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Practical reasons, theoretical reasons, and permissive and prohibitive balancing

John Brunero

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 315 Louise Pound Hall, PO Box 880321,
Lincoln, NE 68588-0321, USA; jbrunero2@unl.edu

Abstract

Philosophers have often noted a contrast between practical and theoretical reasons when it comes to cases involving equally balanced reasons. When there are strong practical reasons for A-ing, and equally strong practical reasons for some incompatible option, B-ing, the agent is permitted to make an arbitrary choice between them, having sufficient reason to A and sufficient reason to B. But when there is strong evidence for P and equally strong evidence for \sim P, one isn't permitted to simply believe one or the other. Instead, one must withhold belief, neither believing that P nor believing that \sim P. This paper examines what explains this contrast, focusing in particular on a proposal recently developed by Mark Schroeder across several papers. Schroeder aims to explain the contrast by an appeal to non-evidential, epistemic reasons against belief. But, I argue, it's not clear exactly what those reasons are, nor how those reasons are to be weighed against evidential reasons. Despite these challenges, I argue that there are grounds for optimism that the contrast can be explained within the broad

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framework Schroeder provides, and I aim to provide resources to meet the aforementioned challenges.

Keywords Practical reasons, Theoretical reasons, Weighing reasons, Permissive balancing, Prohibitive balancing, Mark Schroeder

1 Introduction

There's a common contrast drawn between practical and theoretical reasons.¹ In cases in which the relevant *practical* reasons are equally balanced,² with strong reasons in support of two incompatible options – say, A-ing and B-ing – it's *permissible* for an agent to decide between them. In such cases, there would be sufficient reason for the agent to A and sufficient reason for the agent to B. When Buridan's ass is between two equidistant, equally good, bales of hay, it's permissible for it to head toward the one on the left, and permissible for it to head toward the one on the right. In contrast, in cases in which the relevant *theoretical* reasons are equally balanced, with strong evidence in support of two incompatible propositions – say, P and \sim P – it's *not* permissible for someone to believe one or the other; instead, the proper response is to *withhold* belief, neither believing that P nor believing that \sim P. In this case, the agent would lack sufficient reason to believe that P and lack sufficient reason to believe that \sim P. To borrow terminology introduced by Selim Berker, practical reasons display *permissive balancing* (since they permit A-ing and permit B-ing), whereas theoretical reasons display *prohibitive balancing* (since they prohibit believing that P and prohibit believing that \sim P) in such cases.³

1 See, for instance, (Feldman, 2000: p. 680; Harman, 2004: pp. 48–49 and Dancy, 2018: p. 137).

2 Although I'll often consider cases in which the reasons are equally balanced, there could be underdetermination due to incommensurability, in which case, strictly speaking, there wouldn't be an equal balance. I'll here follow Raz (1986: p. 322), who takes two options to be “incommensurate if it is neither true that one is better than the other nor true that they are of equal value.” To illustrate the possibility, Raz (1986: p. 332) provides the (now standard) example of someone choosing between two careers – a career in law and a career as a clarinetist. It won't matter, for the purposes of this paper, whether the underdetermination is due to an equal balance or to incommensurability.

3 Berker (2018: p. 430).

Some philosophers believe this contrast marks an important difference between practical and theoretical reasoning.⁴ Others have argued that it provides the basis for an argument against the existence of pragmatic reasons for belief.⁵ This paper won't take up these topics, at least directly. Instead, we'll be interested in the relatively unexplored question of *what explains* the common contrast. *Why*, exactly, do practical reasons display permissive balancing, but theoretical reasons display prohibitive balancing, in such cases?

I'll focus in particular on one recent proposal from Mark Schroeder, which I think has the right structure for explaining the common contrast.⁶ Schroeder's main idea is that there are three options available in the theoretical case (believing that P, believing that \sim P, and withholding belief – that is, neither believing that P nor believing that \sim P), and once we factor in *reasons for withholding belief* (which, for Schroeder, are non-evidential, but epistemic, reasons) we can explain why the theoretical cases exhibit prohibitive balancing, but the practical cases do not.⁷ I'll explain the main idea in Sect. 2 below.

Despite my agreement with the broad structure Schroeder provides, I have two main concerns about his proposal. My first concern (discussed in Sect. 3) is that it's not clear exactly *what* these non-evidential, epistemic reasons are. None of the examples of non-evidential epistemic reasons Schroeder provides (across several papers) are sufficiently general, such that they would apply to *every* case in which we see prohibitive balancing. My second concern (discussed in

4 Harman (2004).

5 Berker (2018).

6 See especially Schroeder (2015) and (2012a), though a precursor to the main idea can be found in a footnote in *Slaves of the Passions*. (See Schroeder, 2007: pp. 130–131, fn. 6, part 2).

7 As we'll see below, once we recognize such *non-evidential* epistemic reasons, we'll see how my initial description of the common contrast in the first paragraph, while fairly standard, is misleading in that such reasons are left out. There's also a terminological difference in that Schroeder speaks of non-evidential *epistemic* reasons, not non-evidential *theoretical* reasons, and I presented the common contrast in terms of a difference between practical and *theoretical* reasons (which aligns with how it usually presented). But this is merely a different choice of terminology, and I take Schroeder's use of "epistemic" (which will be explained below) to map onto my use of "theoretical" in this introduction. To avoid confusion, I'll use "epistemic" in discussing Schroeder's views below.

Sect. 4) is that it's unclear how these reasons to withhold belief are to be *weighed against* the relevant evidential reasons, in order to reach some all-things-considered verdict about whether one has, or lacks, sufficient reason to believe that P. Schroeder himself employs two different conceptions of how such weighing occurs — one in an earlier paper, one in a later paper — without commenting on the differences between them. I'll explain his two weighing conceptions, and then go on to explain why I prefer one to the other. (It's worth noting upfront that my preferred weighing conception will be assumed in my exposition of Schroeder's main idea in Sect. 2. For ease of exposition, I hold off explicitly discussing the two weighing conceptions until Sect. 4.) But, as I'll also argue in Sect. 4, even on that preferred weighing conception, we won't yet have a full explanation of the common contrast, since certain puzzling differences between the practical and theoretical cases will remain unexplained.

Despite these concerns about Schroeder's proposed explanation of the common contrast, I'll argue in this paper that there are grounds for optimism about explaining the common contrast within the broad framework Schroeder provides. And I'll develop proposals designed to meet the concerns outlined in the early part of the paper. In particular, after defending (Sect. 4) the particular weighing conception I prefer, I'll offer (Sect. 5) an explanation of the puzzling features that remain unexplained on Schroeder's view, and, lastly, provide (Sect. 6) an account of the reasons against belief, such that those reasons would be sufficiently general, applying to every case in which we see prohibitive balancing. I'll briefly conclude (Sect. 7) by tying the pieces together, and presenting what I take to be the correct explanation of why practical reasons exhibit permissive balancing when there are equally good reasons for two options and theoretical reasons exhibit prohibitive balancing when the evidence for P and \sim P is equally good.

