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Passing the Epistemic Buck

Davide Fassio and Anne Meylan

1. Introduction

Buck-passing accounts (BPAs) hold that normative properties such as badness and rightness can be reduced to non-normative properties that constitute reasons for certain responses, such as performing a certain type of action or holding a certain attitude (e.g. favoring, promoting, blaming, desiring). For example, on such accounts, the badness of a certain object is reducible to its having certain (non-normative) properties that constitute reasons to have a negative attitude toward it (e.g. disfavor, dislike). Similarly, the rightness of an action of a certain type can be reduced to the obtaining of non-normative properties that constitute sufficient reasons to perform it or to respond favorably to it (e.g. praise the agents who perform it).¹ Such accounts are named “buck-passing” because they pass the normative buck from the properties themselves (goodness, badness, rightness, wrongness) to the more basic good-, bad-, right-, or wrong-making properties that constitute reasons for certain responses.

While BPAs are widely discussed in the literature, there have been surprisingly few attempts to apply buck-passing analyses to specific normative domains such as aesthetics and epistemology. In particular, there have been very few works which have tried to provide complete and detailed buck-passing analyses of epistemic values and norms. These analyses are, however, both interesting and important. On the one hand, they can bring to the surface the advantages and difficulties of extending the BPA to specific normative spheres, either providing further support for the approach or highlighting substantive difficulties. On the other hand, epistemic buck-passing analyses can be beneficial for normative epistemology, providing new perspectives on traditional

¹ Upholders of this type of view include Parfit 2011; Scanlon 1998; Skorupski 2010; Stratton-Lake and Hooker 2006. Many have endorsed the latter interpretation and provided buck-passing analyses of both evaluative and deontic properties (e.g. Skorupski 2010; Stratton-Lake 2000). Others endorsed BPAs of evaluative properties (e.g. Scanlon 1998) only, or of deontic properties only (Dancy 2004, 34). We don't see any reason to restrict our attention to a subset of normative properties.

epistemological problems, and possibly providing fresh approaches to such problems. This chapter aims at partially filling this gap.

The chapter is structured as follows. In Section 2, we show how the BPA analyses various kinds of normative properties. In Section 3, we try to apply these analyses in the epistemic domain. This allows us to draw a number of conclusions that we summarize in Section 4. It is important to emphasize that our goal in this chapter is restricted to the issue of whether and how a BPA can be extended to the epistemic domain. For this reason, we will not be concerned with specific arguments for or against endorsing this kind of account.²

2. General Buck-Passing

A BPA is supposed to capture not only thin normative properties—such as goodness, badness, rightness, and wrongness—but also thick normative properties—such as desirability, kindness, and boringness—and perhaps even others such as what Skorupski calls “mixed” and “complex” properties. Accordingly, we first provide, in the current section, buck-passing analyses of some paradigmatic *thin* normative properties such as goodness and badness (evaluative), and rightness and wrongness (deontic). Then we present buck-passing analyses of *thick* normative properties and of *mixed* and *complex* properties. Finally we show how a BPA captures the distinction between *final* and *instrumental value*.

Before proceeding further, two remarks are in order. First, we are aware that many buck-passers will disagree with some of the details of the forthcoming analyses, in particular as regard the relevant type of pro- or con-attitudes. Such details do not, however, matter for our purpose. The present discussion is merely exemplificative. It aims at providing a background for the analyses of epistemic normative properties that are presented in Section 3. Second, we recognize that, while it is uncontroversial that some properties—for instance, thin normative properties such as good and right and thick properties such as cruelty and desirability—are normative, other properties are not uncontentiously normative (an example is courage). The reader is free to restrict the field of normative properties as she thinks opportune.

Thin normative properties

Goodness

For an object X to be good is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to have a pro-attitude (e.g. favoring, desiring, liking) toward X.

Badness

For an object X to be bad is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to have a con-attitude (e.g. disfavoring, blaming, condemning) toward X.

² See Olson 2013; Suikkanen 2009 for overviews of these arguments.

Rightness

A certain type of act F is right iff there are some facts p which are (jointly) sufficient reasons to F.³

Wrongness

A certain type of act F is wrong iff there are no facts p which are (jointly) sufficient reasons to F.⁴

Let us briefly comment on two differences between the analyses of evaluative (goodness, badness) and deontic (rightness, wrongness) properties. First, for deontic properties, the object of assessment (what is right or wrong) can be identical with the *response* (attitude or action) supported or opposed by reasons. As you can see in the analyses above, the act that is right is also the one that there is reason to perform. In contrast, many take it to be an essential constraint on buck-passing analyses of value that the valuable object (what is good or bad) must be the *intentional object* of the response supported or opposed by reasons (see Stratton-Lake 2013, §1), not the response itself. For example, a good thing is one that there is reason to favor; a cruel act is one there is reason to condemn, and so on. Second, while evaluative properties can be analyzed in terms of reasons *simpliciter* (or *pro tanto*), deontic properties can only be analyzed in terms of *sufficient* reasons. Mere *pro tanto* reasons to desire X are sufficient to make X *pro tanto* good, but may be insufficient to reach the minimal threshold necessary to make X *pro tanto* right.

Goodness, badness, rightness, and wrongness can be characterized as thin properties in virtue of their carrying minimal or no descriptive content about the thing assessed. In contrast, thick properties carry descriptive information about the thing assessed. It is an open question how to determine which properties should count as thin or thick, and maybe there is no neat answer to this question. However, the list of normative properties usually classified as thick properties includes admirability, desirability, kindness, disgustingness, cruelty, fairness, generosity, and boringness.

