

# Should smart beta factors be orthogonalised?

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# What is orthogonalisation and why do some investors prefer it?

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- Smart beta factors are not independent e.g. if you increase your tilt towards high quality, you will probably increase your tilt to large-cap and low volatility at the same time.
- This makes risk budgeting and performance attribution complicated. It would be easier if the factors were orthogonal.
- We can artificially create independent factors by a series of cross-sectional regressions:

## Orthogonalisation Method:

- Leave your 1<sup>st</sup> factor unchanged.
- For the 2<sup>nd</sup> factor, regress it onto the 1<sup>st</sup> factor and take the residuals. This is your new 2<sup>nd</sup> factor.
- For the 3<sup>rd</sup> factor, regress it onto both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> factor and take the residuals. This is your new 3<sup>rd</sup> factor.
- Keep going until you have a list of orthogonal factors.

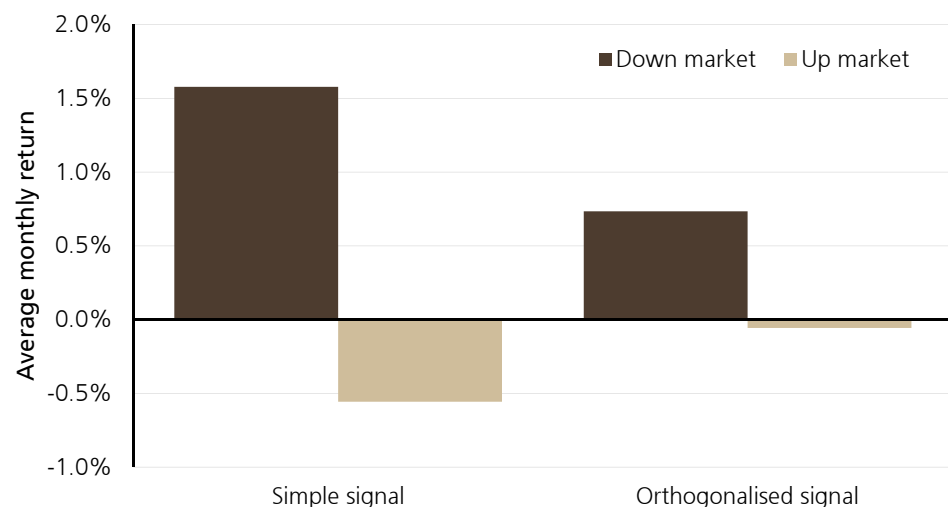
# Why don't we like orthogonalisation?

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- We do not generally recommend orthogonalisation:
  - You lose your intuition about the factors.
  - You increase the turnover of your smart beta factor portfolios.
  - There are statistical problems that investors mostly aren't thinking about.
  - It reduces the performance of price momentum.

# You lose your intuition about the factors (1)

- Portfolio managers build up considerable intuition about how factors behave and how they interact with each other.
- Orthogonalised factors may no longer behave like the simpler, original smart beta factor.
- For example, consider a quality factor which has been orthogonalised to size, value, momentum and risk.