2 Schroeder's view

Before getting to Schroeder's main idea, it would help to have a couple of examples of permissive and prohibitive balancing with which

to work.⁸ Suppose John is deliberating about whether to go to a party to catch up with old friends, or to instead head to the library to study for his exam tomorrow morning. He knows that he can't do both. Suppose he's got good reasons to go to the party (he hasn't seen his friends in a while; it'll be fun), and good reasons to go to the library (he'll be less anxious if he prepares more), and neither set of reasons outweighs the other. Assuming that there are no other relevant reasons in play, it's permissible for John to decide to go to the party, and permissible for John to decide to go to the library. This is a case of permissive balancing.⁹ Now, suppose Jane is deliberating about whether John will show up at the party. She's got some good evidence that John will show up (John seemed particularly enthusiastic about the party when she talked to him earlier; a reliable mutual friend said John is planning to come) but also has good evidence that John won't show up (he's got a poor track record when it comes to attending weekday parties; another reliable mutual friend saw someone that looked like John headed in the direction of the library with a backpack full of books). The evidence supporting John showing up does not outweigh, nor is it outweighed by, the evidence supporting John not showing up. In light of this, it's not permissible for Jane to believe that John will show up, and not permissible for Jane to believe that John won't show up. This is a case of prohibitive balancing.¹⁰

8 Harman (2004: p. 45) gives a similar pair of examples, on which these are based.

9 There are variations on John's case in which the library reasons and party reasons are equally balanced, but he's not permitted to arbitrarily choose one or the other: perhaps John knows that he's about to receive more practically relevant information that may tip the scales in one direction or the other. Here, he would be prohibited (for now) from making an arbitrary choice between them. (Schroeder 2012b: pp. 470–473 discusses a similar case).

10 The common contrast cannot be explained simply by noting that when it comes to action there are two options (A-ing, not A-ing) whereas when it comes to believing there are three options (believing that P, believing that ~P, withholding belief). For one thing, it's not clear why we shouldn't instead say that when it comes to believing there are two options (believing that P, not believing that P) and allow that there may be multiple ways of not believing that P (e.g., by withholding, or by instead believing that ~P). That would then be analogous to the practical case, in which there might be multiple ways of not A-ing. (John, for instance, could not go to the party by instead going to the library, or by going nowhere.) Or, putting the point another way, it's not clear why we shouldn't think the practical case

Such examples are of particular interest to Schroeder since they present a challenge to the idea that we can explain both what it is to have sufficient reason for *action* and what it is to have sufficient reason for *belief* in the same way. In particular, the pair of examples presents a challenge to the following thesis, which Schroeder finds attractive:

Sufficiency as Balance: A set S of reasons for X in favor of A is sufficient just in case for each (cohesive) set T of competing reasons, S is at least as weighty as T.¹¹

The case of John doesn't pose any challenge to Sufficiency as Balance. The set of reasons to go to the party is at least as weighty as the set of competing reasons (the reasons against going to the party), and so John has sufficient reason to go to the party. Similarly, the set of reasons to go to the library is at least as weighty as the set of competing reasons (the reasons against going to the library), and so John has sufficient reason to go to the library, too. But the case of Jane is more difficult. Jane's evidence for the proposition that John will show up is as weighty as her evidence for the proposition that John won't show up. So, if the evidential reasons were the only reasons in play, it would come out, according to Sufficiency as Balance, that Jane has sufficient reason to believe John will show up, and that Jane has sufficient reason to believe John won't show up. But those

involves three (or more) options. For instance, we might think of John's case as involving three options: going to the party, going to the library, and neither going to the party nor going to the library. I'm inclined to think that there are several acceptable ways of characterizing the options available to John and Jane. Additionally, even if we were forced to accept some strictly regimented conception of the relevant options, we still have to address the substantive question of how to explain the differences between John and Jane. That strictly regimented conception of the options could at best be a *component* of that explanation.

¹¹ Schroeder (2015: p. 163). I'll here follow Schroeder and take the competing reasons to be reasons *against doing A*. He does note other possibilities (pp. 163–164), some of which would make the parenthetical "(cohesive)" relevant, but I'll set those aside. His formulation of Sufficiency as Balance also includes a statement of when reasons are conclusive ("A set S of reasons for X in favor of A is conclusive just in case for each (cohesive) set T of competing reasons, S is weightier than T.") that's not relevant to our purposes here.

are incorrect predictions; as we noted above, Jane is *prohibited* from forming either belief.

Schroeder's strategy of reply is to deny that the evidential reasons are the only reasons in play. There are three options available to Jane: believing John will show up, believing John won't show up, and withholding belief on whether John will show up.¹² And there are, in Schroeder's view, *non-evidential* reasons for Jane to withhold belief. So, while Jane's reasons *for* believing that John will show up are provided by the evidence that John will show up, Jane's reasons *against* believing that John will show up are provided *both* by the evidence that John won't show up *and* by the non-evidential reasons to withhold. If this is right, Jane's case doesn't pose any threat to Sufficiency as Balance. Once we factor in the reasons to withhold, it's *not* the case that the set of reasons for believing John will show up are at least as weighty as the set of reasons against believing John will show up (which, again, are provided both by the evidence he won't show up and by the reasons to withhold), and so it doesn't follow from Sufficiency as Balance that Jane has sufficient reason to believe John will show up.

In Schroeder's view, the reasons to withhold are *epistemic* reasons — they are the kind of reasons that bear on the distinctive rationality of belief¹³ — and so they contrast with pragmatic reasons provided

12 Schroeder (2015: p. 165, 2012a: p. 274). The 2012a paper presents the third alternative as "withholding belief," while the 2015 paper presents the third alternative as "lacking belief." Some philosophers (Friedman, 2013; Sturgeon, 2010) have argued that withholding belief on whether P is a distinct positive attitude, not to be identified with lacking both a belief that P and a belief that \sim P. (Note that if you've *never considered* the question of whether P, you could lack both beliefs. But it would at least be somewhat odd to say that you're withholding belief about P in that case.) If we follow Friedman and Sturgeon in thinking that withholding is a distinct positive attitude, then it's plausible that not all reasons to lack belief are reasons to withhold. Consider Schroeder's example (discussed in the following section) of the reason to lack belief in PvQ where someone already believes P with sufficient evidence, and Q is some arbitrary proposition. (The reason, roughly, is that such a belief would be useless for drawing new inferences.) Presumably, this wouldn't also be a reason to have a distinct positive attitude of *withholding* with respect to PvQ.

13 In Schroeder's view, this would be the kind of rationality which is entailed by *knowledge*. There may be *some* sense in which it is rational for one to believe that P when there's a strong incentive to do so, but this wouldn't be the kind of rationality involved in knowing that P.

by incentives (such as, say, the eccentric billionaire's offer of \$10,000 to Jane if she believes that John will show up). But, at the same time, they are not *evidential* reasons, since the evidential reasons in our example will be exhausted by the considerations counting in favor of believing John will show up, and the considerations counting in favor of believing John will not show up.¹⁴ Thus, Schroeder's view requires that we recognize the possibility of *non-evidential, epistemic reasons*.

If Schroeder's view is on the right track, it offers us a promising explanation of the common contrast – an explanation, moreover, which reveals that the difference between John and Jane isn't all that deep. After all, John and Jane have something important in common: they both have sufficient reason to act or have some attitude just when the reasons to do so are at least as weighty as the reasons against doing do. The *difference* between them is just that in Jane's case, there are (non-evidential, epistemic) reasons to withhold, and these reasons make the balance of reasons come out such that Jane lacks sufficient reason to believe that John will show up and lacks sufficient reason to believe that John won't show up.¹⁵

Before getting to my two main concerns about Schroeder's proposal, I'll offer one quick comment on how Schroeder is understanding these *non-evidential, epistemic reasons* to withhold that would

¹⁴ See Schroeder (2015: p. 161, 2012a: p. 276).