How could a BPA be extended to thick normative properties? One main strategy consists in discriminating between distinct thick normative properties by identifying distinct, more specific kinds of appropriate responses. Particular appropriate (positive or negative) responses—i.e. particular ways of favoring or disfavoring a certain object—correspond to particular thick properties. For example, we can define the admirable as what there is reason to admire, the desirable as what there is reason to desire, the boring as what there is reason to feel bored of, and the disgusting as what

³ The “iff” in this formula and the formulas that follow should be read as an analysis of the property that is located on the left side of the bi-conditional in terms of what is located on its right side.

⁴ Some philosophers, such as Skorupski (2007, 2010, ch. 2), provide a similar analysis for certain normative uses of “should” and “ought.” An action (or attitude) that we should/ought to do (have) is one that there are decisive (or unquely sufficient) reasons to do (have). See also Parfit 2011, 33.

there is reason to feel disgusted by. The following is a schema for buck-passing analyses of thick properties that relies on this approach:

Thick normative property

For an X to have the thick normative property Y is for X to have certain properties P that constitute reasons to have a specific pro-/con-attitude A_Y toward X.

In this schema, A_Y denotes the specific response associated with the specific normative property Y. Here attitude A_Y is more specific than attitude A, where A characterizes a thin property relative to the relevant domain. For example, the attitude of admiration is a specific way of favoring. Favoring appears in the analysis of the thin property of goodness, while admiration specifies the thicker property of admirability, where admirability is a specific way of being good.

A problem with such an approach is that it is notoriously difficult to isolate the specific responses individuating each thick normative property.⁵ Consider, for example, cruelty. We can say that, for X to be cruel, is for X to have certain properties P that constitute reasons to condemn X, but many other normative properties share with cruelty these same appropriate responses (e.g. ruthlessness and inhumanity). On an alternative approach, thick properties would not be specified by the appropriate kind of response, but by the specific set of non-normative properties that appear in the analysans.⁶ This analysis is very similar to Skorupski's analysis of what he calls "mixed properties." A mixed normative property is one that reduces to the possession of a specific set of non-normative properties that constitute reason to have a (non-specific) pro- (or con-)attitude (Skorupski 2007, 264).

From now on, we will accordingly make use of two distinct idioms. We will speak of "thick normative properties" in order to denote thick normative properties of the first kind (e.g. admirability, boringness), the ones that can conveniently be captured in terms of *specific responses*. In contrast, we shall speak of "mixed properties" in order to denote thick normative properties of the second kind (e.g. cruelty and kindness). The thick normative properties of the second kind are those that are captured in terms of the possession, by the thing assessed, of *specific properties* and not in terms of specific responses.

The following is a general schema for buck-passing analyses of mixed normative properties:

Mixed properties

For X to have a mixed normative property Y is for X to have certain specific properties P_Y that constitute reasons to have a pro- (or con-)attitude toward X.

⁵ See Crisp 2005; Väyrynen 2006.

⁶ See Suikkanen 2009, 774–5. There are objections to this second approach as well. See Crisp 2005; Väyrynen 2006; and Suikkanen 2009 for a response. As a matter of fact, we are not obliged to choose between these two approaches. It might well be that properties such as admirability and boringness can be analyzed in the former, attitude-based way, while other properties such as cruelty and compassion can instead be accounted for in the latter way, and thus be classified as mixed properties.

For example, we can classify a cruel act as one having certain specific properties, such as willfully causing gratuitous suffering to others, which constitute reasons to disfavor it. Similarly, a behavior is ruthless if it doesn't show pity or compassion to others, which provide reasons to disfavor it. And an act is kind when it shows a friendly and considerate nature and these properties constitute reasons to favor it. Other properties that seem to be amenable to the same type of analysis are, for example, the properties of being lazy, arrogant, unfriendly, careless, compassionate, magnanimous, reckless, nasty, mean, malicious, and brutal.

Finally, there might be other normative properties and entities that we may label “complex” in that they are partly constituted by normative properties and, partly, by non-normative properties. Consider, for instance, murder.⁷ A murder is an intentional killing done with malice. In virtue of being malicious, there is reason to blame and condemn this act. Thus, murder is a complex entity constituted in part by a non-normative component—i.e. the intentional killing—and in part by a (thick or mixed) normative property—i.e. its being done maliciously.

We conclude this section by presenting the buck-passing way of capturing a further classical distinction, that between final value and instrumental value.

Final value

For an X to have final value is for X to have properties which constitute reasons to favor X for its own sake.

Instrumental value

For an X to have instrumental value is for X to have properties which constitute reasons to favor X for the sake of some distinct good that X might bring about (or for the sake of some distinct bad that X might prevent).

For example, the instrumental value of money is reducible to the fact that money has the property of allowing buying goods and this property constitutes reasons to favor money.

Note that the distinction between final and instrumental value is orthogonal to the distinctions between thin, thick, and mixed normative properties considered above. The reason why we introduce it will become clear in Section 3.5, in which we consider how a BPA is able to capture the epistemic value of cognitive states such as knowledge, true beliefs, justified beliefs, and understanding.

3. Epistemic Buck-Passing

The previous section presented analyses by means of which the BPA seems able to capture various kinds of normative properties (thin, thick, mixed, complex). In the current section, we rely on this previous presentation to suggest buck-passing analyses of the epistemic counterparts of these same kinds of properties. Our first objective is, of course, to consider whether and how the BPA can be extended to the specific domain

⁷ See Skorupski 2007, 265.

of epistemic normativity. But, as we shall see, our attempt to develop buck-passing analyses of epistemic normative properties also provides very interesting results regarding some important contemporary debates in epistemology.