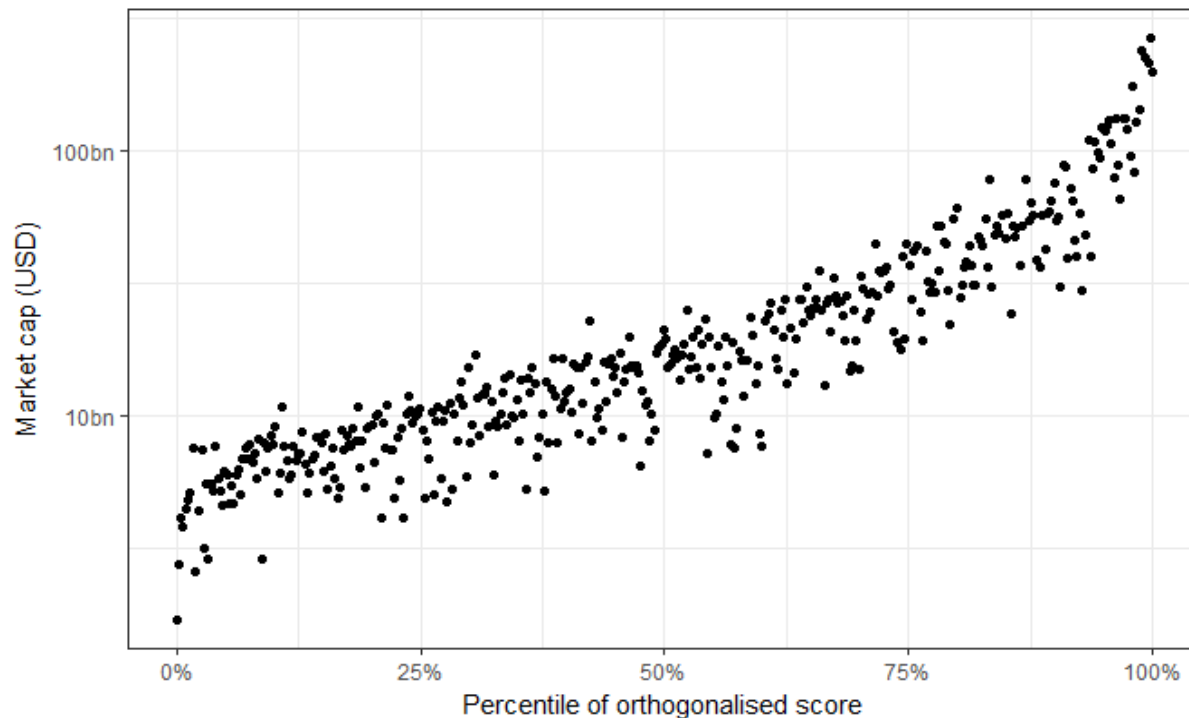
Source: UBS Quants

- Without orthogonalisation, quality provides a good hedge against market downturns.
- With optimisation that effect is much weaker.

# You lose your intuition about the factors (2)

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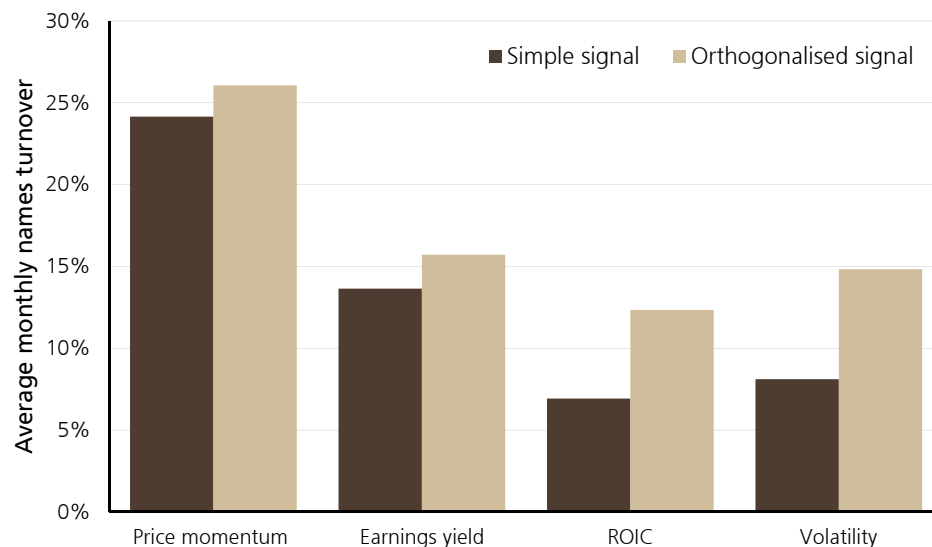
- This can also cause problems in portfolio implementation.
- For example, large-cap portfolios can usually be assumed to be very liquid, but a portfolio based on a size score orthogonalised to value, momentum, quality and risk may include some small-cap names.



Source: UBS Quants

# Increased turnover in smart beta factor portfolio

- Cross-sectional regressions are unstable. The coefficients can move a lot from month to month. That means that even very slow moving signals e.g. ROIC can have high turnover portfolios once they are orthogonalised.
- For example, suppose we run a simple backtest of either i) a simple smart beta factor or ii) a smart beta factor orthogonalised against three other smart beta factors.
- Turnover is a lot higher for the orthogonalised signal.