¹⁵ It's worth noting a potential terminological complication here. In introducing the John and Jane cases, I employed Berker's (2018) terminology of permissive and prohibitive balancing, which I think helpfully describes those cases, since John is *permitted* to choose one of the options, and Jane is *prohibited* from simply believing one or the other. But if we look closely at Berker's definition of prohibitive balancing (see p. 430), the idea is that in a case where there's good epistemic reasons for believing that P and equally good epistemic reason for believing that \sim P and there are *no other epistemic reasons in play*, one is prohibited from simply believing one or the other. (It's not just that there's no other *evidence*, but that there are no other *epistemic reasons*.) In light of this, perhaps we should say that Schroeder's strategy would show how cases like Jane's case aren't, strictly speaking, cases of prohibitive balancing, since there are actually other epistemic reasons in play which might go unnoticed: non-evidential, epistemic reasons. Terminology aside, Schroeder's strategy would nonetheless provide a helpful way of explaining the differences between John and Jane – particularly, why Jane can't just believe one or the other, while John is permitted to make an arbitrary choice between the library and the party – which is my main concern in this paper.

be applicable in Jane's case. It's fairly obvious that these reasons cannot themselves be evidence for or against John's showing up, since in Jane's case it's stipulated that all the evidence is on the table: it's stipulated that there is some evidence John will show up, and some equally good evidence he won't show up, and no other evidence is in play. But Schroeder makes the further claim that such reasons are non-evidential in that they aren't provide by *facts about* one's total evidence, such as by facts about how the evidence balances out.¹⁶ As I'll note in Sect. 6, in developing Schroeder's strategy, this is not something that we need to take on board.

3 Non-evidential epistemic reasons

Let's now turn to my first concern about Schroeder's proposal, which has to do with its substance rather than its structure. My concern is that we're never told exactly *what* those non-evidential, epistemic reasons to withhold are. It's true that Schroeder provides examples of non-evidential, epistemic reasons to withhold in several papers. But, as we'll see below, none of those examples are such that we can assume that they will be applicable to every theoretical case exhibiting prohibitive balancing. This leaves us with a mystery: *what are* the reasons that explain prohibitive balancing?

Let's start with some of Schroeder's examples of non-evidential, epistemic reasons. As one example, Schroeder points out that certain beliefs will be useless when it comes to drawing further inferences. Suppose Jack rationally believes that P, and we're looking at the pros and cons of Jack's believing some disjunction, $P \vee Q$, where Q is some arbitrary proposition. The very good evidence Jack has for P will also be very good evidence for $P \vee Q$. But it's permissible for Jack to lack belief in $P \vee Q$ because of a relevant non-evidential epistemic reason, namely: "because there is nothing that you can rationally infer from $[P \vee Q]$ that you cannot already infer from P."¹⁷ As Schroeder notes, this is a reason for Jack not to bother forming the belief that $P \vee Q$ (at least if he's not considering the question of whether $P \vee Q$).

¹⁶ See, for instance, (2012a: p. 276).

As another example of a non-evidential, epistemic reason against belief, Schroeder points to the *practical costs* in having false beliefs. He does so with the aim of explaining the possibility of pragmatic encroachment – that is, how the stakes can affect the epistemic rationality of belief (e.g., how a critical mortgage payment being due can affect the epistemic rationality of believing that the bank will be open on Saturday morning).¹⁸ Of course, Schroeder is concerned with *epistemic* rationality, and so he doesn't want to allow that just *any* cost of having a false belief is relevant; the costs provided by the threats of malicious demons, for instance, would not affect the epistemic rationality of belief. In Schroeder's view, the relevant cost would "have to be a cost that a belief gives rise to when it is false, due to its playing its normal role as a belief – the sort of cost that is intrinsic to the nature of belief."¹⁹ (To illustrate, he gives the example of the costs incurred by having false beliefs about whether there is a Lady or a Tiger behind the door.²⁰) Such costs can provide reasons to withhold belief. For instance, the critical mortgage payment being due provides me with a reason to withhold belief on whether the bank is open Saturday morning.

In another paper, Schroeder gives the example of someone who withholds belief about whether P because new, decisive evidence about P is about to come in.²¹ The fact that new, decisive evidence is about to come in isn't itself a piece of evidence for or against P, and so it's a non-evidential reason to withhold belief in P. But it counts as an epistemic reason given its relevance to the distinctive rationality of belief.

Such examples succeed, in my view, in establishing the possibility of non-evidential, epistemic reasons to withhold belief. And, in principle, such reasons could explain the rationality of withholding belief in cases in which the evidence for P and the evidence for \sim P is equally balanced. But it's hard to see why we should be confident that

17 Schroeder (2015: p. 166).

18 See Fantl and McGrath (2002) and Stanley (2005).

19 Schroeder (2012a: p. 277).

20 Schroeder (2012a: p. 277). The reference is to the well-known short story by Frank Stockton, "The Lady, or the Tiger?". In the fable, one becomes the tiger's next meal in choosing that door.

21 Schroeder (2012b: pp. 470–473).

such reasons would exist in *all* theoretical cases exhibiting prohibitive balancing. Think, for instance, of our example of Jane, who is wondering whether John will show up at the party. We can assume she has no reason to think that new, decisive evidence will be coming in momentarily. Perhaps she's certain that she won't find out whether John will show up or not until the night of the party, but is deliberating about it anyway, weighing the relevant evidence. And, unlike beliefs about the location of tigers, a false belief that John will show up, or that John won't show up, need not involve any *practical cost*. Perhaps John's presence or absence won't make a difference in her plans — she'll stay just as long at the party, etc. — and she is deliberating about whether he'll be there, not because anything is at stake, but just because she's passing the time while she's waiting in line for a coffee. But, unlike the case of coming to believe PvQ (where one already rationally believes P, and Q is some arbitrary proposition), her learning that John will be at the party *will* allow her to draw new inferences. So that non-evidential epistemic reason is inapplicable here as well.²² In short, none of Schroeder's examples of non-evidential epistemic reasons to withhold belief are applicable to Jane's case. But that's worrisome if such reasons are supposed to play an explanatory role in all cases of prohibitive balancing.

One might reply to this objection by insisting that one of these three reasons must be present, even if it's just a reason with trivial weight. (After all, our intuitions about the non-existence of reasons might be unreliable, leading us to easily mistake an existing lightweight reason for no reason at all.²³) For instance, perhaps Jane's having a false belief about whether John will show up does carry at least *some risk* of a practical cost, and that's enough for there to be a *reason* against believing John will show up.

22 Additionally, Jane is currently *deliberating* about whether John will show up, and we can assume that she *cares*, at least theoretically, about the answer, even if it will have no practical upshot for her plans. If there are reasons to avoid cluttering our minds (see Harman 1986: pp. 12–15) — reasons which might explain why it's permissible to avoid forming beliefs in arbitrary disjunctions entailed by the contents of our current beliefs — those reasons are typically thought to be inapplicable when one is deliberating about the question or cares about the question. (For relevant discussion, see Broome, 2013: pp. 157–158).