Our method in this section is quite simple. For each category of normative properties previously considered, we try to find an epistemic equivalent, that is, one that should be susceptible to the same kind of analysis. In the previous section we isolated the following categories of normative properties:

- thin properties;
- thick properties;
- mixed properties;
- complex normative properties and entities;
- final/instrumental values.⁸

Accordingly, we consider buck-passing analyses of thin epistemic properties in Section 3.1, of thick properties in Section 3.2, of mixed properties in Section 3.3, of complex properties in Section 3.4, and finally, in Section 3.5, we will say a few words about epistemic instrumental values in a buck-passing framework.

Before proceeding further, we should recognize a potential obstacle to our project. While there are epistemic properties whose normativity is pretty uncontroversial, the normativity of others has been highly disputed. Though this problem is not specific to epistemology, it seems potentially more serious in this domain because philosophers have contested the normativity of virtually every epistemic property. Considering the normativity of each of these epistemic properties would obviously take us too far afield. The best way of proceeding is thus to discuss only the less contentious instances of epistemic normative properties even though, as just said, none of them is completely uncontroversial.⁹ Also, the reader is free to modify the spectrum of our analyses by restricting the field of epistemic normative properties as she thinks appropriate. Our analyses do not have the ambition of providing uncontroversial definitions of the various epistemic normative properties. They simply illustrate how such properties can be analyzed in a buck-passing framework.

3.1. *Thin epistemic properties*

What would buck-passing analyses of thin epistemic properties look like? According to the usual characterization presented in Section 2, a thin property is characterized by its carrying minimal or no descriptive or informative content about the thing assessed and by its constituting the most generic type of evaluation within the relevant normative

⁸ We recognize that this list is not exhaustive. We did not, for example, consider buck-passing analyses of intrinsic values, agent-neutral and agent-relative values, betterness, duty, and virtue.

⁹ For instance, we will not consider certain epistemic properties which are commonly considered to belong to the epistemic domain but whose normative status is contentious. These include, for example, the properties of being reliable, coherent, and *a priori*. Skorupski (2010, ch. 2) has attempted a buck-passing analysis of some of these notions.

domain. Accordingly, buck-passing analyses of thin properties (1) do not entail a specification of the descriptive properties that constitute reasons for the relevant attitudes and (2) appeal to the most generic type of pro- or con-attitudes characterizing the relevant normative domain. Let us illustrate these two points by contrasting the buck-passing analyses of thin versus thick normative properties in other normative domains. Consider, first, the moral domain. We assume, for the sake of argument, that the most generic attitude in the moral realm is blame.¹⁰ Possible analyses of the thin property of moral badness and the thick property of despicability are as follows.¹¹

Moral badness

For an act A to be morally bad is for A to have certain properties that constitute reasons to blame someone who As.

Despicability

For an act A to be despicable is for A to have certain properties that constitute reasons to despise someone who As.

Observe that despising is a specific way of blaming someone.¹² In buck-passing analyses, this relation of genericity-specificity between fitting attitudes explains why, e.g. being despicable is a specific way of being morally bad, that is, why despicability is a thicker property than moral badness. Consider a similar example in the aesthetic domain. Take admiration as the most generic aesthetic pro-attitude, and revulsion (intended in an aesthetic sense of the term) as its correlated con-attitude. Now, consider the properties of being aesthetically disvaluable and disgusting.

Aesthetically disvaluable

For an object X to be aesthetically disvaluable is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to feel revulsion about X.

Disgusting

For an object X to be disgusting is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to be disgusted by X.

Feeling disgusted by something is a specific way of feeling revulsion about that thing and, accordingly, the property of being disgusting is a thicker, more specific aesthetic property, while the property of being aesthetically disvaluable is a thinner, more generic one.

This illustrates a peculiar feature of buck-passing analyses of thin properties in different normative domains: the characterization of the thinnest property in a domain is put in terms of the most generic pro- or con-attitude characterizing this domain.

¹⁰ Skorupski (2010, §1.8 and ch. 10).

¹¹ Again, the details of the analyses do not matter. The reader can, for example, substitute blameworthiness with shamefulness, and/or consider a different thick property if she thinks despicability is not a thick property.

¹² The reader might object that despising is not a way of blaming. If so, she should feel free to replace “blame” with the name of a more generic con-attitude that is, according to her, such that despising is a species of it.

In order to provide buck-passing analyses of the thinnest *epistemic* properties, it is thus necessary to individuate the most generic pro- and con-attitude characterizing the epistemic domain. Many epistemologists would agree that the relevant pro-attitude is the attitude of believing and the relevant con-attitude the attitude of disbelieving. Some would also take withholding judgment to be such a generic irreducible doxastic attitude.¹³ Furthermore, even if there is wide disagreement on whether all reasons for believing and disbelieving are epistemic,¹⁴ there is no substantive disagreement about the claim that epistemic reasons are paradigmatically reasons for doxastic attitudes,¹⁵ namely, belief, disbelief, withholding—and closely related responses such as judging, inferring, and concluding.¹⁶ Consequently, buck-passing analyses of the thinnest epistemic normative properties are analyses that define epistemic normative properties in terms of reasons for doxastic attitudes.

Epistemic goodness (E-good)

For X to be *E-good* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to believe X.

Epistemic badness (E-bad)

For X to be *E-bad* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to disbelieve X.

Epistemic neutrality (E-neutral)

For X to be *E-neutral* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to withhold judgment about whether X.

In what follows, for reasons of brevity, we focus our attention on the analysis of epistemic goodness. But analogous considerations apply to epistemic badness and to epistemic neutrality (assuming that withholding is a fundamental doxastic attitude, one that is not reducible to more basic doxastic attitudes such as the absence of both belief and disbelief).

