceive (RN) in the same terms. I have defended this norm on the basis of very general considerations about the nature of normative reasons and their role in practical reasoning. It also makes little sense to label a norm epistemic for the simple fact that its condition of application concerns the obtaining of a certain fact. Nearly every conditional norm displays this feature – if the law requires you to stop when lights are red, it requires you to perform a certain action when a certain fact obtains, namely, that lights are red.

My account presupposes that what it is for something to be a reason for someone is not dependent on the actual perspective of the subject. However, someone sympathetic to epistemic norms of action could argue for an account of normative reasons as facts dependent on the perspective of the subject. If for example normative reasons were known facts, (RN) would be equivalent to an epistemic norm allowing the use of a proposition as a premise in one’s practical reasoning if and only if that proposition is known. In that case it would make more sense to take (RN) as an epistemic norm.[[23]](#footnote-23) While my view is that perspectivalist accounts of normative reasons are wrong, it is not my intention here to engage in complex debates on the nature of normative reasons.[[24]](#footnote-24) Two remarks are in order here. First, I would like to observe that the view that reasons are facts possibly unknown or not believed by the subject for which they constitute reasons is by far the most common view in the literature, endorsed by philosophers arguing for very different accounts of reasons,[[25]](#footnote-25) and subscribed to by many authors defending epistemic norms of action (e.g., Fantl & McGrath 2009, 173-176; Hawthorne & Magidor, forthcoming; Littlejohn, forthcoming).[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus I don’t think that assuming this view here constitutes an excessively strong and contentious assumption. Second, and more importantly, my account doesn’t necessarily depend on this assumption. While for the sake of argument I will stick to the view that normative reasons are facts not dependent on the actual perspective of the subject, philosophers endorsing perspectivalist accounts of reasons are free to substitute the expression “*p* is a reason for S to *F*/not-*F*”in (RN) with the expression “*p* is a fact that makes or contributes to making objectively right or wrong to *F*/not-*F*”. The core idea that I try to convey with (RN) is that what makes appropriate the use of a proposition *p* as a premise in practical reasoning about whether to *F* is the (at least partial) contribution of the fact that *p* to the objective rightness or wrongness of *F*-ing/not *F*-ing.

***1.3 Explaining epistemic assessments***

We are now in a position to explain the relevant epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning by appealing to instrumental assessments relative to the regulation conditions of (RN), without the need to postulate any independent epistemic norm. Consider a specific schema valid for conditional norms:

(N-schema) A ought to *F* if and only if C

Norms having this form possess regulation conditions, some of which concern the epistemic position of the subject. In particular, in order to follow such a norm, A must have appropriate epistemic access to (know, justifiedly believe…) C. Now, remember that i) regulation conditions are not part of the satisfaction conditions of a norm, and ii) normative assessments do not exclusively concern satisfaction conditions; some assessments are relative to regulation conditions. For instance, A is blamable if, faced with a choice about whether to *F*, she culpably ignores C; A can justify her *F*-ing on the grounds that she knows (or justifiedly believes) that C obtains; and A is excusable for violating N if she wrongly but justifiedly believes that C doesn’t obtain.

Similar considerations apply to (RN), which is a specific norm governing our practice of using propositions as premises in practical reasoning, and which has the form exemplified by the N-schema. According to (RN), it is appropriate for A to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning about whether to *F* if and only if *p* is a reason to *F*/not-*F* – this is the satisfaction condition of the norm. In the actual or in relevantly similar circumstances, A can follow (RN) only by satisfying a number of regulation conditions, some of which epistemic. In particular A must acknowledge the norm, recognize that *p* is the case, and that it is a reason to *F*/not-*F*.

Consider again Mary’s example. That it will not rain is a reason for Mary not to take the umbrella (given her preferences). According to (RN) it is appropriate for Mary to use the proposition that it will not rain as a premise in her reasoning if and only if it will not rain. Suppose that Mary uses this proposition as a premise, but she has very poor evidence that it is true (e.g., she sees a weather forecast saying that there is only 30% probability that it will rain). Her friend Tom, who knows her order of preferences, criticizes her: “why didn’t you take the umbrella? You don’t know that it will not rain!”. According to my account, this criticism doesn’t show that Mary is committed to a norm requiring her to use the proposition that it will not rain as a premise in her reasoning only if she knows thatit will not rain, and that she is violating that norm. On the contrary, by using that proposition as a premise in her reasoning Mary complied with (RN). Nevertheless, Mary’s use of this premise is legitimately criticisable. Knowledge (or justified belief) is a prerequisite for complying with (RN) – at least in most similar circumstances. Mary’s use of a premise that she didn’t know (justifiedly believe) could have easily led her to violate (RN). Even though in the specific circumstance she complied with (RN), her relying on *p* in her reasoning displayed insensitivity to the norm and may legitimately be blamed, for it could easily have led her astray.

Consider an analogy with a different norm. Law requires you to file tax declarations with correct data. Now suppose you write on the declaration that your revenue for this year was 20000 $ and someone asks you how you know that this is the right amount. You can reply by mentioning evidence for it. Or suppose that you wrote that sum without having any clue that that was the right amount of revenue for the year, and someone criticizes you as follows: “you wrote that your revenue is 20000$ but you didn’t know it! You must write the correct data!” Though the law doesn’t require from you any epistemic condition, all these challenges, justifications and criticisms concern your epistemic position. These assesments do not concern whether you comply with the law or not, but they are about certain regulation conditions necessary to follow the law in the wide majority of cases, and assess how you try to follow it and whether you display sensitivity to it.

Summing up, the main argument for epistemic norms of practical reasoning infers the existence of such norms from considerations about what sorts of epistemic assessments are appropriate in a range of situations. However such assessments can be explained by appealing to the regulation conditions of a non-epistemic norm. Therefore they do not constitute evidence for the existence of epistemic norms. The suggested account exploits this fact, identifying epistemic assessments with instrumental evaluations relative to regulation conditions of (RN), a non-epistemic norm.

In the next section I will show that the present account has several advantages over competing explanations assuming epistemic norms. However, before proceeding further, it is useful to clarify under exactly which respects the two accounts, the one in terms of epistemic norms and that suggested above, diverge. This clarification is particularly pressing because someone may wonder whether what upholders of epistemic accounts really have in mind when they talk of epistemic norms are simply instrumental assessments relative to regulation conditions. If this were the case, then my explanation wouldn’t be an alternative to epistemic accounts, but a mere restatement of them within a different terminological framework.

If the issue were merely terminological, the terminology used by these philosophers would be confusing to say the least. It makes little sense to talk of epistemic norms when we consider epistemic assessments grounded in ordinary norms. When we criticize the epistemic position of a driver crossing the street against a red light (“didn’t you see it was red!”), the legitimacy of this challenge doesn’t appeal to some norm other than the law which requires stopping when lights are red.[[27]](#footnote-27) Furthermore, if we look carefully at the literature, there are several reasons to think that this issue cannot be reduced to a mere terminological dispute. Upholders of epistemic norms conceive them as substantive normative principles governing practical reasoning. In particular, they consider such norms as (i) universally valid principles outlining constitutive conceptual connections between knowledge and deliberation and (ii) relative to *sui generis* epistemic or rationality standards, independent of other normative sources.

For what concerns (i), many of those arguing for epistemic principles hold more or less explicitly that these norms are *conceptually constitutive* of either knowledge or deliberation. For example, according to Stanley (2005):

“As other anti-intellectuals have argued (Fantl and McGrath 2002, and especially Hawthorne 2004), it is immensely plausible to take knowledge to be constitutively connected to action, in the sense that one should act only on what one knows” (2005, 9).