23 See Schroeder (2007: pp. 93–97) for support for this general strategy.

However, it's worth observing here that such lightweight reasons would not explain all cases of prohibitive balancing. Why not? Note that withholding belief is thought to be appropriate not only when the evidence for P *precisely balances* with the evidence for \sim P, but also when the evidence is *close*. If the evidence favors P over \sim P but not *significantly* so, it would still be appropriate for one to withhold belief.²⁴ In such a case, we would need a reason with more than a trivial weight to prevent the reasons for believing that P from dominating. The evidence for P would here provide reasons in favor of believing that P, and the evidence against P would provide (less weighty) reasons against believing that P, and the *other* reasons against believing that P would need to be weighty enough to more than cover the difference, otherwise it would come out that one has sufficient reason to believe that P, according to Sufficiency as Balance. We need a reason with some heft.

In summary, the worry here is that if (non-evidential, epistemic) reasons to withhold are to explain the difference between John and Jane — specifically, why John is permitted to pursue either option, but Jane is not permitted to have either belief — we should have a clear account of *what* those reasons are. The point here is not to challenge Schroeder's examples of non-evidential epistemic reasons, nor to challenge the particular argumentative purposes to which those examples are put, but instead to suggest that we don't yet have a firm grasp on the reasons that would explain the difference between John and Jane, and so we're not yet able to explain every case of prohibitive balancing.

4 Two weighing conceptions

Let's now turn to my second concern about Schroeder's proposal, which has to do with its structure. In particular, it has to do with how the non-evidential reasons to withhold are to be *weighed against* the other relevant evidential reasons in order to reach some all-things-considered verdict about what one has sufficient reason to believe. We can distinguish two weighing conceptions.

²⁴ See Snedegar (2017: p. 126) and Schroeder (2015: p. 162).

The first weighing conception, which was in the background of my exposition of Schroeder’s proposal in Sect. 2, holds that in order to have sufficient reason to believe that P, the reasons to believe that P must be at least as weighty as the *combined weight* of reasons against believing that P.²⁵ And, in Jane’s particular case, the reasons against believing John will show up are provided *both* by the evidence that John won’t show up, *and* by the non-evidential reasons to withhold. So, on this weighing conception, Jane would have sufficient reason to believe that John will show up only when her reasons for believing that John will show up are at least as weighty as the combined weight of the reasons against believing that John will show up (which, again, are provided by both the evidence that John will not show up, and the non-evidential reasons to withhold). For instance, let’s suppose that Jane’s reason to withhold is a practical cost of the sort Schroeder describes in his discussion of pragmatic encroachment. (I argued in the previous section that there’s no reason to suppose there would be such practical costs in Jane’s case. But, for purposes of illustration, let’s put that aside for now.) The idea is that, in this particular case, that practical cost would be both a reason to withhold, and a reason against believing John will show up. And so when we weigh up the pros and cons of Jane’s believing John will show up, in the “pro” column we would have the evidence favoring John’s showing up, and in the “con” column we would have the evidence against John’s showing up, and the practical cost. And the “pros” would be outweighed by the combined weight of the “cons”.

Proponents of this weighing conception could supplement their view with some general theory of when some fact constitutes a *reason against* a particular option. One unpromising possibility would be to see Jane’s case as following from some more general principle: in Jane’s case, evidence for $\sim P$ and non-evidential reasons to withhold are both reasons against believing P since *in general* whenever you have three options (say, A, B, and C), the reasons for A and reasons for B are also reasons against C, and so Jane’s reasons *for*

25 Although I’m leaving out the qualification here, I’m taking “reasons” to refer to epistemic reasons (some of which are evidential, some of which are non-evidential). I take no stand in this paper on the contested question of whether there are pragmatic reasons for belief. For a small sample of important contributions to this debate, see Kelly (2002), Shah (2006), Leary (2017), and Berker (2018).

believing $\sim P$ and reasons *for* withholding belief are also reasons *against* believing that P . The problem, however, is that the more general principle is false. Consider a case in which our three options are equally well-supported. (Perhaps think of a case in which I'm considering dining at three equally good restaurants tonight.) If the reasons for B and reasons for C are reasons against A , then I would lack sufficient reason for A , since those reasons for A would now be outweighed, two-to-one. Likewise, if the reasons for C and reasons for A are reasons against B , then I would lack sufficient reason for B , since those reasons for B would also be outweighed, two-to-one. And if the reasons for A and reasons for B are reasons against C , then I would lack sufficient reason for C , since those reasons would be outweighed, two-to-one. It would come out, implausibly, that I am prohibited from pursuing any of A , B , and C .²⁶ So, this general principle is unpromising.

But we're not making use of any such general principle here. The idea, rather, is simply that the feature we've identified as a reason to withhold with respect to P is also, intuitively, a reason against believing that P . In our variation on Jane's case, the practical cost of being mistaken would be both a reason to withhold and a reason against believing John will show up.²⁷ In summary, on this first weighing conception, for Jane to have sufficient reason to believe John will show up, her reasons to believe John will show up must be at least as weighty as the combined weight of the reasons against believing John will show up, and in this particular case, the latter set of reasons includes both the evidence that John won't show up and the practical cost (or whatever else we suggest as the non-evidential reason).

26 Schroeder would also reject the general principle. Recall his statement of Sufficiency as Balance: "A set S of reasons for X in favor of A is sufficient just in case for each (cohesive) set T of competing reasons, S is at least as weighty as T ." The qualification "cohesive" is designed to rule out having the reasons for both B and C compete with the reasons for A in the way that generates the problem mentioned in the main text. (See Schroeder, 2015: p. 164.).

27 The point here is just that the particular fact we've identified as a reason to withhold is also, intuitively, a reason against belief. (Other candidate reasons to withhold may also share this feature.) A stronger claim, which I'm not making here, would be that reasons to withhold *just are* reasons against believing, so anything identified as a reason to withhold is thereby a reason against believing.

But Schroeder sometimes suggests a second weighing conception, according to which in order to have sufficient reason to believe that P, the reasons to believe that P must be at least as weighty as the reasons to believe that $\sim P$ and the reasons to believe that P must be at least as weighty as the reasons for withholding. Here, we consider *individually* the weight of the set of reasons to believe that $\sim P$ and the weight of the set of reasons to withhold. And we then state that the set of reasons to believe that P must be at least as weighty as each of these two sets taken individually, in order for one to have sufficient reason to believe that P. Here's one of Schroeder's formulations:

Belief Sufficiency: It is epistemically rational for S to believe p just in case S has at least as much epistemic reason to believe p as to believe $\sim P$ and S has at least as much epistemic reason to believe p as to withhold with respect to p.²⁸

According to Belief Sufficiency, for Jane to have sufficient reason to believe John will show up, her reasons to believe John will show up must be at least as weighty as her reasons to believe John will not show up and her reasons to believe John will show up must be at least as weighty as her reasons to withhold.

To see the differences between the two weighing conceptions, let's suppose that the weights of the relevant sets of reasons are as follows:

(a)	Evidential reasons to believe that P	3
(b)	Evidential reasons to believe that $\sim P$	2
(c)	Non-evidential reasons to withhold	2

(I acknowledge that there is something highly artificial about the assignment of precise numerical weights; I'm doing so only for the purposes of illustrating differences between the two weighing conceptions.) According to Belief Sufficiency, it would be epistemically rational to believe that P since (a)>(b) and (a)>(c). But according to the first weighing conception, it wouldn't be epistemically rational to believe that P since (a)<(b)+(c), on the assumption that, in this

²⁸ Schroeder (2012a: p. 274).

particular case, the evidential reasons to believe that $\sim P$ and non-evidential reasons to withhold are both reasons against believing that P , and their weights can be added together.²⁹

In my view, we should prefer the first weighing conception to the second. It's not clear why we shouldn't allow that the reasons against believing that P , even though some are evidential and some are non-evidential, could combine together to outweigh the reasons for believing that P , even when each set of reasons wouldn't be weighty enough to do this on its own. After all, we normally allow that reasons of different kinds can behave in this way, as when, say, the combination of moral and prudential reasons against A-ing make it such that I lack sufficient reason to A, even though neither set of reasons by itself would do the trick, or when the combination of perceptual and testimonial reasons render it impermissible to believe that P when neither set of reasons by itself would do so.