A legitimate worry concerns whether it is appropriate to consider belief a pro-attitude. “Pro-attitude” is a term of art typically used to refer to motivational states—such as valuing or favoring—that have the world-to-mind direction of fit and do not play, thereby, the same role as beliefs in our mental economy. In accounts of values, buck-passers

¹³ There is disagreement on whether we should extend the title of fundamental epistemic reasons to reasons to withhold judgment. For a positive answer see, for example, Schroeder 2012.

¹⁴ For an overview, see Reisner, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Here doxastic attitudes are conceived as to include both full attitudes and partial ones. When we talk of reasons for doxastic attitudes we thus include not only, e.g. reasons for outright belief, but also reasons to be more or less confident in a certain proposition.

¹⁶ Note that Skorupski (2010, 35) takes reasons to “think, judge, conclude, and so on” to be epistemic reasons as well. However, the wide majority of epistemologists and ethicists of all stripes take epistemic reasons to be reasons for doxastic attitudes only. For instance, Sylvan (2016), in his introductory survey on epistemic reasons, claims that epistemic reasons are a subset of the normative reasons for doxastic attitudes. Similar claims are common in the literature on epistemic reasons. See e.g. Schroeder forthcoming; Turri 2009.

typically appeal to valuing responses, but believing and disbelieving are not traditionally considered kinds of valuing and disvaluing.¹⁷ It may, therefore, be argued that an appeal to a different kind of response such as belief doesn't count as an account of value at all, and that it is not promising to generalize a BPA to epistemic value in this way.

Our aim in this chapter is however to provide a BPA of epistemic normativity. Now, in epistemology and practical philosophy, there is a nearly universal agreement that epistemic normativity is exclusively concerned with reasons for doxastic attitudes (together, maybe, with a few other closely related responses such as judgment). There is quite a wide consensus that epistemic normativity should be distinguished from other types of normativity precisely on the basis of the specific set of attitudes it provides reasons for.¹⁸ In this standard picture, appealing to reasons for non-doxastic attitudes such as valuing responses (e.g. praise, admiration) amounts to ruling out the possibility that the resulting account captures a genuinely epistemic type of value. In other words, if it is true—as the worry goes—that beliefs (and a few closely related attitudes) cannot occupy the place of a response in a BPA of values, this simply means that there are no distinctively epistemic values.¹⁹ If there is something like genuine epistemic value, belief (or some related response such as judgment) should be the corresponding attitude in terms of which this value is analyzed. Let us, furthermore, emphasize that our aim in this chapter is merely hypothetical. We do not aim at demonstrating that a BPA of epistemic value is indeed possible. We only intend to show what it would look like if it were such. In what follows, for the sake of argument, we assume there is a genuinely epistemic kind of value that is analyzable in terms of reasons for doxastic attitudes (and a few closely related attitudes).

In BPAs of values in general, the object of evaluation is the same as the intentional object of the relevant pro-attitude. This is also the case in the analysis of epistemic goodness. *X* is the intentional object of the attitude of believing, that is, the believed proposition. In a buck-passing framework, the objects of thin epistemic evaluation are not doxastic attitudes, but propositions. This would certainly be a serious limitation of the BPA of epistemic normativity. Both in epistemology and ordinary language the

¹⁷ Though some philosophers have argued that belief is a distinctive type of positive feeling or emotive response toward a proposition. This idea traces back at least to David Hume and counts important upholders such as William James and Bertrand Russell.

¹⁸ See fn. 16 for references. Some philosophers define epistemic reasons as facts that are evidence of the truth of a proposition, or that make a proposition likely to be true (e.g. Parfit 2011, 47). This definition is compatible with there being epistemic reasons for non-doxastic attitudes such as judging, concluding, and maybe even guessing. However, also according to this definition, epistemic reasons are not reasons for responses having a world-to-mind direction of fit. That certain facts raise the probability of proposition *p* can make these facts reasons to believe, judge, or guess that *p*, but it rarely makes them reasons to e.g. praise or admire that *p*.

¹⁹ Of course, nothing prevents us calling “epistemic” certain values that are reducible to reasons for a different set of responses—e.g. some type of valuing attitude such as praise or admiration for certain epistemic conditions. We have nothing against this alternative terminological choice. However, this alternative use captures a kind of normativity which is not the one at work when epistemologists talk of epistemic normativity and which is also not the one constituting the focus of our chapter.

standard objects of epistemic assessments have been universally considered to be doxastic attitudes, not propositions.²⁰ We rarely assess a proposition according to whether it is epistemically valuable.

One may think that extending assessments from propositions to doxastic attitudes can dodge this odd consequence. Unfortunately things are not so simple. As we mentioned in Section 2, many buck-passers consider it to be a constraint of their analyses of value that the valuable object be the intentional object of a fitting attitude. If our object of assessment is not the proposition p , but a doxastic attitude, say the belief that p , then an appropriate buck-passing analysis of its value should find some attitude that fits that object. But we also said that the most generic type of attitude characterizing the epistemic domain is the attitude of believing itself. This leads us to the conclusion that, if S 's belief that p is epistemically valuable, its being epistemically valuable must reduce to reasons to believe the specific proposition that [S believes that p]. The result is that our doxastic attitudes can be the object of epistemic valuation only *qua* contents of propositions, and their value would be reducible to reasons for second-order beliefs.

A possible solution to this difficulty that the buck-passing analysis of epistemic goodness seems to raise would be to deny the aforementioned constraint on the intentional object. However, this implies a significant departure from previous fitting attitude accounts of value. A more promising approach consists in complementing the buck-passing analysis of values with a buck-passing analysis of deontic properties—such as rightness. While the BPA of value accounts for epistemic assessments of propositions, the deontic analysis bears on doxastic attitudes.

As we previously emphasized, deontic properties do not seem to be subject to the constraint that the object of assessment must also be the object of the fitting attitude (see Section 2). Recall the standard analysis of rightness:

Rightness

A certain type of act F is right iff there are some facts p which are jointly sufficient reasons to F .