Elsewhere in his book, Stanley takes this constitutive connection to be conceptual.[[28]](#footnote-28) In a similar vein, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008) take evidence supporting the Knowledge-Action Principle to be indicative of a deep conceptual link between knowledge and rational action, and Fantl and McGrath (2009) claim that a similar principle articulates a conceptual connection between knowledge and practical justification.[[29]](#footnote-29) While these authors seem to interpret this conceptual connection as a feature of the concept of knowledge, Hawthorne (2004) seems to take it to be constitutive of our conception of deliberation.[[30]](#footnote-30) The *necessity* of these principles straightforwardly follows from their constitutive nature. It is generally admitted that conceptually constitutive truths (i.e., truths expressing features constitutive of concepts) are also conceptually necessary (e.g., Fine 1994; Rosen 2010). For example, if it is conceptually constitutive of bachelorhood that a bachelor is an unmarried man, it is also conceptually necessary (i.e., true in all conceptually possible worlds) that bachelors are unmarried men. Similarly, if epistemic norms outline conceptual connections between knowledge and deliberation, they do not express merely contingent aspects about the relation between these two things, but conceptually necessary truths which are such in virtue of the concepts of either knowledge or deliberation (or both).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Furthermore, these principles are not supposed to capture mere defeasible regularities in our habits of evaluating actions. Rather, they are conceived as *universally valid*, in the sense that there are no contexts in which practical reasoning is not bound by these norms and premises in practical reasoning exempted from their assessments.[[32]](#footnote-32) In other words, these principles are supposed to lay down necessary and sufficient conditions on what use of propositions as reasons for action counts as appropriate (e.g., Benton 2014, §2a; Brown 2008a).[[33]](#footnote-33) This doesn’t mean that there cannot be contexts in which these norms are overridden by other practical (e.g., moral, prudential…) normative considerations. However also in such contexts the subject’s use of an unknown or not justifiedly believed proposition in practical reasoning will be (epistemically or rationally) inappropriate. For what concerns (ii), many philosophers, both defenders and critics of epistemic norms, conceive such norms as relative to *sui generis* epistemic or rationality standards independent of and not derivative from other normative sources such as prudence and morality.[[34]](#footnote-34)

These properties commonly attributed to epistemic norms stand in neat contrast to those that my account attributes to the relevant epistemic assessments. Insofar as I take epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning to be merely instrumental, according to my account their subsistence and normative force is fully dependent on and derived from further normative sources. In my view these assessments are similar in all respects to other instrumental assessments concerning the means whose realisation would facilitate compliance with whatever non-epistemic norm, be it a positive law, a moral principle or a rule of a game. Such assessments are not constitutive of or specific to some concept or practice, but apply to norm regulation in general. They are not dependent on specifically epistemic standards, but have the very same status as other assessments concerning other regulation conditions bearing on the subject’s intentions, motivations, norm acceptance and environment.[[35]](#footnote-35) Relatedly, insofar as I take assessments of regulation conditions to be generic instrumental evaluations, these assessments do not designate a unique condition stable across contexts and necessary and/or sufficient for the appropriate use of every premise in practical reasoning, but they are contingently variable given which conditions are best conducive to following (RN) in the actual or in similar circumstances.

A further difference is that some of those holding that epistemic norms govern practical reasoning also distinguish assessments relative to the satisfaction conditions of epistemic norms from assessments concerning excusability and other derivative criticisms relative to these norms, where the objects of these assessments are *not* satisfaction conditions of norms. For example, according to upholders of the knowledge norm, if one who falsely but reasonably believes that *p* uses *p* as a premise in one’s reasoning, she violates the norm (for she doesn’t know *p*) but is excusable for this infraction. This excusability assessment doesn’t bear on the satisfaction conditions of some independent norm, but is dependent on the epistemic norm itself and the subject’s sensitivity to the reasons provided by this norm.[[36]](#footnote-36) My account differs from these alternative accounts for it considers *all* assessments relative to epistemic conditions as not bearing on the satisfaction conditions of a norm. In this framework, all epistemic assessments of action and practical reasoning are, like excuses, relative to the regulation of some non-epistemic norm.

1. **Advantages of the account**

In this section I will present several advantages of my account over competing accounts that assume the existence of epistemic norms. Before beginning, it is worth briefly mentioning an obvious advantage of the view. As argued in §1.2, the account of epistemic assessments that I suggest here is not tailored around assessments of action and reasoning, but relies on an account of norm regulation that is extremely general, in that it is able to explain the ways in which we assess any norm and its regulation conditions. In this respect my account is more general and involves fewer ontological commitments than alternative epistemic accounts. In the following subsections I will consider other advantages in more detail, namely: i) my account better explains the available data; ii) it preserves the intuitive relation between epistemic and mind-independent assessments; iii) it better explains the contextual variability of epistemic assessments; iv) it has no problems locating the sources of the necessity of (RN).

***The account better explains the available data*** - In §1 we saw that the account can explain intuitions about epistemic assessments considered by other views. The account can also explain non-epistemic assessments not easily explained by alternative accounts. Consider the following case. Mary and Carl are looking for a new Thai restaurant that has recently opened downtown. They arrive at a crossroad. Mary doesn’t know which way to go. Instead of asking someone, she goes on her hunch and turns right. It just so happens that this takes them far away from the restaurant. Carl may legitimately criticize Mary’s action by asking: “why did you turn right? You didn’t know that was the right direction!” (Hawthorne & Stanley 2008, 571). But it would be at least equally reasonable for him to criticize her by saying “Why did you turn right? You should have turned left. That’s where the restaurant is!” The latter criticism challenges Mary’s action by pointing to the facts speaking in favour of or against that action (her reasons for so acting) that she didn’t use as premises in her practical deliberation. My account explains both criticisms by pointing to different types of assessments – the second criticism invokes the satisfaction condition of (RN), while the first invokes its regulation conditions.

In contrast, epistemic accounts cannot accommodate these data without some trouble. They argue from epistemic assessments of action and reasoning to the existence of epistemic norms. In particular, they argue from the assessments involving a condition X – for example the criticism: “why did you *F*? Not X!” – to the existence of a norm permitting one to *F* only if X. But since we assess our actions and reasoning both in terms of the obtaining of facts that constitute reasons and our epistemic position with respect to those reasons, applying the same methodology they should conclude that besides epistemic norms there is also some non-epistemic norm like (RN) governing appropriate premising in practical reasoning. This conclusion would be hardly acceptable for many upholders of epistemic norms, and in particular for those who conceive of the debate about epistemic norms as boosting the broader project of a Knowledge-First epistemology supporting the primacy of knowledge-based assessments of assertion, belief and action.[[37]](#footnote-37) More generally, an account able to explain the data just by assuming a unique norm governing practical reasoning – like (RN) – would be simpler and more ontologically parsimonious than one that explains data by multiplying norms.