Additionally, Belief Sufficiency will generate troublesome verdicts when it comes to Jane's case, as I'll now explain. Jane has just as much evidence that John will show up as she has that John will not show up. If her evidence is equally balanced, we could represent the relevant weights as follows:

(a)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will show up	3
(b)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will not show up	3

We want to deliver the result that it's not epistemically rational for Jane to believe John will show up. To do so, it would have to be via the *second* conjunct of Belief Sufficiency ("S has at least as much epistemic reason to believe p as to withhold with respect to p .") failing to be true. (The first conjunct of Belief Sufficiency ("S has at least as much epistemic reason to believe p as to believe $\sim P$ ") is clearly true since we've set up Jane's case such that she *does* have as much

²⁹ As we noted earlier, it would be unwise to endorse the *general* thesis that reasons for an alternative to an option are always reasons against that option. (For another argument against this thesis, see Snedegar, 2021) Additionally, even if we did endorse that general thesis, it would be unwise to think that the *weights* of the reasons can always be added together in this way. (On this point, see Nair, 2016) But we're endorsing no such general theses here.

reason to believe John will show up as to believe that John will not show up.) In particular, it would have to be that Jane doesn't have at least as much reason to believe John will show up as she has to withhold. So, the weight of the reasons to withhold would have to be as follows:

(c)	Non-evidential reasons to withhold	> 3
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But now suppose that we increase the evidence on both sides (perhaps two reliable witnesses say John is on the way, while two more say he's hitting the books), so that the weights are now as follows:

(a)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will show up	6
(b)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will not show up	6

Now, in order to avoid the result that Jane has sufficient reason to believe that John will show up, the weight of the reasons to withhold would have to increase:

(c)	Non-evidential reasons to withhold	> 6
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But, as Selim Berker has persuasively argued, this would be surprising, mysterious behavior.³⁰ What would explain the sudden increase in the weight of the reasons to withhold? After all, we're told by Schroeder that these reasons are non-evidential reasons, neither provided by particular facts about the evidence, nor by facts about how the evidential reasons are balanced.³¹ So, how would this change

³⁰ Berker (2018: p. 450) notes that the weight of the reason would have to increase "like magic." Berker doesn't distinguish between the two weighing conceptions I've identified here. But he interprets Schroeder as employing the second, problematic weighing conception. (See p. 449.) See also Snedegar (2017: pp. 124–126) for relevant discussion.

³¹ Schroeder (2012a: pp. 276–277). In contrast, Snedegar (2017: pp. 120–11) develops an impressive contrastivist theory of reasons which allows for evidence for P to constitute a reason to withhold *rather than* believe that \sim P. Exploring contrastivism would take us too far afield here.

in the evidence on both sides result in an increase in the weight of the reasons to withhold?³²

There is one rather straightforward response to Berker's challenge: we could hold that the reasons to withhold are significantly weighty, such that *no* increase in the evidential reasons will be enough to outweigh them. To illustrate it numerically, we might say the maximum weight of the evidential reasons is 10, but the non-evidential reasons to withhold can go up to 11. One problem with this response is that we would need some justification for these claims about reasons. Why think evidential reasons have a maximum weight? Why think reasons to withhold extend beyond it? But even if we allow for such claims, there will still be difficulties, which we could again illustrate with the case of Jane. Suppose we allow that the weights of the relevant reasons in Jane's case are initially as follows:

(a)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will show up	3
(b)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will not show up	3
(c)	Non-evidential reasons to withhold	11

But now suppose that Jane discovers that the evidential reasons to believe John will show up are much weaker than she initially thought. (Perhaps she discovers that John's earlier enthusiasm about the party was feigned.) And the resulting weights are now as follows:

³² I don't think this objection provides a decisive refutation of the second weighing conception. There may be resources for dealing with the objection, especially if we relax Schroeder's assumption that reasons to withhold are non-evidential. If we relax this assumption, we could perhaps maintain that the fact that the evidence for P and \sim P balances out will be a reason to withhold that will always increase in weight to outweigh the weight of the evidence. And it need not be entirely mysterious: it's just that reasons to withhold are systematically sensitive to how the evidence balances out. (Thanks to an anonymous referee for this suggestion.) But the view would nonetheless still be somewhat puzzling. It's not puzzling that the weight of the reason to withhold would be systematically sensitive to *how the evidence balances out*. But it's puzzling why it would also be systematically sensitive to the *amount* of balanced evidence – say, whether it's a (3,3) or (6,6) balance. But the latter sensitivity would be what's needed if the reason to withhold is to continue to be weighty enough as we increase the evidence on both sides. But there may be ways of explaining away this puzzling feature.

(a)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will show up	1
(b)	Evidential reasons to believe that John will not show up	3

We'll suppose that the preponderance of the evidence favors believing John will not show up, and so this is what Jane has sufficient (indeed, conclusive) reason to believe. But according to Belief Sufficiency, for it to be rational for Jane to believe John will not show up, the weight of the reasons to withhold would have to dramatically decrease, such that

(c)	Non-evidential reasons to withhold	≤ 3
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But what would explain such a dramatic shift? (Again, keep in mind that the reasons to withhold aren't provided by pieces of evidence, nor by facts about how the evidence balances out.) It seems deeply mysterious.

We can avoid the epicycles that would be needed to explain the unusual behavior of the weight of the reasons to withhold by instead adopting the first weighing conception, according to which one has sufficient reason to believe that P when the evidential reasons to believe that P are at least as weighty as the *combined weight* of the evidential reasons to believe that $\sim P$ and the reasons to withhold. On this conception, increasing the strength of the evidence on both sides won't make any difference, since the increase in the evidence for P will be offset by the increase in the evidence for $\sim P$. Regardless of how we vary the strength of the evidence on both sides, for P and for $\sim P$ – whether it's (3,3) or (6,6) as in the illustrations above – we would need only a reason to withhold of some weight in order for the reasons to believe that P to fail to be at least as weighty as the combined weight of the reasons against believing that P (where this includes both the evidence for $\sim P$ and the reasons to withhold).

That completes my argument against the second weighing conception. But it does raise another puzzle. We noted above that Jane will continue to lack sufficient reason for believing each of the relevant propositions (that John will show up; that John will not show up), even when we pile on new evidential reasons on both sides. Increasing the

combined weight of the evidential reasons on both sides – moving from (3,3) to (6,6) – doesn't change Jane's case: her case remains one of prohibitive balancing throughout. But the puzzle is that this *doesn't* happen in the practical case. If we come by new reasons for A-ing and new reasons for B-ing, the case could *shift* from one in which A-ing and B-ing are both prohibited to one in which they are both permitted. Let's consider a practical example to illustrate this possibility. Suppose, as before, that John has just as much reason to go to the party as to go to the library. But now suppose that the weather is awful, and, all-things-considered, John ought to do neither. So, he lacks sufficient reason to go to the party and lacks sufficient reason to go to the library. But if we now *add (equally strong) new reasons* for each of the two options which are on a par, the normative situation could change: the "double increase" could make the case one of permissive balancing instead. To fill out the example, let's suppose that John has suddenly developed a romantic interest in Jane and learned she might be interested as well, and let's suppose that a lot now hinges on the particular test for which John is studying. And suppose these new reasons are equally strong. Now, despite the bad weather, John has sufficient reason to go to the party and sufficient reason to go to the library.