We can see how, in this analysis, the action assessed as right is also the one there are sufficient reasons to perform. If, in this formula, we substitute the type of act with the attitude of believing, we have an intuitive buck-passing analysis of what we might call, for now, “epistemic rightness”:

Epistemic rightness (E-right)

A belief that p is *E-right* iff there are some facts q which are jointly sufficient reasons to believe that p .²¹

²⁰ Other usual objects of epistemic assessments are agents and/or their character traits. We discuss traits in Section 3.5.

²¹ Epistemic wrongness can be accordingly defined in terms of lack of sufficient reasons to believe; or alternatively in terms of decisive reasons not to believe (which is formally equivalent). For reasons of space, we will not be able to discuss negative normative properties here.

It seems thus that the thinnest epistemic properties of doxastic attitudes call for a buck-passing analysis of deontic, rather than evaluative, properties. Under the hypothesis that the buck-passing analysis should be able to capture the thinnest epistemic normative properties of doxastic attitudes, such a thinnest epistemic normative property would be a deontic property. This is a first very interesting result.

Now suppose that the thinnest epistemic property for doxastic attitudes is justification—as we try to argue immediately below. Under the hypothesis that the buck-passing analysis should be able to capture the thinnest epistemic normative properties of doxastic attitudes, justification is a deontic property. In contrast, many epistemologists, such as reliabilists and epistemic consequentialists, have argued that justification (as well as other normative properties attributed to doxastic attitudes) is an evaluative, and not a deontic, property. The conclusion we reach conditionally supports a deontic conception of justification.²²

This support is conditional since it depends on the validity of the buck-passing analysis in the epistemic realm and on the truth of the aforementioned constraint on the intentional object. Note that none of what we say below rests on the assumption that the thinnest epistemic property attributed to doxastic attitudes is a deontic property.

We have so far considered how thin epistemic properties are analyzed within a buck-passing framework. We haven't yet said much about what these epistemic properties are. In this respect, "epistemic goodness" and "epistemic rightness" are just artificial labels for thin epistemic normative properties that are either evaluative or deontic. Let us now consider whether there are ordinary or technical properties that can replace the labels *E-good* and *E-right* in the above analyses. An answer to this question will tell us which "standard" epistemic properties are to be considered thin (if any).

First consider *E-goodness*. Which evaluative property is it possible to attribute to propositions and is also analyzable along the lines presented above? As mentioned before, some philosophers have argued that truth is an evaluative property of propositions. Can truth be the property we are searching for? This suggestion is problematic for at least two reasons. First, there are propositions that are true even though there is no reason to believe them.²³ Consider, for example, truths such as that the exact number of cats in Vicenza on Christmas Eve of 1698 was *n*. That there are no clues (even misleading) of what this number is seems to exclude that there are reasons for anyone to believe it. Another problem is that if we define truth as *E-goodness*, it seems equally natural to define falsity as *E-badness*. However, if we accept the law of excluded middle for at least some set of propositions *P*, we end up with the conclusion that there is never

²² Because the key deontic notion in our analysis is rightness and not a strong form of permission or obligatoriness, the deontic conception of justification that we advocate does not necessarily have the kind of voluntarist or responsibilist implications that some philosophers have attributed to it (e.g. Alston 1988).

²³ See, for example, Skorupski 2010, 43. It is worth observing that some philosophers disagree with this claim. For example, Schroeder 2012 holds that there are always (objective) reasons to believe any truth, no matter whether accessible or not.

reason to suspend judgment about any proposition in this set.²⁴ If we want to preserve the possibility of having reasons neither to believe p , nor to believe not- p , we must identify the pair *E-goodness/E-badness* with some properties other than truth/falsity.

Which other property can do the work here? It is not obvious how to answer this question. Part of the difficulty comes from the fact that philosophers have very different views about (1) which type of things can count as a reason to believe (known facts, facts one is in a position to know, propositions one rationally believes . . .) and (2) which kind of features can ground the epistemic reason relation (probabilistic, counterfactual or causal support, fallible versus infallible support, and so on). Different views on these matters go with very different extensions of what is *E-good*. For example, if one assumes that reasons are rationally believed propositions (no matter whether true or false) and a probabilistic support relation, every proposition made probable by one's rational beliefs will count as *E-good*, including false propositions and merely statistically supported propositions (e.g. that my ticket in a fair 1000-ticket lottery is a loser). One will reach very different results if one assumes, for example, that reasons are facts that one is in a position to know and an infallible support relation. In this case, *E-good* propositions will be a subset of all truths. To be sure, this lack of specification in the buck-passing analysis is not problematic. The fact that the BPA can remain neutral on such substantive issues—while providing a framework in which they can be understood and, potentially, resolved—can even be considered a virtue.

Let us now consider *E-rightness*. Which kind of property is it possible to attribute to beliefs and is also analyzable in terms of there being sufficient reasons to hold these beliefs? Or, more simply, how do we ordinarily classify beliefs supported by sufficient reasons? Here the answer seems easier. The large majority of epistemologists would attribute to these beliefs the status of being *justified*.²⁵ Again, depending on how one conceives of the entities that count as reasons to believe and the epistemic support relation, one will reach radically different views about the extension of *E-rightness*. Not surprisingly, these different views reflect various conceptions of justification.

A buck-passing analysis of thin epistemic properties also sheds new light on the related debate regarding the norms of belief. Philosophers have argued for very different competing norms of belief. Here is a short list:

- (TN) For any S and p : S may believe p only if it is true that p .
- (KN) For any S and p : S may believe p only if S knows that p .
- (EN) For any S and p : S may believe p only if p is supported by S's evidence.