Furthermore, if both an epistemic norm and (RN) were in place, there would be circumstances in which the two norms conflict. These are, for example, cases in which some fact *p* constituting a reason against *F*-ing is unknown to the agent engaging in practical deliberation about whether to *F*. In such cases, according to the Knowledge Norm it could be appropriate for the agent to use *p* as a premise in her reasoning about whether to *F*, while according to (RN) it would not. Practical reasoning would thus be regulated by norms issuing contradictory demands. This is problematic in itself. Moreover, as a matter of fact, we actually never experience *this kind* of conflict amongst norms when we assess our reasoning.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Proponents of factive epistemic norms of action could reply here that they can avoid the problems considered above by adopting the distinction between assessments relative to satisfaction conditions and regulation conditions of norms. For instance an upholder of a knowledge norm can maintain that the truth of *p* is a necessary condition for the regulation of an epistemic norm permitting one to rely on *p* only if it is known that *p*. This approach would consider challenges relative to factual conditions (“why did you *F*? Not *p*!”) as instrumental assessments challenging the subject for not taking necessary means for the realization of the epistemic conditions required by the epistemic norm (‘*F* only if you know that *p*’). For example, they could explain the challenge “you shouldn’t have gone right! The restaurant is to the left!” by pointing to the fact that the restaurant’s being on the left entails that the subject doesn't know that it’s on the right. The challenge would express the instrumental inappropriateness of acting on a false proposition, since this proposition would not be known and one should act only on what one knows.

While this approach could avoid the criticisms considered above, it would come at a significant cost for proponents of these norms. By admitting that assessments are not always indicative of what norms require, forbid or permit (satisfaction conditions) but of their regulation conditions, the general argumentative strategy of deriving norms from epistemic assessments of action would be substantially weakened. As we can explain criticisms relative to factual conditions in terms of assesments relative to regulation conditions of epistemic norms, we can equally well explain criticisms relative to epistemic conditions in terms of assesments relative to regulation conditions of non-epistemic norms. At the very least this approach would be on an explanatory par with the one suggested in §1.

Moreover, there are some *prima facie* reasons to think that factual assessments are not instrumentally derivative from knowledge-based ones. If they were, when we challenge someone by saying “you shouldn’t have gone right! The restaurant is to the left!”, we should interpret such an assessment as challenging the agent for not taking the means necessary to satisfy a knowledge norm. If this were the case, it would make sense to explain our challenge by adding that “since the restaurant is to the left it is not to the right; so you didn’t know it was to the right; because of this you shouldn’t have gone right”. While this explanation is in itself coherent, it strikes me as an implausible interpretation of what people normally express with this type of challenge.[[39]](#footnote-39) A more intuitive explanation of the challenge would rather be that “since you intend to go to the restaurant and it is to the left, you should have gone to the left, not the right”. In other terms, intuitively with such a challenge we normally try to express that one shouldn’t have performed a certain action (turning right) because there was a decisive reason for doing the opposite (turning left), namely, that the restaurant where we wanted to go was to the left – and not that you didn’t know it was to the right, which is by no means a reason to turn left. In short, the normative force of this type of challenge doesn’t seem to derive from any more fundamental epistemic norm, but directly from the reason that the restaurant was to the left. These considerations provide at least a *prima facie* reason not to take factual assessments as instrumentally derivative from epistemic ones.

My account is also supported by the intuition that many epistemic assessments of action and reasoning sound more like excuses for not complying with a norm than like appraisals relative to compliance with a norm. This is particularly evident when we look at negative epistemic assessments. For example, someone performing a wrong action may excuse herself by pointing to her insufficient epistemic position. Let’s assume for the sake of argument that knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning (the same point can be made with any other epistemic norm). Consider the following dialogue:

A: “It’s raining heavily! Why didn’t you take an umbrella?”

B: “Well, I didn’t know that it was going to rain”.

If knowledge were the norm of action, B’s claim should sound like a justification rather than an excuse: if B didn’t know *p*, she didn’t violate the Knowledge Norm by not relying on *p* in her reasoning – on the contrary, B’s not relying on this proposition is fully appropriate according to this norm. So, assuming the Knowledge Norm, B’s claim cannot be an excuse, only a justification.[[40]](#footnote-40), [[41]](#footnote-41) But B’s claim clearly sounds like an implicit confession of and excuse for wrongdoing, as would claims such as “I believed it wasn’t going to rain”. B seems to beg for excuses for having inadvertedly and blamelessly ignored the relevant information, adducing an explanation that rationalizes why she acted wrongly. Contrast these claims with a reply that isn’t an excuse: “I wanted to become wet”. Here B seems clearly to engage in an attempt to justify her action.[[42]](#footnote-42) While these intuitions don’t square well with epistemic norms of practical reasoning, they fit well with my account: B’s answer is a mere excuse for violating (RN) – i.e., an assessment relative to regulation conditions of (RN).[[43]](#footnote-43)

Further support for my account comes from phenomenological considerations about the way in which we follow norms. When we try to follow a norm that requires us to *X* if C, we look at whether C, and then if C obtains we try to *X*. Now, when we consider whether to perform a certain action *F*, our decision is directly motivated by considerations about facts speaking in favour of *F*-ing, and not by considerations about whether we know these facts. For example, in order to decide whether to use the proposition that it is raining as a premise in my deliberation about whether to take an umbrella, I look exclusively at whether it is raining, not considering whether I know that it is raining. From the first-person perspective, whether I should *F*, given certain fixed preferences, is transparent to facts speaking in favour of or against *F*-ing, and not to my epistemic standing with respect to these facts. This indicates that the norm we follow when we choose premises for practical reasoning is not an epistemic norm, but some norm along the lines of (RN).

***The account preserves the intuitive relation between epistemic and mind-independent assessments*** – As noted before, some assessments of action and reasoning concern epistemic conditions while others bear on mind-independent properties like the obtaining of states of affairs that constitute reasons. Intuitively, these two types of assessment are related. Whether it is appropriate for S to *F* only if she knows that *p* seems to depend on whether *p* is a reason to *F*. More generally, it seems that epistemic assessments depend on and originate from mind-independent assessments. That S should *F* if *p* explains why S should *F* if she knows *p*, and not the other way round. Similarly, every time I justify myself for *F*-ing by mentioning that I know *p*, my justification seems to work at least in part because *p* is a reason to *F*. And you should not act on what you don’t know because it could easily lead you to rely on false grounds in your practical reasoning. On the contrary, that it is raining is a reason for me to take an umbrella, independently of whether I know it.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This dependence relation is ignored and left unexplained by epistemic accounts. It is even unclear whether and how these accounts can provide a plausible explanation of it. In contrast, my account easily explains it in terms of the relation between norms and norm regulation. This relation is a consequence of the fact that the ways in which an agent can act to follow a norm are determined by what the norm requires, plus other contingent non-normative features of the situation.