Source: UBS Quants

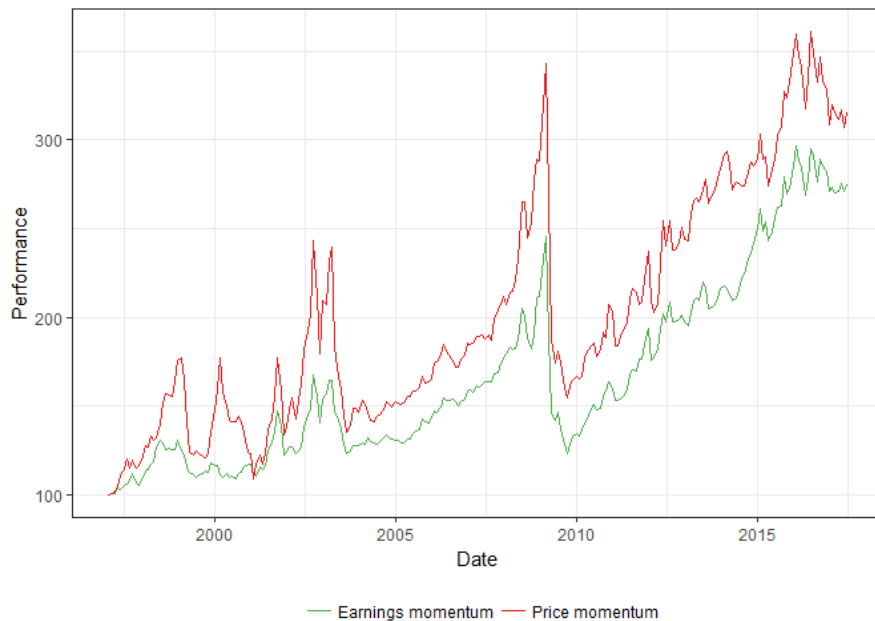
Please note that we do not adjust for the errors in variables problem in these orthogonalisations.

# Statistical problems (1)

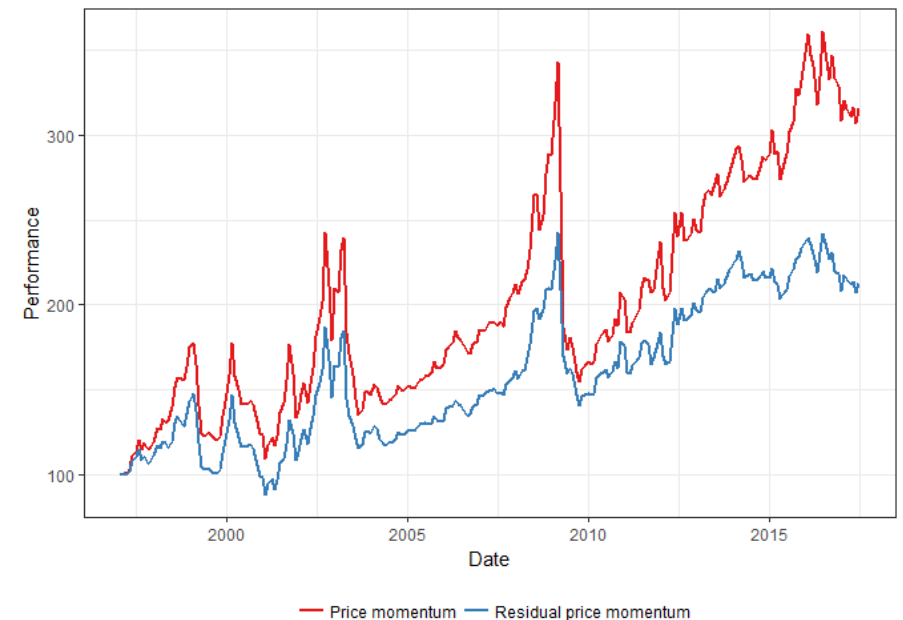
A puzzle:

- Price momentum and earnings momentum are extremely similar factors.
- So if you regress price momentum onto earnings momentum, the residual should be mostly random noise.
- Random noise should not outperform.
- But a backtest based on this residual does outperform.

Performance of price momentum & earnings momentum



Performance of price momentum residuals



Source: UBS Quants

# Statistical problems (2)

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What's going on?

- Cross-sectional regressions with noisy data will typically underestimate the beta, due to an *errors in variables* problem, and all financial data is noisy.
- If your beta is underestimated then your residuals will not really be orthogonal to the earnings momentum signal. Some of the information from the earnings momentum signal has been "left in".
- That is what allows the outperformance of the residual signal.