In the theoretical case, the "double increase" doesn't affect the exhibition of prohibitive balancing, while in the practical case, it does. What explains that difference? Even if we work with the first of Schroeder's two weighing conceptions, we haven't yet done enough to explain that difference.

5 Opportunity costs

Let's take stock. We've explored Mark Schroeder's promising explanation of why there's permissive balancing in the practical cases but prohibitive balancing in the theoretical cases. According to Schroeder, it's because in the theoretical cases there's a third option of *withholding*, and the reasons for believing that P must be at least as weighty as *both* the (evidential) reasons for believing that $\sim P$ and the (non-evidential) reasons for withholding, in order for one to have sufficient reason to believe that P. But this claim could be read in two ways. I pointed out

two possible weighing conceptions, one according to which the former reasons must be at least as weighty as the latter sets of reasons *combined*, and one according to which the former reasons must be at least as weighty as the latter sets of reasons *taken individually*, and I argued in favor of the first weighing conception. But this isn't yet enough to explain why "double increases" can change a case of prohibitive balancing to one of permissive balancing in the practical cases, but not in the theoretical cases. And we still have the unresolved concern from Sect. 3: specifying exactly *what* the reasons to withhold are, and having those reasons be sufficiently general, so that they can explain every theoretical case exhibiting prohibitive balancing. Let's start with the "double increase" challenge.

A good place to begin in thinking about the differences between the practical and theoretical cases is to note that while there's little, if any, cost involved in withholding belief, there would be a cost involved in taking neither of the equally well-supported options in the practical case.³³ If John doesn't go to the party and doesn't go to the library, he'll miss out on the benefits of both. And if Buridan's ass indecisively remains between the two equally good, equidistant bales of hay, it'll starve. But if Jane withholds belief on whether John will attend the party, she's not any worse off (epistemically or otherwise) because of that.

In John's case, the benefits of going to the party (seeing his friends), and the benefits of going to the library (being better prepared), could be understood as *opportunity costs* of his taking neither option. Of course, it's also true that in going to the library, John would miss out on the benefits of going to the party, and in going to the party, John would miss out on the benefits of going to the library. But the point is that the "third alternative" involves missing out *on both*.

Given that we can understand the benefits of going to the library and the benefits of going to the party as opportunity costs of staying home, it's no surprise that by increasing the benefits attached to the other two options (as we do in a "double increase" case), we could make it the case that John ought not to stay home, and instead ought to arbitrarily choose between the party and the library. In increasing those benefits, we increase the opportunity costs,

³³ See Snedegar (2017: p. 131).

thereby strengthening the weight of the set of reasons against staying home.³⁴ And so we can account for how “double increases” could change John’s case from one in which choosing to go to the party and choosing to go to the library are both *prohibited* to one in which both are *permitted*.

The proposal here simply reflects the ordinary idea that practical deliberation – in particular, the assessment of the pros and cons of some option – involves taking account of the relevant opportunity costs. In our case, one of the “cons” of John’s staying home is that he would neither get to see his friends, nor be well-prepared for the exam. But we don’t see a structural parallel to opportunity costs in the theoretical case. In particular, there are no “opportunity costs” to Jane’s withholding belief in a case in which the evidence is balanced out. And so it should come as no surprise that by increasing the evidence on both sides (the evidence for John showing up and the evidence for John not showing up), we don’t increase the weight of the set of reasons against withholding.

In short, in the practical case, there are opportunity costs to staying home, which are increased in the “double increase” case, thereby strengthening the weight of the set of reasons against staying home, but in the theoretical case, there’s nothing parallel to opportunity costs that would be increased by adding evidence on both sides, and so the strength of set of the reasons against withholding isn’t increased by such additions.

It’s compatible with this to allow that *in some contexts* the evidence for P could count as a reason against withholding with respect

34 For the purposes of this paper, I don’t need to commit myself to any particular view about the weights of reasons other than that mentioned in the text here (namely, that increasing the benefits of both the library and party options would increase the opportunity costs of staying home, thereby increasing the strength of the set of reasons against staying home). We don’t want to endorse the unpromising proposal, discussed in §3 above, according to which reasons for one option are always reasons of the same weight against other options, since, as we noted, this would have the unwelcome result in the case with three equally good options that none are permitted. Additionally, it would be odd, to say the least, for us to say in John’s case that the benefits of going to the party and the benefits of going to the library are *both* reasons against staying home whose weights add together, since John can get at most *one* of these sets of benefits; he can’t *both* go to the party and go to the library.

to P. Perhaps this is so in cases in which the evidence for P is decisive. But the point is that *in this particular context*, in which the evidence for and against P is equally balanced, the evidence that P doesn't count as a reason against withholding.³⁵ Note that it would be rather peculiar for a person to *cite* the evidence for P as a reason against withholding in a context in which the evidence for P and for \sim P is equally balanced. It would be like the person who, desiring to draw a lukewarm bath, turns on both the hot and cold faucets, and, despite the bath being a perfect temperature, cites the fact that the hot water has been on as a reason not to get in. There may be some contexts in which the fact that the hot water has been on is a reason not to get in (e.g., when there's no other water going into the tub), but this is not one of them.

The point here makes use of the familiar idea of the *holism* of normative reasons: some fact could be a reason in one context, but not in another.³⁶ The fact that I've promised to do so is often a reason to meet you for lunch, but not when I've given that promise under duress. The fact that the wall appears red is often a reason to believe it's red, but not when we know it's illuminated by a red light. Likewise, the evidence that John will be at the party is often a reason against Jane withholding belief, but not when there's equally good evidence that he won't be there. In that particular context, the evidence that John will be at the party isn't any reason against withholding.

We can now see how to address the worry about "double increases" which we encountered at the end of the previous section. Recall that the worry was that we need to explain a difference between the practical and theoretical cases: in the practical cases, adding new equally strong reasons on both sides can make the third alternative inappropriate, while adding new equally strong evidence for P and for \sim P doesn't make withholding inappropriate. We can explain this by noting that there are opportunity costs attached to the third alternative in the practical case, but no similar opportunity costs to withholding

³⁵ Nor does that evidence that \sim P count as a reason against withholding. Nor does the conjunction of the evidence that P and the evidence that \sim P. In this particular context, there's nothing that plays the role of the opportunity costs in the practical case, counting against the third alternative.

³⁶ See Dancy (2004, esp. Ch. 3). The examples that follow are both taken from Dancy.

in the theoretical case. In the theoretical case, in which the evidence for P and for $\sim P$ is equally balanced, neither the evidence for P nor the evidence for $\sim P$ count as reasons against the third alternative of withholding belief. So, it's no surprise that increasing the evidence on both sides doesn't make withholding come out to be impermissible.