***The account better explains the contextual variability of epistemic assessments*** – Some recent literature suggests that epistemic assessments of action bear on several conditions that may vary contextually: For example, Brown (2008a) advances cases in which knowledge that *p* is not sufficient to rationally rely on *p* in one’s action. In her most well-known example, a surgeon must operate on a patient’s kidney. While the surgeon knows which kidney she must operate on (she checked several times during the previous days), it seems that, given the high stakes, she should check again before the operation in order to be certain. Others have suggested cases in which it seems perfectly fine to rely on a mere justified true belief that is not knowledge.[[45]](#footnote-45) Gerken (2011, §3; 2015, §2) has argued that the degree of epistemic warrant necessary for the rational use of a premise in practical reasoning is contextually variable, where such contextual variability depends on practical features such as the availability of alternative courses of action and of further evidence, considerations of urgency and the stakes associated with the action. For example, if stakes are very high, as in Brown’s Surgeon case, it seems that something more than knowledge is required for appropriately acting on *p*; in cases where stakes are very low, a reasonable true belief may be sufficient; however in normal cases knowledge would remain the most common epistemic standard of assessment.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Assume that the conditions that are objects of epistemic assessments are contextually variable in this way. My account is in a better position to explain such contextual variability than epistemic accounts. In general, context-sensitivity is much less plausible for norms’ satisfaction conditions than for regulation conditions. As a matter of fact, satisfaction conditions are much less contextually variable and sensitive to the type of practical factors under consideration than regulation conditions. Even admitting the possibility of an epistemic norm displaying such extreme context variability of satisfaction conditions, a much easier and more natural explanation would be that these variable assessments bear on the specific ways in which an agent strives to comply with a norm in different situations – i.e., the regulation conditions of a norm. While satisfaction conditions of norms are rarely context-sensitive, regulation conditions are systematically and constitutively so, given the contingently variable ways in which agents can satisfy norms in different circumstances. In particular, pragmatic factors such as stakes, urgency, and available options typically influence the ways in which one can follow a norm given situational contingencies.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Once again, my account provides a simpler and more straightforward explanation than rival accounts relying on epistemic norms. Contextual variability is a typical feature of regulation conditions: one can try to follow and satisfy a norm in different ways depending on the circumstances. Consider again the case of traffic regulations. The law prescribes stopping at red traffic lights always and everyhere, but if we are in a very traffic-congested road we should be much more careful than usual, check carefully that a light is green before going, and so on. Similarly, a doctor ought to provide the appropriate treatments to her patients, but she must be much more careful and informed when the life of one of her patients depends upon her decision. Stakes and other contextually variable practical factors affect how important it is to comply with a norm. This in turn affects how stringent we are in trying to follow the norm, and thus how careful we must be about whether we are actually complying with it in a circumstance. The variable importance of complying with a norm in a context is also what makes us more or less excusable and blamable, and more or less responsive to criticisms. In this perspective, variable epistemic assessments of action and reasoning do concern the instrumental conducivity of our attitudes to follow (RN) in different circumstances – while the satisfaction conditions of (RN) remain invariant across these circumstances.[[48]](#footnote-48),[[49]](#footnote-49),[[50]](#footnote-50)

***The account has no problems locating the sources of necessity of (RN)***– According to epistemic accounts, epistemic norms are supposed to be necessary, constitutive principles.[[51]](#footnote-51) For these accounts it is a metaphysical or a conceptual impossibility that a subject appropriately uses *p* as a premise in her reasoning without being in the epistemic position required by the norm. However, as many have argued, necessities are grounded in the essence of some entity or concept.[[52]](#footnote-52) More precisely, metaphysically necessary truths are propositions that are true in virtue of the nature of some object and conceptually necessary truths are propositions that are true in virtue of the nature of some concept.For example, that water is H2O is necessarily true in virtue of the nature of water, not of that of other chemical substances, and that a bachelor is an unmarried man is true in virtue of the concept of bachelorhood, not those of man or of being married.

 If epistemic norms are metaphysically or conceptually necessary, they are such in virtue of the nature of some object or concept. However it is quite hard to individuate the source of necessity for such norms. If the source is (the concept of) knowledge, then from this it follows that knowledge is at least in part constituted by practical factors such as the appropriateness of relying on one’s knowledge in action. Even though some philosophers have endorsed this kind of pragmatic encroachment on knowledge, many have found it problematic.[[53]](#footnote-53) A similar though reversed problem occurs if we locate the source of necessity of epistemic norms in entities pertaining to the practical domain. In the latter case, we would have an implausible ‘epistemic encroachment’ on practical notions such as that of action. Since epistemic norms establish a necessary, metaphyisical or conceptual connection between the epistemic and the practical domain, they must locate the source of their normativity in either domain, with the potentially problematic consequences of ‘pragmatizing’ epistemology or ‘epistemizing’ action or related practical notions.[[54]](#footnote-54) While I do not exclude the viability of similar approaches, I want just to observe that my account deals with this problem in a straightforward manner. As argued in §2.1, (RN) follows from considerations about the nature of normative reasons and/or practical reasoning.

**3. Possible objections and replies**

*Objection 1*: According to (RN), the fact that *p* is a reason to *F*/not-*F* is sufficient to make it appropriate to use *p* as a premise in one’s reasoning about *F*-ing. One can follow the norm by merely truly believing that *p*. Why then do our epistemic assessments of action and reasoning normally concern knowledge, and less often certainty or justified true belief?

*Answer*: First of all, notice that according to (RN), in order to appropriately use *p* as a premise, we don’t even need a true belief. What (RN) requires is simply that one uses *p* as a premise in one’s reasoning iff *p* is a reason, regardless of one’s mental attitudes about *p*. According to my account, the epistemic position with respect to *p* is relevant exclusively for the regulation of the norm. Remember that assessments relative to norm regulation do not concern the satisfaction conditions of the norm, but the ways in which agents can follow the norm. Now, by merely truly believing that *p* one may be able to follow the norm in specific circumstances, but one’s epistemic position is not apt to follow it in most similar cases. A mere true belief is not an apt means to the regulation of (RN) because it is not conducive to the satisfaction of that norm in most relevantly similar circumstances.[[55]](#footnote-55) In short, though acting on a mere true belief (or on a ‘true hunch’) can lead to norm compliance in specific lucky circumstances, this is not a good (reliable) way to follow (RN). Consider someone who decides whether to stop at a traffic light based on a hunch or guess that it is red. As this reckless driver is criticisable because by ignoring the red light she risks not complying with the law, the agent acting on a mere true belief is criticisable because by relying on poor evidence in her actions she risks violating (RN).[[56]](#footnote-56)

*Objection 2*: Epistemic probabilities concern what is more probable given what we know (or rationally believe). They are not reasons, but describe our confidence or evidential support for possible facts that if true would constitute reasons. If so, according to (RN) it would be inappropriate to reason from probabilities. This contrasts with the intuition that sometimes it is appropriate to rely on probabilistic considerations in our practical reasoning.[[57]](#footnote-57)

*Answer*: There are at least two replies to this objection. First, according to (RN) we should only use true propositions as premises in our reasoning. But we can follow (RN) only by considering our own perspective about what is the case (more precisely, about what reasons there are). Sometimes relying on epistemic probabilities in our reasoning is the best way to follow (RN) given our limited epistemic perspective. Even if reasoning from probabilistic considerations consitutites a violation of (RN), this violation is blameless, and not relying on such considerations is blameworthy for it would imply that the agent isn’t trying to follow (RN) given the available evidence.[[58]](#footnote-58)

A second possible reply is the following: suppose that given one’s evidence there is .6 epistemic probability that *p*. Evidence for *p* is knowledge of other facts that increase the probability that *p*. The suggestion is that when in our reasoning we use the proposition that there is .6 probability that *p*, we do not use that proposition *as a premise* in our reasoning. That proposition is already a preliminary conclusion of our reasoning following from the consideration of other facts we know which make it .6 probable that *p*. This explanation is also supported by the fact that when we defend our choices we rarely mention probabilistic considerations alone. Rather, we list facts that make certain outcomes more or less probable.[[59]](#footnote-59)

*Objection 3*: Lottery cases speak in favour of a knowledge account and against my account. Suppose your ticket is a loser, but you don’t know it. The fact that it is a loser is a reason for you to sell it for a few cents. According to (RN), you should reason from the proposition that your ticket is a loser and decide to sell it. However, it is unreasonable to sell the ticket if you don’t know it is a loser.

*Answer:* Some assessments relative to regulation conditions concern whether the agent’s actions would facilitate the satisfaction of (RN) in similar circumstances. Now, even though for all you know the chances that your ticket will be the winner are very low, there are possible circumstances relevantly similar to the actual one in which your ticket is the winner. By selling the ticket, in such circumstances you would fail to follow (RN). Thus, if you were to sell the ticket before knowing it’s a loser you would indeed comply with (RN), but you would not take the means necessary to satisfy (RN) in relevantly similar circumstances. Your actions would be criticisable as unsafe means to norm-compliance. Indeed, when you discover that the ticket was a loser, you realize that you should have sold it. But selling it before knowing it was a loser, even if right, would have shown a form of disrespect for (RN), and you would be criticizable for this.