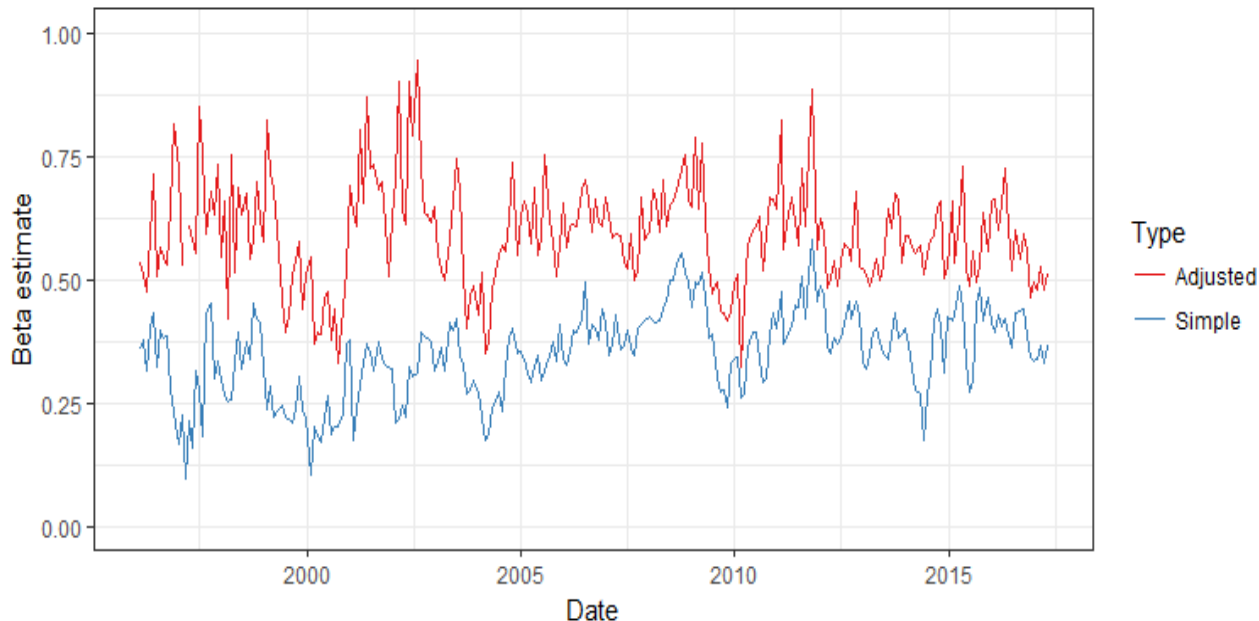


# Statistical problems (3)

What can we do about this?

- We can use an instrumental variable to correct our estimate for the beta.
- We find another highly correlated variable (here earnings revisions) and re-estimate the beta in our regression:

$$\text{New estimate of beta} = \frac{\text{cov}(\text{price momentum}, \text{earnings revisions})}{\text{cov}(\text{earnings momentum}, \text{earnings revisions})}$$