²⁴ For a similar point (though directed to the notions of correctness and permissibility), see Reisner forthcoming, §1.

²⁵ We observe here that the identification of *E-rightness* and justification fits nicely with typical theories of justification in terms of sufficient reasons to believe. This identification also supports the idea that justification is a deontic property, since the properties typical of deontic buck-passing analyses (considered in Section 2) would be clearly identifiable in these accounts.

A buck-passing analysis of normative uses of “may” could be the following:²⁶

May

S may F iff there are some facts p which are sufficient reasons to F.

The reader can observe that this analysis is identical to that of rightness considered above. Thus, what is right for a person to do is also what she may do. Assuming that this analysis is correct, we can reformulate the various norms of belief as follows:

- (R-TN) For any S and p : there are sufficient reasons for S to believe p only if it is true that p .
- (R-KN) For any S and p : there are sufficient reasons for S to believe p only if S knows that p .
- (R-EN) For any S and p : there are sufficient reasons for S to believe p only if p is supported by S’s evidence.

(R-TN), (R-KN), and (R-EN) would be reducible, respectively, to the claims that there are never sufficient reasons (or there are decisive reasons not) to believe what is false, what is not known, and what is not supported by evidence. Again, we can easily observe that depending on how we conceive of reasons to believe and the support relation, some of these norms will look more or less intuitive or problematic. For example, consider a fallibilist conception according to which, even if all the reasons for a certain subject point toward believing p , the supported proposition can still be false. This view seems incompatible with factive norms (e.g. truth and knowledge norms). This is because, according to this view, some proposition can be false or unknown, and nevertheless the subject can have sufficient, or even decisive, reasons to believe p . It seems then that a factive conception of epistemic norms forces a move toward more infallibilist conceptions of rational support relations, while vice versa non-factive norms (e.g. an evidence norm) are compatible with fallible rational support relations.

This discussion is very rough and sketchy, but it gives a hint of how a buck-passing analysis of epistemic normativity can cast new light on the problem of the norm of belief and, possibly, indicates solutions to this problem, or at least incompatibilities between certain clusters of views.

3.2. *Thick properties*

In this section we consider buck-passing analyses of epistemic thick normative properties. We characterized thick normative properties, in general, as those analyzable in terms of distinct and specific kinds of appropriate responses. As we also said, these specific responses stand in a relation of specificity-genericity to more generic attitudes characterizing the relevant normative domain. In the epistemic domain, the most generic pro- and con-attitudes are those of believing and disbelieving, and perhaps

²⁶ See Skorupski 2007, §5 and fn. 7 above.

withholding (or suspending) judgment. In order to see how buck-passing analyses of epistemic thick normative properties would look, we need, first, to consider which more specific attitudes stand in a specificity-genericity relation to these attitudes. Once these more specific doxastic attitudes have been individuated, we will be in a position to say which epistemic properties are such that having them amounts to having properties that constitute reasons to hold these specific doxastic attitudes. In other words, we will be able to identify which epistemic properties are thick epistemic properties in a buck-passing framework.

Are there specific ways of believing, disbelieving, and withholding judgment? We think there are. To start with, consider the attitude of believing. Being certain that p is a specific way of believing that p (namely, believing that p with a very high confidence). Other similar attitudes are being sure and being convinced that p (viz. believing with a rather high degree of confidence). A recent debate in epistemology and philosophy of mind concerns whether belief entails complete confidence in the believed proposition or is compatible with having relatively little confidence in what we believe.²⁷ We do not want to take a stance in this debate. We just note that if one endorses the weaker conception of belief (or alternatively a wide conception encompassing both weak and strong uses of the notion), one can classify as specific ways of believing propositional attitudes such as conjecturing, suspecting, being convinced, being confident, and thinking that p . They are all specific ways of believing that p with a (more or less) weak degree of confidence.

For what concerns specific ways of disbelieving, we can mention attitudes such as doubting, mistrusting, and excluding that p . Finally, some attitudes seem to be specific ways of withholding judgment. These include, for example, being uncertain that p , hesitating about whether p , being undecided about whether p .

Now that we have identified more specific doxastic attitudes, we are in a position to say which epistemic properties are, in a buck-passing framework, thick epistemic properties. Here are plausible analyses of some thick epistemic properties attributable to propositions:

E-certainty

For X to be *certain* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to be certain that X .

E-probability/likelihood

For X to be *probable/likely* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to be confident/conjecture/suspect/think that X .²⁸

²⁷ Hawthorne et al. 2016, for instance, argue that our everyday notion of belief is unambiguously such a weak one.

²⁸ This analysis applies to epistemic probability. Other notions of probability (e.g. frequentist, modal) are not analyzable in these terms. The same remark is *mutatis mutandis* true of likelihood/unlikelihood and possibility/impossibility (mentioned below). They have to be taken in their epistemic sense. Note also that the choice of one or the other of the various attitudes mentioned in the *analysans* depends on how likely it is that X .

E-improbability/unlikelihood

For X to be *improbable/unlikely* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to doubt/mistrust that X.

E-impossibility

For X to be (epistemically) *impossible* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to exclude that X.

Unclear

For X to be *unclear* is for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to be undecided about whether X.

Let us stress once again that these analyses do not have the ambition of providing uncontroversial definitions of the various thick epistemic properties. It simply illustrates how thick epistemic properties can be analyzed in a buck-passing framework. As the reader will have noticed, some of the analyzed properties are ways of being *E-good* (e.g. being certain); others are ways of being *E-bad* (e.g. unlikely) or of being *E-neutral* (e.g. being unclear).