One may reply that even though you don’t know that the ticket is a loser, you know that it’s highly improbable that it will be a winner. Therefore, in order to follow (RN), you should rely on what for you is more likely to be the case, and thus sell the ticket. In other words, even if your actions do not facilitate the satisfaction of (RN) in all relevantly similar circumstances, they would be sufficiently reliable means to norm compliance in most such circumstances. In response to this challenge, notice that our instrumental assessments are heavily affected by prudential considerations. When complying with the norm is particularly important, our assessments about how reliable our actions should be in facilitating compliance are much more exigent than in normal cases. Furthermore, in some specific cases it may be much more important for us to comply with one direction of the biconditional norm expressed by (RN) than with the other. This is precisely the case in the lottery example where it is much more important to comply with the left-to-right direction of the norm than with the other direction. Even though the odds are strongly against winning, the expected gain if the ticket is a winner is tremendously higher than the expected loss if the ticket is a loser. Presumably you bought the ticket with the hope of becoming rich and at a price that doesn’t significantly affect your utility. Earning a few cents by selling the ticket is a minuscule gain for you, almost null if compared to the high gain you will get if the ticket is a winner. The reason you would have to hold the ticket if it were a winner is almost immeasurably stronger than the reason you would have to sell it if it were a loser. Since you don’t know whether the ticket is a loser or not, the slight chance of winning justifies you in not selling it. Such cases are compatible with being justified in acting on mere probabilities in other circumstances in which prudential considerations do not affect our weighing of reasons – for example, when we decide to take an umbrella with us based on the probability that it will rain.[[60]](#footnote-60)

**Conclusion**

In this paper I’ve challenged the claim that practical reasoning is governed by epistemic norms. Ordinary epistemic assessments of action are *prima facie* evidence in support of this claim, but I’ve argued that assuming the existence of epistemic norms is neither the only, nor the best, way to accommodate the available data concerning the ways we assess our actions and reasoning. I’ve introduced and defended an alternative account of these assessments that avoids this assumption. One may suggest that similar considerations can be extended to the debate on epistemic norms of other mental attitudes and assertion. While I consider this approach promising for emotions and desires, this extension is more contentious for belief and assertion. These accounts should assume that norms analogous or similar to (RN) constitutively govern these attitudes. They need an independent substantial defence that unfortunately I cannot provide in this article.[[61]](#footnote-61)

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1. Usually philosophers characterize this norm in terms of conditional or bi-conditional claims having the following structure:

(EN) it is appropriate for S to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning if and only if C