It is this substantive difference in the relevant reasons in the cases of Jane and John that explains the puzzling differences when it comes to "double increases." While this observation goes beyond what Schroeder says, it's compatible with the framework he offers. And I think it should be a welcome addition, not only because it helps explain the puzzling differences when it comes to "double increases," but also because it's intuitively plausible in its own right: in a context in which the evidence for P and for $\sim P$ is equally balanced, the evidence for P is, intuitively, simply not a reason against withholding belief.

6 The general reason against belief

Recall that we are also aiming to explain why Jane lacks sufficient reason to believe John will show up. The worry was that if we just considered the equally balanced evidence, she would have as much reason for believing he'll show up as against believing he'll show up. And on a traditional understanding of the sufficiency of reasons, reflected in Schroeder's Sufficiency as Balance, that would mean that she has sufficient reason to believe John will show up, and sufficient reason to believe John won't show up. And, of course, that's not true.

Schroeder's insight was that we need to allow for the possibility of non-evidential reasons against believing. If we factor in such reasons, we can say that when the evidence is equally balanced – that is, when there's just as much evidence for P as for $\sim P$ – it doesn't follow that the (epistemic) reasons are equally balanced, since the reasons for believing P will be provided by the evidence for P , but the reasons against believing P will be provided *both* by the evidence for $\sim P$ and these nonevidential reasons. And, working with the weighing conception defended in Sect. 4, the combined weight of the latter reasons would make it such that one lacks sufficient reason to believe that P . The remaining problem to solve, left over from Sect. 3, is the question of what exactly those non-evidential reason against belief are.

My proposal is that there is a general reason against forming any belief – namely, that one *risks being mistaken* in doing so. Of course, this reason can be, and is often, outweighed. For instance, in a case in which you’ve got good evidence for P, and ought to believe that P, this reason will have been outweighed.³⁷ But in a case in which you’ve got no evidence whatsoever – either for or against P – and there are no other reasons in play, this reason against believing that P will make it the case that you ought not believe that P. This helps explain why it’s not permissible to just go around forming beliefs when there’s no evidence whatsoever available.

This general reason explains not only why you shouldn’t form beliefs when there’s no evidence whatsoever available, but also why you shouldn’t form beliefs when there’s *scant* evidence. Suppose you hear a rumor that P, but have no other evidence for or against P. In this case, you ought not believe that P, even though you have some evidence in support of it. The idea here is that the evidence you have isn’t *good enough* to justify believing that P. But we can explain this by allowing that our general reason against forming a belief has enough weight to outweigh the reasons provided by the evidence you have for P.

In my view, this general reason against forming any belief helps explain why *not believing that P* is the default option.³⁸ (The default would be overridden when you’ve got good evidence for P. But that’s compatible with *not believing that P* being a default.) The explanation

³⁷ Additionally, as the strength of the evidence for P increases in this case, the risk of being wrong would diminish, which would plausibly also reduce the weight of this reason against believing that P. This reason against believing that P would thus be both outweighed and further “attenuated,” in Dancy’s (2004: p. 42) terminology, as the evidence for P increases. I find this feature to be independently attractive, though nothing hinges on that here. (It’s worth observing that there are practical examples in which some fact functions as both a reason for A-ing and an attenuator of reasons against A-ing. Here’s one example involving risk: the risk of a messy divorce is a reason against marrying Sam. But Sam’s good character is a reason to marry Sam, and attenuates this reason against marrying Sam, by reducing the risk of a messy divorce.) The flip side of this is that the reason against belief can be “intensified” (again, in Dancy’s terminology) as the risk of being wrong increases. So, in cases like Jane’s, in which the evidence that John will show up balances out with the evidence that he won’t, the reason would be significantly weighty (since the risk of being wrong is very high).

³⁸ On default rules, and their relationship to reasons, see Horty (2012).

is that there's already a reason against belief, and we need reasons *for* believing that are weighty enough to counterbalance it. Moreover, I don't think that the existence of such a reason will be especially controversial. Even those who follow William James in thinking that the aim of avoiding error needs to be balanced against the aim of obtaining truth would still be in a position to recognize the risk of error as a reason against believing that P — a reason, moreover, that would be of little relevance in contexts where the evidence strongly favors P.³⁹ (Additionally, if we were to ask Jane, or someone similarly situated, why she didn't just go ahead and believe John would show up, despite the evidence being a wash, she would likely point to the risk of error in such methods of belief-formation. Our proposed reason thus has the advantage of being one which is likely to be cited by Jane herself, or those similarly situated.)

The proposal here is able to avoid my worry about Schroeder's view from Sect. 3, where it seemed that none of his proposed epistemic, non-evidential reasons would be applicable in every case in which there's good evidence for P and equally good evidence for \sim P. In contrast, our proposed reason (the risk of being mistaken) is applicable in every such case. (Indeed, it's a general reason against belief, and so it's applicable not just in such cases. As we saw, it's applicable even when there's no evidence available on the question.) Our proposed reason might easily be confused with one to which Schroeder points in his discussion of pragmatic encroachment: the downstream *practical consequences* of having false beliefs about, say, banking hours or the locations of tigers. But we're not concerned with such practical consequences. Rather, the idea is that the risk of having mistaken beliefs *itself* constitutes a reason not to form a belief, regardless of the downstream consequences of doing so.⁴⁰ Our proposal thus has no trouble extending to cases where nothing is at stake, such as

39 James (1897: p. 18).

40 One might worry about how we should understand the risk of mistaken beliefs as a reason against belief, if it's apart from the downstream practical consequences. One option would be to adopt a broadly *instrumentalist* conception of epistemic rationality in which the rationality of doxastic attitudes is explained in terms of *epistemic* goals, such as, roughly, the goals of avoiding error and having true beliefs. (See Foley, 1987, Ch.1.) On this conception of epistemic rationality, Jane's forming the belief that John will show up is instrumentally irrational with respect

Jane's casual deliberation in the coffee shop line about whether John will show up to the party.

One further advantage of our proposal is that it can explain a feature of the theoretical cases we noted earlier: withholding belief is appropriate not only when the evidence for P and for \sim P equals out, but also when *it's close*, as when the balance of evidence slightly favors P over \sim P, or slightly favors \sim P over P. As we noted above, the reason that is central to our account (the risk of mistaken belief) explains not only why we're not permitted to believe that P when there's *no* evidence that P, but also why we're not permitted to believe that P when there is *scant* evidence that P. Our proposed reason has enough weight, such that not just any old bit of evidence will be enough to equal its weight. But if that same reason is operative in cases like Jane's in which the evidence for P and the evidence for \sim P equals out, it should come as no surprise that adding a slight bit of evidence for P would not be enough to shift the balance in favor of believing that P. So, withholding belief would also be appropriate when the evidence for P and for \sim P is close.