It is often argued that the distinction between thin and thick properties applies only to evaluative properties, not to deontic properties.²⁹ If this is right, there are no thick properties that constitute ways of being *E-right* and *E-wrong*, that is, ways of being justified and unjustified. It seems, however, possible to capture the *E-rightness* or *justification* of specific doxastic attitudes (being certain, being confident, doubting, excluding, and so on) in terms of there being some facts which are sufficient reasons for having these attitudes (toward particular propositions) and the *E-wrongness* or *lack of justification* of these specific doxastic attitudes in terms of the lack of sufficient reasons for having these attitudes. Thus, sometimes we will not merely be justified in believing a certain proposition *p*, but also justified in being certain or persuaded that *p*; or we may not merely be justified in disbelieving that *p*, but also justified in doubting or excluding that *p*; or not merely justified in withholding judgment about whether *p*, but also justified in being uncertain or undecided about whether *p*.

3.3. Mixed properties

Let us now consider buck-passing analyses of mixed epistemic properties. In Section 2 we characterized mixed normative properties, such as cruelty, as those normative properties that can be analyzed in terms of specific types of non-normative properties that constitute reasons for the relevant attitude. Are there mixed epistemic properties? We think there are. Unfortunately, here we cannot adopt the “backward” method used for providing buck-passing analyses of thin and thick epistemic properties. This is because the types of fitting attitudes involved in the analyses of mixed properties are the same as those used in the analyses of thin properties. Indeed, the peculiarity of these properties does not lie in the type of fitting attitude, but rather in the specific

²⁹ Mulligan 1998, 2009; Ogien and Tappolet 2009.

types of considerations that count as reasons for the attitude. The mixed epistemic properties of some X are thus to be analyzed in terms of (i) there being reasons to have the relevant attitudes—belief, disbelief, or withholding—which are constituted by certain properties of X where (ii) these properties belong to some specific type. Here are buck-passing analyses of some mixed epistemic properties:

Straightforward

For X to be *straightforward* is (i) for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to believe that X and (ii) these properties make X uncomplicated, easy to understand.

Indisputable

For X to be *indisputable* is (i) for X to have certain properties that constitute reasons to believe that X and (ii) these properties make X not open to question or dispute.

Other properties, which could receive similar analyses, are, for example, being obvious, unambiguous, irrefutable, unmistakable, distinct, confirmed, and so on.

Similar accounts can be given for opposite properties such as being unobvious, disputable, unconfirmed, indistinct, etc. In these cases, the reasons will be reasons to withhold judgment or to form a low degree of confidence in the assessed proposition. Other mixed epistemic properties analyzable in terms of the attitude of withholding are, for example, being vague, obscure, and indeterminate.

Vague

For X to be *vague* is (i) for X to have certain properties that provide reasons to withhold judgment about whether X and (ii) these properties make X indiscriminable, unfocused, indefinite, etc.

Obscure

For X to be *obscure* is (i) for X to have certain properties that provide reasons to withhold judgment about whether X and (ii) these properties have to do with a lack of information about whether X.

Again, these various analyses serve a merely illustrative purpose and are not supposed to be completely accurate. Some of the properties that we classify as mixed epistemic properties might also be considered to be thick properties.³⁰ The property of being obscure, for instance, can be analyzed in terms of reasons to withhold judgment about whether X based on a lack of information (mixed interpretation), or in terms of reasons to be confused and undecided about whether X (thick interpretation). There are similar debates concerning non-epistemic normative properties. The sole goal of the present analysis is to illustrate how an analysis of mixed epistemic properties could proceed and what the end result would look like. We are open to revising details.

³⁰ Or to be not normative at all.

3.4. *Complex entities and properties*

Complex entities and properties, such as murder, are partly constituted by normative properties and partly by non-normative ones. Complex epistemic entities and properties are those that involve in their analysis a non-normative component and an epistemically normative component.

A traditional view in epistemology holds that a proper analysis of knowledge requires, amongst other things, the recognition that there are sufficient reasons to believe the known proposition.³¹ If this is the case, then knowledge is a complex epistemic entity. It is—like murder—factorizable into a non-normative component—which may involve all sorts of non-normative conditions: factual, modal, causal, explanatory, reliability-related, internal—and a normative component ultimately reducible to there being sufficient reasons to believe the known proposition. Of course, many have also argued that knowledge is an unanalyzable, primitive notion.³² We are also conscious that the issue whether knowledge is normative is widely debated in the literature. For instance, some philosophers have suggested that it is a natural kind.³³ This is not the place to settle this very complex and wide-ranging dispute. We would simply like to observe that, if it is appropriate to provide a buck-passing analysis of complex epistemic entities such as knowledge, then the dispute can partially be adjudicated by considering whether knowledge of p is metaphysically compatible with the absence of sufficient reasons to believe p .

Other candidates to the title of complex epistemic entities might be clues, indices, and indications. They seem all to be partially definable in terms of their making propositions more likely for a subject. If, as suggested in Section 3.2, epistemic probability and likelihood are normative, then these entities have a normative component.

3.5. *The epistemic value of cognitive states*

The following are often recognized to be epistemically valuable cognitive states: knowledge, true belief, justified belief, and understanding.³⁴ For instance, the view that knowledge is valuable is taken for granted by the numerous philosophers who have tried to solve the *Meno problem*, that is, the issue of what makes knowledge a better epistemic standing than mere true belief.³⁵ The reader might have noticed that the latter states, even though they are usually considered to carry some “epistemic value,” do not appear in our previous analyses.³⁶ How would a BPA capture the epistemic value that knowledge, true belief, justified belief, and understanding are supposed to possess?

³¹ See e.g. Ayer 1956; Chisholm 1957; Conee and Feldman 2004; Russell 1948.

³² E.g. Hossack 2007; Williamson 2000.

³³ E.g. Kornblith 1993; Millikan 1984.