Where p is some proposition, C is some epistemic condition with regard to *p*, such as ‘S knows that *p*’, ‘S justifiedly believes that *p*’ or ‘S is warranted to believe that *p*’. See, for example, Hawthorne 2004, 29-30; Hawthorne & Stanley 2008; Williamson 2005, §§ 4 and 5. Some philosophers suggest slightly different formulations of the norm. Some use “rational”, “permissible” or “warranted” instead of “appropriate”. Other variants change “to use *p* as a premise in her practical reasoning” to “to rely on *p* in one’s practical reasoning” or “to treat *p* as a reason for action” (on the difference between these formulations see Gerken 2011, fn2). Some endorse only one of the directions of the biconditional. Since I want to remain as neutral as possible on specific features of the norm, I am open to revising (EN) as one prefers. Further discussions in the paper don’t depend on specific formulations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While arguments based on epistemic assesments of action and practical reasoning are the most popular and most discussed in contemporary literature, it is worth mentioning that these are not the only arguments provided in support of epistemic norms of practical reasoning. Other arguments supposed to motivate these norms move from independent theoretical assumptions. A thorough discussion of these arguments would take us too far afield. However it is important to mention at least one of them, provided by Fantl and McGrath (2009, ch.3). Roughly, the main strategy of Fantl and McGrath consists in two steps: first, they defend a doxastic version of epistemic principles restricted to reasons for believing; second, they defend epistemic principles of reasons for action by appeal to bridge principles such as the following Unity Thesis: “if *p* is warranted enough to be a reason you have to believe *q*, for any *q*, it is warranted enough to be a reason you have to *ϕ*, for any *ϕ*” (2009, 73). For discussions and criticisms of this argument see, for example, Brown 2010; Cohen 2012; Reed 2012. For what concerns the general strategy, like Dustin Locke (2014, 88, fn.6), I think that the trouble with so-called ‘theoretical’ arguments in support of epistemic norms of practical reasoning is that they all seem to rest on theoretical assumptions that are at least as controversial as the norms themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My account has some similarities with an account of epistemic norms of assertion suggested by Whiting 2013. However there are several important differences between the two. First, his account of epistemic norms of assertion relies on a truth norm of assertion, while my account is deduced directly from the nature of normative reasons and their role in practical reasoning; second, his account is based on the notions of ‘being a reason’ and ‘having a reason’ and presupposes the view according to which having a reason involves there being a reason that one possesses. This is a disputed assumption (see, for example, Schroeder 2008). My account doesn’t rely on this distinction. Third, his account cannot be easily adapted to an account of norms of practical reasoning; similarly, in order to adapt my account to norms of assertion, important modifications of the account are needed. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The notion of norm-regulation was first coined by Pollock & Cruz 1999, ch.5, §3. The distinction between a norm and its regulation has been widely discussed by Engel. See in particular Engel, 2007, §3; 2008, §4. The present characterization of norm regulation slightly diverges from that used by other authors. See [Author] for a discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Two remarks are in order here. First, the qualification “in many circumstances” is necessary because, at least for some norms, there may be circumstances in which an agent ends up conforming to it without satisfying all the mentioned regulation-conditions, such as in cases in which a subject conforms to a norm by mere chance (I will come back to this point below). Second, in all the sentences in this paragraph “must” does not express a normative notion. These must-claims are anankastic conditionals expressing necessary conditions for certain facts or events being the case, as in the sentences “If you want sugar in your soup, you must ask the waiter” or “if the train goes to Edinburgh it must pass through Sterling”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Another way of describing regulation conditions is in terms of steps facilitating the pursuit of what we have reason to do. See, for example, Raz 2005, 5. These conditions can be further distinguished in subtypes: Raz distinguishes between means, preconditions and facilitating conditions to do what reasons require. In [Author] I provide a classification of the various types of regulation conditions necessary to follow a norm. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The idea that norms require mere conformity to satisfaction conditions and not also compliance (involving recognition of the norm, intention to follow it, motivation, and so on) has been recently defended in connection with epistemic norms by Littlejohn 2013, §3. For convincing arguments in this direction, see for example, Thomson 1991, 293 and Gardner 2007, ch 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of cases in which it is relatively easy to follow norms even when most or all regulation conditions are not satisfied. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Such variability is stronger for the regulation of some norms than for others, and may be stronger for a subset of regulation conditions (e.g., for those necessary to put oneself in position to satisfy a norm). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Means in a means-end instrumental relation should be understood quite broadly, as circumstances or actions that help to cause or constitute a desirable end, or facilitate or constitute a precondition for its realisation (see Brunero & Kolodny 2013, §2). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For similar considerations see Hawthorne & Stanley 2008, 588-9; Kolodny 2008, §1; Williamson, forthcoming, §2; Hawthorne & Magidor, forthcoming, §3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. More precisely, I conceive the latter type of assessment as concerning conditions that in the closest possible worlds lead to norm satisfaction. In general, this safety condition doesn’t require that the means are conducive to norm satisfaction in *all* similar possible worlds. In most circumstances one may be deemed as taking the good means to a valuable end even though these means do not necessarily lead to that end. The important point is that they are *reliable* means to that end. As Brunero and Kolodny observe, “Means are also often probabilistic. Something may also count as a means to an end even if it is not guaranteed to help to bring about the end, but only has some chance of doing so” (2013, §2). However there may be exceptions to this general rule. Prudential considerations may affect how strict our assessments are. For example, in cases in which following a certain norm is deemed particularly important, our standards of evaluation become very demanding. I’ll be back to this point in §3, response to objection 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a characterization of the dependence of instrumental reasons on source reasons see, for example, Raz 2005. For an overview and discussion of instrumental transmission see also Brunero & Kolodny 2013, §2. I want to remain neutral here on the debated issue of the normative nature of instrumental rationality. My point here is that the instrumental reasons an agent has in a context are determined by and dependent on other independent normative reasons from which they acquire their normative force merely in virtue of being means to desirable ends. This point is compatible with very different accounts of instrumental rationality. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [Acknowledgment]. Two other ways in which instrumental reasons are dependent on the normative force of further norms are (i) that the defeasibility of the source reasons is fully transmitted to instrumental reasons and (ii) that when source reasons can be realized in multiple ways, we have sufficient instrumental reasons to realize any one of the conditions that facilitate the realization of the desirable end, but not necessary reasons to satisfy one of those conditions rather than another. For a discussion of these properties of instrumental reasons see in particular Raz 2005, §1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For example, someone may be criticised for not making any effort to comply with a promise (this regardless of whether she happens to keep the promise by accident or not). In such a case, the criticism is not necessarily a clue to the existence of a norm requiring the agent to make efforts to keep promises. The criticism may well concern a regulation condition of a further promise-keeping norm, providing an instrumental assessment of an attitude that in most circumstnaces is necessary for norm-conformity. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Examples making reference to legal norms, and in particular to street regulations, are quite standard in the relevant literature. For two very recent examples, see Baker-Hytch & Benton, forthcoming, §5.1; Simion, forthcoming. Other typical examples are norms governing linguistic practices and games (e.g., Kelp & Simion, forthcoming; Williamson 2000, ch.11) and moral norms such as promise-keeping (e.g., Williamson, forthcoming). If the reader doesn’t find the present example sufficiently convincing, she or he is free to substitute whatever she/he takes as a clear example of a norm involving objective conditions of satisfaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Note that this strategy is not deployed exclusively in the debate about epistemic norms of action. Philosophers have used similar argumentative strategies for arguing that assertion and belief are governed by epistemic norms. The most representative example is Williamson 2000, Ch.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Similar accounts of reasons have been recently defended by, e.g., Alvarez 2010; Parfit 2011; Scanlon 1998; Skorupski 2010. In the present article I will assume that normative reasons are facts. I suspect that all that I say can be rephrased in ways compatible with alternative views. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Here some remarks are in order. First, that it is not raining may also not be the only or the decisive reason for Mary about whether to take an umbrella. (RN) merely states the conditions required to use a proposition as a premise in practical reasoning; it doesn’t exclude that other propositions can be used as premises in the same reasoning. These propositions would be (or express) other *pro tanto* reasons for or against *F*-ing. Second, I conceive (RN) as a *pro tanto* norm, which can be occasionally overridden by other considerations. If *p* is a reason to *F*, then S ought to use *p* as a premise in her reasoning about whether to *F* if there are no overriding reasons for not doing so. Here is a case in which there is such an overriding reason: suppose that the weather being sunny is a reason for you not to take an umbrella. You *pro tanto* ought to use the proposition that it’s sunny as a premise in your deliberation about whether to take an umbrella. However, suppose an evil demon will kill you if you use the proposition that it’s sunny as a premise in your reasoning. Then you ought *all things considered* not to use that proposition as a premise, even if it is a reason relevant to whether to *F*. For a similar case see Crisp 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Compare to Way (forthcoming): “Reasons are meant to guide us to act, believe, desire, or otherwise respond. But to be guided by reasons just is to engage in reasoning, broadly construed. So it is hard to see how reasons could fail to be appropriate premises for reasoning towards ϕ-ing” (1). Following Way, we may conceive reasoning in a broad sense, not limited to reflective cases. On this point see also Arpaly & Schroeder 2012. [Acknowledgment omitted]. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Many claim that a reason for action just is a premise of sound practical reasoning. For example, according to Setiya, “When a fact is a reason for A to F in the normative or justifying sense, it need not be a reason for which she acts; she may not even be aware of it. But the fact is a premise for sound reasoning to a desire or motivation to F whose further premises are available to A” (Setiya 2014, 221). For an overview and defense of the view that reasons are premises of good reasoning (i.e., reasoning involving good patterns of reasoning from correct premises to a conclusion) see Way (forthcoming). One can also try to derive (RN) from the premise that subjects aim to act only on the basis of normative reasons (Whiting 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For a discussion of practical reasoning with attitudes other than belief see Broome 2013a, §14.4 and Gao 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this possible objection to my attention. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For an overview of the debate opposing perspectivalists and objectivists see, for example, Alvarez 2016, §2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A very incomplete list includes Alvarez 2010; Broome 2013a; Dancy 2002; Kearns & Star 2008; Kolodny 2005; Korsgaard 1996; Lord 2010; Parfit 2011; Raz 1999; Scanlon 1998; Setiya 2014; Skorupski 2010; Way, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. A terminological note: Fantl and McGrath call favoring reasons what here, following many other philosophers, I call normative reasons. These are reasons there are for someone to *F*, and bear on whether one ought to do something in an objective sense, independently of the subject’s epistemic position and possessed information. Fantl and McGrath contrast favoring reasons with justifying and motivating ones, which are reasons one has to *F* that are less objective than the former and depend on the possessed information. See Fantl & McGrath 2009, 173-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lackey 2007, §4, makes a similar point when she argues against the notion of secondary propriety. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For example he writes that “my purpose is to establish that knowledge is conceptually connected to practical interests” (2005, 89). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. According to Hawthorne and Stanley, “our ordinary folk appraisals of the behavior of others suggest that the concept of knowledge is intimately intertwined with the rationality of action” (2008: 571). Fantl and McGrath write that the principle they call (KJ) - If you know that *p*, then *p* is warranted enough to justify you in *F*-ing, for any *F* – “articulates broader connections between the concepts of knowledge and justification than those typically recognized” (2009, 84). Another philosopher defending a constitutive conceptual connection between action/practical reasoning and knowledge is Hyman (1999; 2015, ch.7), whose view is, roughly, that to know is to be able to be guided by the fact that *p*. However it is not clear whether this connection is or implies a normative action-knowledge principle. See Hawthorne and Stanley 2008, fn7.  [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “[W]e operate with a *conception of deliberation* according to which, if the question whether p is practically relevant, it is acceptable to use the premise that p in one’s deliberations if one knows it and (at least in very many cases) unacceptable to use the premise that p in one’s practical reasoning if one doesn’t know it” (2004, 30, *my italics*). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. It is worth mentioning some other reasons indicating that epistemic norms such as the Knowledge Action Principle don’t express mere contingent patterns of assessment but conceptually constitutive principles. First, many defenders of epistemic norms of action use these norms to support pragmatic encroachment, the view that knowledge constitutively depends on pragmatic factors. In particular, the form of pragmatic encroachment defended by philosophers such as Stanley and Fantl and McGrath involves conceptual constitutive dependence of knowledge from practical factors (see, e.g., quotes in fn 28 and 29). However, if norms of action aren’t conceptually constitutive principles (or at least conceptually necessary) it is hard to see how something would follow from them about the concept of knowledge. Second, there is an on-going debate on the idea that there is a common epistemic norm which would provide appropriateness conditions for assertion, practical reasoning and belief (for an overview see, for example, Benton 2014, §2a; Brown 2012a; Gerken 2014; [Author]). Philosophers supporting commonality tend to think that there is some deep connection between these norms (e.g., McKenna forthcoming; Montminy 2013; Smithies 2012). This debate presupposes a modal similarity between the various norms. Many of the arguments for commonality would be ineffective if, for example, we conceived the norms of belief and assertion as necessary and constitutive of these attitudes and practices (or their concept), but the norm of practical reasoning as expressing a merely contingent, instrumental evaluation. However many take the norms of belief and assertion to be necessary and constitutive principles (for the constitutivity of the norm of belief see, for example, Shah & Velleman 2005; Wedgwood 2002; for the norm of assertion see, for example, Williamson 2000, ch.11). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For a similar statement see Gao 2016, 4 and fn. 5. As Gao puts it, the epistemic norm of practical reasoning is “an exceptionless principle valid for every possible premise of a practical reasoning” (fn 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Some philosophers make the same point in terms of *identification conditions*. According to Ichikawa, these norms are “general principles relating knowledge and action … identifying knowledge with propositions held appropriately as reasons for action” (Ichikawa 2012, 54). Others put this point in terms of *determination*. For example, Jackson 2012, §1 argues that the Action-Knowledge principle defended by Hawthorne and Stanley is intended by the two authors to be a principle which would fully determine (possibly in concert with one’s desires) what it is rational for one to do.