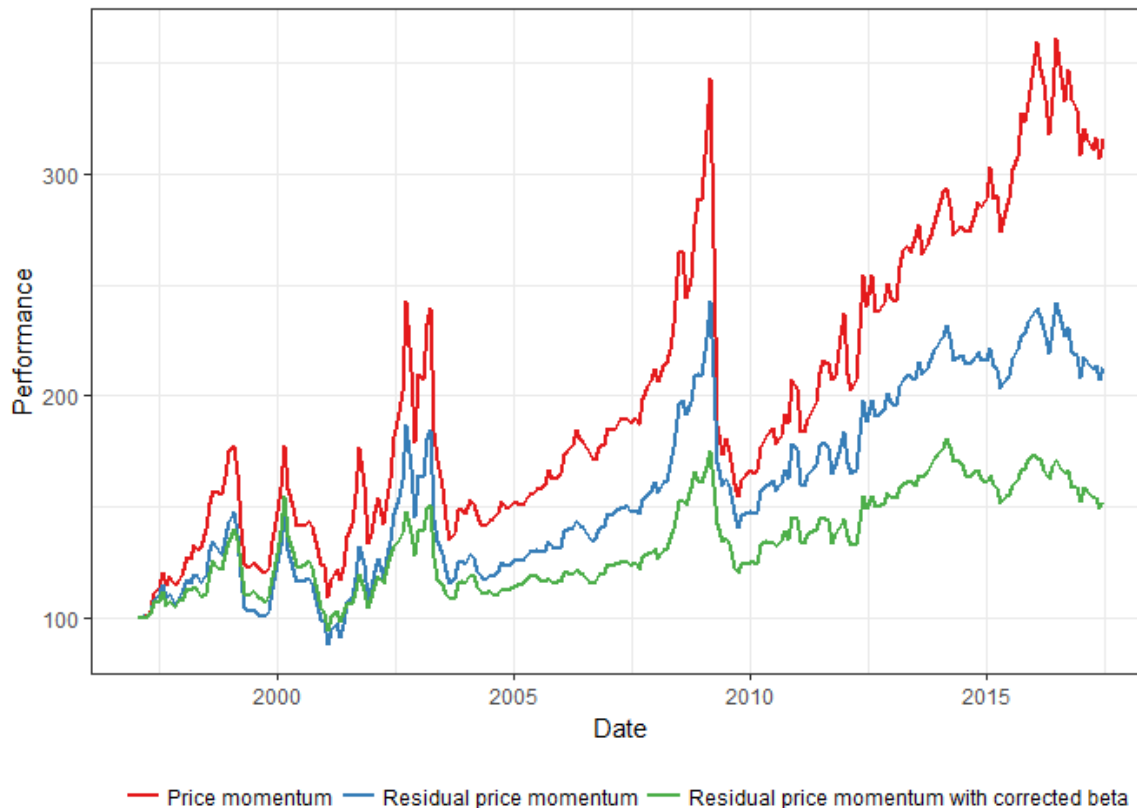


Source: UBS Quants

- Note that the new, adjusted estimate for the beta is consistently higher.
- That is evidence of an errors in variables problem.

# Statistical problems (4)

- With the correct beta, price momentum orthogonalised to earnings momentum is close to flat.

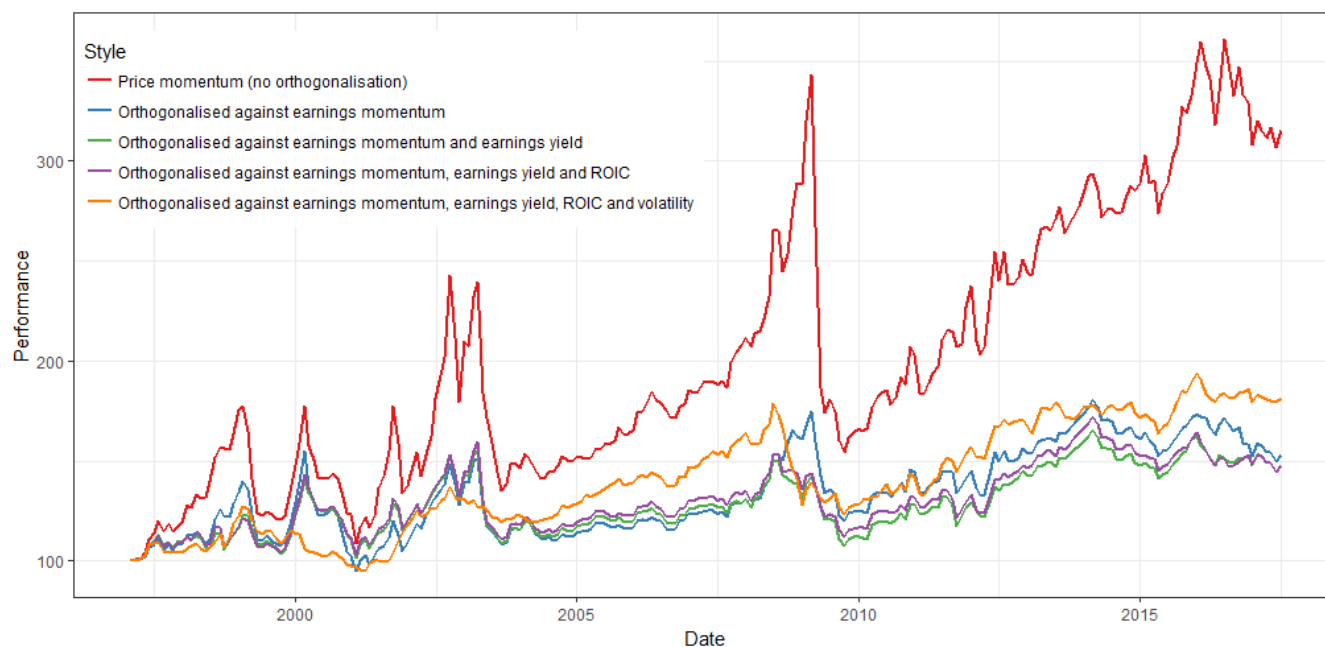


Source: UBS Quants

- We suspect that errors in variables problems are common with orthogonalisation and are not being corrected for.