³⁴ See e.g. Ahlstrom-Vij 2013 and David 2005 for the view that true belief is the fundamental epistemic good; DePaul 2001 for the view that justified belief is of fundamental epistemic value; and Kvanvig 2003 for the claim that understanding is an epistemically fundamental good.

³⁵ See Pritchard 2007 for an overview.

³⁶ We have suggested a buck-passing analysis of knowledge, but this is very different from giving an analysis of the epistemic value of knowledge.

As the reader can readily observe, there is no easy way of accounting for the value of these cognitive states in terms of epistemic reasons. When we say that knowledge has more epistemic value than Gettierized true belief, we are not saying that there are more reasons to believe knowledge than Gettierized true belief. Assuming that the latter claim makes any sense at all, this is clearly not what we mean with such comparative assessments. We are rather saying that there are reasons to favor, promote, like, or prefer knowledge to Gettierized true belief. The pro-attitude in terms of which the value of knowledge, true belief, justified belief, and understanding needs to be analyzed is not the attitude of believing but the attitude of favoring (or desiring, liking, etc.). Now, favoring, desiring, and liking are *not pro-attitudes that characterize the epistemic domain of evaluation*. Rather, they appear in buck-passing analyses of practical values (see Section 2). Even though they are most often called “epistemic values,” the value of the cognitive states just mentioned apparently has more to do with the practical realm of evaluation than with the epistemic realm. This is not an anodyne result since this would make, say, knowledge a practical good, one that is directly commensurable with other practical goods (e.g. pleasure, utility, etc.).

One way of avoiding this conclusion is to connect the reasons we have to favor these cognitive states to genuine epistemic properties—in particular E-goodness and E-rightness—in such a way that the reasons in question will derive some form of epistemic normativity from their relation to them. A relation that allows this form of derivation is the relation that connects instrumental values to the final value they promote.³⁷ Suppose, for instance, that the value of beauty is instrumental, that beautiful things are valuable in virtue of the finally valuable pleasant mental states they trigger. The value of beauty would, therefore, be hedonistic. Is it possible to provide buck-passing analyses of the value of these cognitive states in which the latter would qualify as an epistemic instrumental value, viz. a value that derives its normative force from the proper epistemic good or right it might bring about? This is possible.

It suffices to make clear that we have reason to favor these states for the sake of the E-rightness or the E-goodness that such states might bring about. That is, for a state S (knowledge, true belief, justified belief, understanding) to be valuable is for it to be instrumentally epistemically valuable (IE valuable) where IE value is, in a buck-passing framework, analyzed as follows.

Instrumental-epistemic value (IE-value)

For a state S to be IE-valuable is for S to have properties that constitute reasons to favor S because being in S tends either to bring about more and better potential reasons to believe and beliefs supported by epistemic reasons or to prevent beliefs not supported by epistemic reasons.³⁸

³⁷ See e.g. Chang 2015.

³⁸ We recognize that this analysis is sketchy and doesn't address a series of issues such as how exactly a cognitive state tends to bring about reasons to believe. Furthermore, even though we have formulated the account in instrumental terms, we want to remain open on whether the derivative value should be acquired instrumentally or in some other derivative way. See Sylvan (2018) for an alternative proposal.

By instrumentally relating the value of knowledge, true belief, justified belief, and understanding to reasons to believe, this analysis has the advantage of avoiding the aforementioned worrying conclusion. It preserves the epistemic flavor of the assessment and the incommensurability with practical values. Furthermore, this analysis casts new light on the debate pertaining to the value of cognitive states. This is because different accounts of epistemic reasons and reasons relations give rise, as we said, to different forms of E-goodness, to distinct final values, thereby affecting the question of which states are more instrumentally conducive to these final values.

We conclude this section by mentioning that a similar account is available for a set of epistemic virtues—those usually labeled “responsibilist”—such as open-mindedness, carefulness, and intellectual courage (as well as for the corresponding vices).³⁹ As for the value of cognitive states, these virtues cannot be analyzed directly in terms of reasons to believe. One can be open-minded or careful without there being any reason to believe anything. However, these virtues can be analyzed in terms of instrumental reasons, as good means to bring about beliefs supported by reasons and to prevent beliefs not supported by reasons:

E-virtuosity

For a trait of character C to be E-virtuous is for C to have properties that constitute reasons to favor it because possessing C tends either to bring about better potential reasons to believe and beliefs supported by epistemic reasons or to prevent beliefs not supported by epistemic reasons.

4. Conclusion

While BPAs are widely discussed in the literature, there has not yet been a serious attempt to apply buck-passing analysis to epistemic normativity. In this chapter, we have tried to fill this gap. We provided buck-passing analyses of various epistemic normative properties. Our analyses cover all types of normative properties that other buck-passing analyses in other domains cover: thin, thick, and mixed normative properties, complex normative properties and entities, and derivative normative assessments. While these analyses have no pretense to being perfect, fully accurate, or complete, they can pave the way for future work going in the same direction.

In addition, we think that our analyses unveil several interesting and important aspects of epistemic normativity by providing a systematic account of how various epistemic properties relate. Further, these analyses have occasionally proved useful in providing a new perspective on and fresh approach to traditional epistemological problems. For example, they indicate that epistemic assessments of doxastic attitudes such as justification are better classified as deontic properties than evaluative ones. They highlight the relevance of issues concerning the ontology of epistemic reasons

³⁹ See Baehr 2004, §3 for an overview.

and the nature of the basing relation for a wide variety of debates including those on the nature of epistemic justification, on the fundamental norm of belief, and on the epistemic value of mental states. Finally, they provide a wide and structured normative framework within which the most diverse epistemic properties (including clarity, likelihood, vagueness, knowledge, and the value of understanding) can find their place.⁴⁰

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