In cases in which there is no, or scant, evidence that P, or in which the evidence for and against P balances out (as in Jane's case), or is close, we can generate the result that there's insufficient reason for believing that P by appealing to our general reason against belief, which gets added to the "con" column when listing out the "pros" and "cons" of believing that P. This employs the first weighing conception from Sect. 4, which holds that in order to have sufficient reason to believe that P, the reasons in favor of believing that P must be at least

to her goal of avoiding error, in the same way that my not studying for an exam is instrumentally irrational with respect to my goal of doing well on the exam, since both risk not achieving the goal. But we could also work with non-instrumentalist conceptions of epistemic rationality. Some philosophers are skeptical that agents have any such general goals as *avoiding error* or *having true beliefs*, as opposed to more specific, fine-grained goals, such as *avoiding error with respect to such-and-such* (Kelly, 2003). And they thus suggest that epistemic rationality cannot be reduced to instrumental rationality. (Conceptions of epistemic rationality which appeal to belief's "constitutive aim" need not count as instrumentalist, since that constitutive aim need not be the goal of any particular agent. On this point, see Velleman, 2000: pp. 19, 184, 253.) But both the instrumentalists and non-instrumentalists alike would deny that our reason to avoid mistaken beliefs must depend entirely upon the downstream *practical* consequences of mistaken beliefs.

as weighty as the combined weight of the reasons against doing so. And in all these cases, the combined weight of the “cons” outweighs that of the “pros.” We could also allow that our general reason against belief is a reason *for* withholding.⁴¹ In Jane’s case, it would come out that she has sufficient (and conclusive) reason to withhold if the reasons for withholding outweigh the reasons against withholding. But it’s plausible that they do. As we noted in the previous section, it’s not very plausible to think that the evidence that John will show up and the (equally good) evidence that John won’t show up constitute reasons *against* withholding. (They don’t function as “opportunity costs” in that way that the benefits of the two main alternatives in John’s case are opportunity costs of staying home.) Now, perhaps there could be *other* reasons against withholding which are applicable. But given that the risk of being mistaken is quite high in Jane’s case, we can plausibly allow that our reason *for* withholding is a relatively weighty one, and thus it would come out that Jane has sufficient (and conclusive) reason to withhold.⁴²

I’ve argued so far that in appealing to the risk of being mistaken as a general reason against belief, we can provide an explanation of the difference between John and Jane within Schroeder’s framework. I noted above, in support of this proposal, that Jane would likely cite the fact that she would risk being mistaken as a reason if someone were to ask her why she didn’t just go ahead and believe, say, that John will show up, when the evidence was equally balanced. But it’s also worth observing that if she found herself confronting an interlocutor who didn’t already know how the evidence was balanced, she might instead cite the fact *that the evidence is equally balanced* as her reason against believing that John will show up. Such observations won’t settle questions about the metaphysics of reasons, but it’s worth noting that there are several options here. One would be

41 However, we may wish to avoid *identifying* reasons against belief with reasons for withholding. See Schroeder (2017: p. 373).

42 Development of this thought would require that we discuss the nature of withholding (including whether and how it differs from merely lacking belief), as well as the nature of the reasons for and against withholding. Unfortunately, we lack the space to do that here. But I think we have some grounds for optimism that our approach will be able to generate good predictions when it comes to withholding.

to have one or the other consideration (the risk of being mistaken, the equally balanced evidence) be Jane's reason, while the other is a background condition on the reason.⁴³ Another would be to have the *conjunctive fact* (that the evidence is equally balanced and simply believing one or the other would risk error) be Jane's reason. Along these lines, one could do away with the distinction between reasons and background conditions altogether and argue that the "complete reason," to use Raz's phrase, would include both of these facts (along with others), but which aspects of the complete reason one would cite would depend upon, among other things, what's accepted as common ground in a particular conversational context.⁴⁴ I won't be able to settle complex debates about the metaphysics of reasons in this paper. I will state that my preference is to have *the risk of being mistaken* as Jane's reason, or at least a component of its contents, since, for one thing, this helps us see what Jane's case has in common with the case where there's no evidence, or scant evidence, for P. But I would also be amenable to views which allow for facts about how the evidence is equally balanced to figure into the content of Jane's reason. And here it's worth returning to a point about Schroeder's framework that I noted at the end of Sect. 2. Schroeder takes non-evidential epistemic reasons against belief to be "non-evidential" in that the reason is neither a piece of evidence, nor provided by facts about how the total evidence balances out. I think we need only follow Schroeder part way on this count. We *do* need to allow that the reason against belief isn't itself a piece of evidence, since in Jane's case, we've stipulated what the relevant evidence is: there's some evidence John will show up, and some equally good evidence he won't show up, and that's all the evidence there is. But we need not rule out the possibility that Jane's reason (or a component of it, or a background condition for it) is provided by facts about how the total evidence balances out. It's thus worth emphasizing that in taking *the risk of being mistaken* as a general reason against belief, and using that to explain Jane's case, we need not adopt a strict conception of the metaphysics of reasons that would also exclude facts about how

43 On the distinction between reasons and background conditions, see Schroeder (2007: Ch. 2).

44 See Raz (1975: pp. 22–25).

the total evidence balances out from being among the contents (or background conditions) of Jane's reason.

Of course, much more could be said about our proposed reason against belief. We could attempt to explain exactly *why* the risk of error is a reason against belief – an explanation that would likely lead us to discuss, among other things, the nature and aim of belief, and its correctness conditions.⁴⁵ But such a task is beyond the limited scope of this paper. My aim has been merely to suggest that we have the resources to explain the common contrast, and, moreover, to do so in a way that is compatible with Sufficiency as Balance. And we've said enough, I believe, to establish grounds for optimism on this front.

7 Conclusion

By way of summarizing and concluding, let's return one last time to John and Jane. John has sufficient reason to go to the party and sufficient reason to go to the library, while Jane lacks sufficient reason to believe John will show up and lacks sufficient reason to believe he won't. What explains the difference between John and Jane? I've argued that we're able to explain the difference working within a framework according to which there's sufficient reason for some action or attitude just when the reasons for it are at least as weighty as the reasons against. The reasons for John to go to the party are at least as weighty as the reasons against, and so John has sufficient reason to go to the party. The reasons for John to go to the library are at least as weighty as the reasons against, and so John has sufficient reason to go to the library. But Jane's case seemed less straightforward, since the evidence for and against John's showing up balanced out, and yet Jane *doesn't* have sufficient reason for believing John will show up, and *doesn't* have sufficient reason for believing he won't. But once we allow that Jane has an epistemic reason against believing John will show up (that she risks being mistaken, as I suggested in Sect. 6), we can say that the reasons for believing John will show up (provided by the evidence that he'll show up) do not outweigh the *combined weight* of

⁴⁵ On the aim of belief, see Wedgwood (2002) and the papers collected in Chan (2013).

the reasons against believing he'll show up (provided by the evidence that he won't show up, and our proposed reason). (This employs the weighing conception I defended in Sect. 4, which avoids several problems faced by a rival conception.) And so Jane doesn't have sufficient reason to believe John will show up. And, by similar reasoning, Jane doesn't have sufficient reason to believe John won't show up. As we noted in Sect. 4, the reasons in Jane's case will continue to balance out this way, even in a "double increase" case in which we add in lots of evidence on both sides – evidence that John will show up and evidence that he won't. But that generates a puzzle, since a "double increase" in a case like John's case could change the case from one of prohibitive balancing to one of permissive balancing. Why doesn't it do so in Jane's case? The answer, proposed in Sect. 5, is that a double increase in the practical case increases the opportunity costs of the "third alternative," but nothing similar happens in the theoretical case, given the nature of the evidential reasons involved, particularly the way in which they constitute reasons against withholding only in certain contexts.

This completes our explanation of the relevant differences between John and Jane. I hope to have shown in this paper that although there are several concerns about Schroeder's particular approach to the common contrast, there are nonetheless grounds for optimism about explaining the common contrast within that framework.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2021 St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality (SLACRR), where I received very helpful comments on the paper from Jeff Behrends. I also owe a large debt to the excellent referees for *Synthese* who helped me improve this paper significantly.

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