# Reduces the performance of price momentum (1)

- Price momentum has a time varying exposure to the other smart beta factors.
- When high quality has outperformed, price momentum will tilt towards high quality and when value has outperformed, price momentum will tilt towards value.
- This style rotation effect is driving a lot of the performance of price momentum. If you remove it, by orthogonalising the signal to the other smart beta styles, you will reduce the performance.



Source: UBS Quants, Europe, long-short factors

Orthogonalisations use instrumental factors for earnings momentum and for earnings yield.

# Conclusions

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- Orthogonalisation is tempting to portfolio managers because it seems to make risk budgeting and performance attribution much simpler.
- However, we generally think that it is a bad idea:
  - Orthogonalisation can make smart beta factors unintuitive.
  - There are statistical problems with orthogonalisation that most investors do not realise.
  - Orthogonalised signals are less stable and so increase turnover.
  - For price momentum and maybe other factors, orthogonalisation can reduce performance.
- Investors should focus on understanding the relationships between simple, intuitive smart beta factors rather than creating artificial, orthogonalised factors and putting their faith in an orthogonalisation process which is unlikely to deliver what it promises.

# Reduces the performance of price momentum (2)

- Orthogonalisation pushes up turnover and tends to decrease performance.

	Return	Risk	Risk adjusted return	Turnover
Momentum (no orthogonalisation)	5.8%	21%	0.27	24%
Orthogonalised against earnings momentum	2.1%	13%	0.16	40%
Orthogonalised against earnings momentum and earnings yield	1.9%	12%	0.16	40%
Orthogonalised against earnings momentum, earnings yield and ROIC	1.9%	12%	0.16	40%
Orthogonalised against earnings momentum, earnings yield, ROIC and volatility	3.0%	9%	0.34	38%

Source: UBS Quants, Europe, long-short factors

Orthogonalisations use instrumental factors for earnings momentum and for earnings yield.

- Orthogonalising against volatility does improve performance, by reducing price momentum's negative beta exposures after market drawdowns, but we can achieve similar results by volatility targeting.

# Appendix

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# Errors in variables (1)

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- Suppose there is a linear relationship between  $y$  and  $x$ :

$$y = \beta x + \varepsilon$$

- We want to estimate  $\beta$ , but, unfortunately, we don't have data on  $x$ , only on  $x^* = x + \eta$ , because  $x$  is measured with error.
- We estimate  $\beta$  by regressing  $y$  onto  $x^*$ :

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Estimate} &= \frac{\text{cov}(x^*, y)}{\text{var}(x^*)} \\ &= \frac{\text{cov}(x + \eta, \beta x + \varepsilon)}{\text{var}(x + \eta)} \\ &= \frac{\beta \sigma_x^2}{\sigma_x^2 + \sigma_\eta^2} \\ &= \frac{\beta}{1 + \sigma_\eta^2 / \sigma_x^2} \end{aligned}$$

- Note that this estimate is always less than  $\beta$  and if  $x^*$  is very noisy then it will be a lot less than  $\beta$ .

## Errors in variables (2)

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- Suppose we have found a variable  $z$ , which is correlated to  $x$ , but not to the noise term,  $\eta$ , or to the error term,  $\varepsilon$ .
- Then we can get a new estimate for the beta as the ratio of the covariance of  $y$  and  $z$  and the covariance of  $x^*$  and  $z$ :

$$\begin{aligned}\text{New estimate} &= \frac{\text{cov}(y, z)}{\text{cov}(x^*, z)} \\ &= \frac{\text{cov}(\beta x + \varepsilon, z)}{\text{cov}(x + \eta, z)} \\ &= \frac{\beta \sigma_{x,z} + \sigma_{\varepsilon,z}}{\sigma_{x,z} + \sigma_{\eta,z}} \\ &\approx \beta\end{aligned}$$



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