Some contemporary debates strongly indicate that these norms are understood as universally valid in this way. In particular, a typical strategy to criticize these norms consists in the appeal to possible counterexamples (e.g., Brown 2008a; Crisp 2005; Gao 2016; Gerken 2011; Reed 2010; Schiffer 2007). This strategy would be ineffective if these norms were not supposed to be universally valid. The responses of defenders of epistemic norms to these counterexamples confirm that they consider such norms as exceptionless. For example, Fantl and McGrath take cases like Brown’s Surgeon to stand in important tension with their project (2009, 61–62; 2012, 70). Other philosophers, such as Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 582), appeal to a distinction between conformity to the norm and excusable and blameless violation. These replies indicate that the norm is supposed to apply to all instances of practical reasoning in an exceptionless way. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For example, according to Littlejohn, “the notion of propriety we are concerned with is epistemic, not practical” (2012, 192). Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 571, 581-582) contrast the Knowledge Action Principle to decision theoretic principles grounding rationality. For an insightful discussion and references see also Gao 2016, 4. For a discussion of different sources of normativity see, for example, Broome 2013, 26-7 and Ch.7. A case suggested by Crisp (2005) indicates that upholders of epistemic norms are actually committed to assuming that these norms are relative to specific independent non-practical standards. Crisp suggests a case in which you know that 2 + 2 = 4, but a demon informs you that the next time you use that belief as a premise in practical reasoning, he will subject you to a painful death. It seems that it would not be practically rational for you to deploy the proposition that 2 + 2 = 4 as a premise in your practical reasoning. Rather, all practical normative standards require you not to use your belief that 2 + 2 = 4 as a premise in your reasoning, even if you know it. If there is a norm that requires you to rely on what you know (or on some other epistemic condition), this seems to be relative to epistemic or *sui generis* rationality standards. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. One may still insist that, while instrumental norms are not epistemic in this narrow sense, to the extent that they concern epistemic conditions they are still epistemic in a wider sense. However this sense is quite uninteresting and shallow. An instrumental assessment appealing to epistemic conditions is ‘epistemic’ in the same sense in which an instrumental reason to jump (say, for avoiding an obstacle) is a ‘jumpistic’ reason. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See in particular Williamson, 2005, 227; Sutton 2007, 80; Hawthorne & Stanley 2008, 586; Littlejohn forthcoming, Kelp & Simion forthcoming. For a discussion of this strategy see also Gerken 2011 §4, Lackey 2007, §4, Littlejohn 2012, ch 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For a statement of the project and an overview of the literature see for example Gerken 2015, §1. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The possibility of normative conflicts can be proved in general for any two conditional norms which require, forbid or permit the same action but whose conditions are extensionally different. Consider any two norms N1 and N2, where N1 permits one to *F* iff C1 and N2 permits one to *F* iff C2 and such that C1 is extensionally different from C2. In cases in which one condition is the case but the other is not, one norm will permit one to *F*, while the other will forbid it. This is also the case of (RN) and the knowledge norm. Suppose, for example, that *p* is a reason for S to *F*, but S doesn’t know *p*. In this case, (RN) will permit her to rely on *p* in her deliberation whether to *F* while (RN) will not. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Indeed if this were the right explanation, it would make more sense to challenge the agent by saying directly that the restaurant was not to the right, without mentioning that it was to the left. That the restaurant was to the left would be relevant only to the extent that it implies the falsity of the proposition that the restaurant was to the right, which in turn makes the proposition unknown, and thus inappropriate to use as a premise in practical reasoning. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Bear in mind that an excuse is a type of defense that admits the violation of a norm but points to factors that rationalize the subject’s norm violation. On the contrary, a justification is a defence pointing to conditions indicating the conformity to the norm. If knowledge is the norm of action, a defense pointing to the fact that the subject didn’t act on *p* because she didn’t know *p* stresses that certain conditions required by the norm are satisfied (in particular, the conditions relative to *p*). Thus this defense is a justification; it cannot be an excuse, which involves an admission that the norm was violated. On the distinction between justification and excuse see, for example, Duff 2006; Gardner 2007, ch. 4-6; Kelp & Simion forthcoming; Littlejohn forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Here it is worth mentioning that a justification for not violating a certain norm can be partial, restricted to the performance of a specific action. For example, an agent could point to the fact that she didn’t violate the norm by *F*-ing in a certain circumstance. In this case, the subject would be justified to *F*. But she could be violating the same norm by doing something else. In the case considered in the main text, the subject could be violating the knowledge norm even if she doesn’t know that it was going to rain and didn’t act on this proposition (for example if the subject knows the different proposition that [it was likely thatit was going to rain] and should have taken the umbrella on the basis of this known proposition). All this is compatible with the present argument, which considers exclusively the status of B’s claim as a defence for her action. This claim sounds like an excuse, while if knowledge were the norm of action, it couldn’t sound like an excuse, only like a (at least partial) justification. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. B could have also answered: “Ok, what I did was inappropriate, but for all I knew that was the right thing to do”. This answer is a rationalization and excuse of one’s action. B is clearly not defending her action or insisting that what she did was appropriate. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. I admit here that there are several possible ways of filling some details of the case, and in some of these ways intuitions about whether the subject’s defense counts as an excuse are clearer than others. I just observe that all that my argument needs is some possible reading of the case in which B’s specific claim clearly sounds like an excuse. These possible cases would be sufficiently problematic for the knowledge norm. This is because the absence of knowledge that *p* can only *justify* the subject for not relying on *p* in her reasoning; it cannot *excuse* her for that, since excuses involve admission of wrongdoing, and by not relying on *p* in absence of knowledge that *p* the subject doesn’t violate the knowledge norm (on the contrary, she complies with it). Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. On the explanatory asymmetry between objective and subjective assessments see, for example, Peacocke 2004, 116; Jackson 2012, 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. E.g., Brown 2008a, §5; Fantl & McGrath 2009, ch.4, §1; Hill & Schechter 2007, §6. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Brown seems to endorse a similar view in Brown 2008a, 2012b, even if she doesn’t develop it. She writes: “my own preferred view is that the full range of data is best explained by supposing that the epistemic position required to rely on a proposition in practical reasoning varies with context” (2012b, 45). Gerken 2011 explains this variability in terms of an epistemic norm involving a contextual variable in its scope. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Notice also that these practical factors are multifarious and relatively vague. Therefore there may be specific situations in which it would be potentially impossible for a subject to discriminate which specific factors obtain in her context. However, according to epistemic accounts, such factors determine what an epistemic norm requires in a given context. If such accounts were right, there may be situations in which an agent is not in a position to determine what the epistemic norm requires from her due to the inaccessibility of these factors. This would constitute a violation of a minimal accessibility constraint on norms, and would eventually imply a violation of the ‘ought implies can’ principle (provided that accessibility is sometimes necessary to follow the norm). My account easily avoids this problem: such factors affect only the regulation conditions to follow (RN). They do not determine what (RN) requires, which is a contextually-invariant condition. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Philosophers widely disagree on intuitions elicited by cases involving epistemic assessments of action. These very often deeply contrasting and unstable intuitions may eventually be considered as a further clue that epistemic assessments do not concern satisfaction conditions of norms, but rather contingent and variable conditions necessary to follow norms in different circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. It is worth mentioning here another respect under which epistemic assessments are context sensitive in a way affecting the strength of criticizability and blamability of agents. As argued in §1.1, some assessments of epistemic conditions concern whether the agent would conform to the norm in relevantly similar circumstances. The strength of such assessments is affected by how similar these circumstances are and the frequency of norm-conformity in such circumstances. For example it seems less appropriate to criticize and blame flyers that ignore a no-smoking regulation on a plane but smoke very rarely than those who tend to smoke frequently, regularly and everywhere. This is because the former comply with the norm in most relevantly similar circumstances more than the latter. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. One may doubt here that my account of contextually variable epistemic assessments would fare any better than a ‘hybrid knowledge’ account combining a knowledge norm of action and a distinction between assessments relative to regulation conditions and to satisfaction conditions. In order to address this worry, first consider how my account explains the various epistemic assessments (which, I remember, are instrumental evaluations relative to regulation conditions). Assuming that one should rely only on propositions that are true (or are reasons), when it is particularly important not to fail to comply with this norm (as in Brown’s Surgeon case), the subject should strive to achieve a very high degree of evidence before relying on *p*, higher than that required for knowledge. By contrast, when it is particularly unimportant to comply with the norm (e.g., in the case illustrated by Gerken 2011, 535-536; 2015, 144), the subject may eventually rely on evidence which is insufficient for knowledge, though it is enough to make a belief rational. A similar explanation is not available to the hybrid knowledge view for cases in which it seems fine for the subject to rely on a proposition supported by a relatively low degree of evidence insufficient to know the relevant proposition. Relying on a proposition based on evidence insufficient for knowledge is not a proper way of following a knowledge norm, even in relatively relaxed contexts. This disposition does not constitute a regulation condition of a knowledge norm, neither in actual, nor in most similar circumstances. Therefore the hybrid knowledge view, differently from my account, is unable to explain all the contextually variable epistemic assessments considered by Brown and Gerken. Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. On the modal constitutive status of epistemic norms see §1.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. E.g., Fine 1994, Rosen 2010, Schaffer 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. For explicit claims that epistemic norms are constitutive of knowledge, see for example Fantl & McGrath 2009, 84; Hawthorne & Stanley 2008, 571; Stanley 2005, pp. 9, 85 and 89. Pragmatic Encroachment on knowledge has been defended by, for example, Fantl & McGrath 2009; Hawthorne 2004; Stanley 2005. For criticisms see, for example, Brown 2008b; DeRose 2005; MacFarlane 2005; Neta 2007; Reed 2010; Williamson 2005. This list is merely exemplary and obviously incomplete. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Notice that a similar problem may not arise for assertion, as that type of speech act is often conceived as bearing constitutive relations with epistemic notions such as belief and knowledge. If many philosophers don’t see any problem in characterizing assertions as speech acts expressing one’s beliefs or knowledge, it is far more contentious, for example, to provide a characterization of the essence or concept of action as that type of thing that is appropriate if and only if it is grounded on knowledge, and to ascribe a constitutive sensitivity of practical notions to epistemic factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. This implies that in an extremely friendly environment in which one always encounters only true information it doesn’t make sense to assess one’s epistemic position relative to propositions one uses as premises in reasoning. This seems to match intuitions about specific cases: consider a situation in which an angel makes whatever I believe true, and it is common knowledge that this is the case. In this situation it makes little sense to assess my epistemic position with respect to a proposition that I use as a premise in my reasoning. While this fits my account well, it constitutes a further problem for epistemic accounts arguing for conceptually constitutive epistemic norms. These views take data from ordinary epistemic assessments as modally robust, appropriate in any world, including epistemically friendly worlds. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. A related question is why knowledge is the most common epistemic standard of assessment, much more common than, for example, justified belief. A possible explanation, provided by Gerken 2015, §3, is that in normal cases knowledge-level warrant is frequently necessary and very frequently sufficient for the epistemic permissibility of S’s acting on *p*. We refer to knowledge by default, since it is also the most ordinarily used epistemic notion. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Schiffer 2007 provides a similar objection to the knowledge norm of practical reasoning. See also Cresto 2010 for a similar point. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Notice also that relying on probability considerations can be more or less excusable depending on specific practical circumstances. If it is very important to do the right thing, then using probabilities as premises in our reasoning seems inopportune, while if not too much is at stake or it is relatively urgent to act (no matter whether correctly or not), acting on probabilities is fully excusable. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Here is an example of how the two replies work. Given the available information, at t1 stock A could lead to higher gains or higher losses than stock B. Since I want to maximise my gains but also not lose too much, I decide to buy both A and B. At time t2, stock A has gained more than B. In this case it seems I was rational in relying on my partial information at t1. Reply 1: what I did was wrong. I could have earned more by only buying stock A. But I did the best thing given what I knew. So I am blameless for my action. If I had only bought stock A I would be blameworthy because, even though I would have done the right thing, I would have not tried to follow (RN) by considering the reasons I had given my limited evidence. Reply 2: My decision to buy both A and B at t1 was the result of using the available information about the stock market – the trends of the stocks in the past year, events which may affect the stock market… – as premises in my reasoning. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. For similar considerations see Hill & Schechter 2007, 117-118. The present explanation is related to what said in §2.1 about the influence of contextual practical factors on assessments relative to regulation conditions. If stakes are high, one will be more careful in considering whether one’s epistemic position is good enough to take a certain proposition as a reason and use it as a premise in one’s reasoning. Since in lottery cases stakes are high (one could earn a lot of money by keeping the winning ticket), the subject would be criticizable if she relied on a mere partial belief that the ticket is a loser. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For a similar defence of a truth-norm of assertion see Whiting 2013. Other philosophers have defended similar truth norms of belief using quite different arguments. One could provide an argument for norms of assertion and belief moving from (TN) and the idea that assertion and belief have respectively the role of communicating and possessing appropriate premises for reasoning. However it is unclear whether this strategy would favour truth or knowledge norms. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)