

The Aim of Belief: A Priori Defenses  
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**The sources of epistemic normativity:** Give a ground (vindication, justification) for the practice of epistemic evaluation (evaluation in terms of knowledge/ignorance, rational/irrational, justified/unjustified).

One way to do this:

ESSENTIALISM ABOUT EPISTEMIC EVALUATION: Epistemic evaluation (of beliefs) is the evaluation of beliefs, qua beliefs.

The idea of epistemic evaluation as “purely intellectual” evaluation; evaluating intellection, qua intellection, or in “purely intellectual” terms. One way to articulate the idea of “belief, qua belief” is to maintain that **truth is the aim of belief**.

**Performance normativity** (trying, intending, desiring, striving, endeavoring) as an unproblematic kind of normativity: we understand the source of normativity in this case.

How should the thesis that truth is the aim of belief be understood? And what can be said in its defense?

### 1. The literal conception

“A thing intended or desired to be effected; an object, purpose.” (*OED*) Consider the archer; the target is her aim because she intends or desires to hit the target. If she does not intend to hit the target, then hitting the target is not her aim.

Truth is not the aim of belief, in this sense (Wedgewood 2002, p. 267).

### 2. The intentional conception.

[U]nless one takes there to be a criterion of success in the case of an attitude towards the proposition that  $p$ , and, further, unless that criterion is truth, then whatever else it may be, the attitude in question is not that of belief. So unless the attitude-holder has what we might call a controlling background intention that his or her attitudinizing is successful only if its propositional content is true, then the attitude taken is not that of belief. (Humberstone 1992, p. 73)

INTENTIONAL CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily,<sup>1</sup> someone believes  $p$  only if she intends or desires that she believe  $p$  only if  $p$ .

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<sup>1</sup> At least necessarily. We need the “aim of belief” to flow from the nature or essence of belief, as such.

Counterexample: Calderon believes that he's at Los Pinos, but doesn't intend or desire that he believe that he's at Los Pinos only if he's at Los Pinos.

AMENDED INTENTIONAL CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily, someone believes  $p$  only if she intends or desires that, in general, for all  $q$ , she believe  $q$  only if  $q$ .

Objection 1: Still not psychologically plausible for many believers (the unreflective, children, animals).

Objection 2: Merited irrationality (self-enhancement bias, irrational optimism, overestimation of control, doxastic partiality, virtuous charity) is an element of living well. So I *don't* desire that, for all  $q$ , I believe  $q$  only if  $q$ .

It may be impossible to intend or desire that I believe some particular content, which I take to be false. But it's not impossible to intend or desire that I believe some unspecified false contents.

### 3. The taxonomic motivation

Some theorists (Railton 1994, p. 72, Velleman 2000, p. 247, Shah and Velleman 2005, pp. 297-8) motivate the thesis that truth is the aim of belief by appeal to the idea that we need to give an account of the difference between belief and other propositional attitudes (desire, imagination, etc.). We don't.

The various conceptions of the aim of belief, canvassed here, would have to spelled out differently, if they were to serve as definitions of 'belief'. (As they stand, they'd be circular.)

### 4. The actual regulation conception

In forming and retaining a belief ... one responds to evidence and reasoning in ways that are designed to be truth-conducive. Hence belief is regulated for truth. (Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 298, see also Velleman 2000, p. 253)

Naturalists can't take this talk of design literally. One possibility is that "design" is to be spelled out in evolutionary terms. (I consider that possibility elsewhere; here I'm looking only at a priori defenses of the aim of belief.) But perhaps this:

ACTUAL REGULATION CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily,<sup>2</sup> a person's beliefs are generally and for the most part regulated for truth, i.e. (in general, and for the most part) she forms, sustains, and abandons her beliefs in ways that are actually reliable, with respect of the goal of believing truths and not believing falsehoods.

Counterexample: The victim of an evil demon's beliefs, which are not regulated for truth (in this sense).

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<sup>2</sup> Again, necessity is the least that's required here.

AMENDED ACTUAL REGULATION CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily, someone believes  $p$  only if only if (in general, and for the most part) she forms, sustains, and abandons her beliefs in ways that are meant to be reliable (but may not actually be reliable).

Objection: But meant by whom? This reintroduces either the intentional conception (§2) or the language of “design.”

## 5. The argument from charity

What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all there is to learn; the same goes for what the speaker believes. [...] [I]t is impossible for an interpreter to understand a speaker and at the same time discover the speaker to be largely wrong about the world. [...] [I]t becomes impossible correctly to hold that anyone could be mostly wrong about how things are. (Davidson 2001, p. 148-51)

Can this Davidsonian idea give us a defense of (some version of) the thesis that truth is the aim of belief? The argument would need to take the following form:

- D1. Necessarily,<sup>3</sup> someone believes  $p$  iff a fully informed interpreter would conclude that she believes  $p$ .
- D2. Necessarily, interpreters obey the principle of charity, i.e. they try to make their interpretations such that people’s beliefs are true.
- D3. Therefore, truth is the (or at least an) aim of belief.

Obviously, we still want a conception of the aim of belief. And this will make a difference in assessing the cogency of the argument. But I think we can reject the argument straightaway, because premise D1 (the interpretationist conception of belief) is false.

## 6. The presupposed norm conception

Consider the norm or rule: for all  $q$ , it is correct to believe  $q$  iff  $q$  is true. Call this the *truth rule*. Ralph Wedgwood (2002) argues that this concept of correctness is “normative” for the practice of believing. What this means is that engaging in the practice of forming and abandoning beliefs (“reasoning”) commits one to following the truth rule (i.e. believing  $p$ , if you judge that  $p$  is true, and not believing  $p$ , if you judge that  $p$  is false.) It’s irrational for a believer to do otherwise, because such a person is doing something (in this case, believing something) that is inconsistent with a norm that she’s antecedently committed to (in virtue of engaging in the practice of forming and abandoning beliefs).

For example, engaging in the “ordinary practice of playing chess” presumably involves aiming to win a game of chess by making only legal moves. So, making what one judges to be an illegal move, while engaging in the ordinary practice of playing chess, involves a set of mental states – the aim of not making any illegal moves, the judgment that  $y$  is an illegal move, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Again, D1 is at least necessary; it needs to be giving a definition of belief, so that its “aim” flows from the nature or essence of belief, as such.

decision to make move  $y$  anyway – that intuitively conflict with each other.  
(Wedgewood 2002, p. 268)

PRESUPPOSED NORM CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily, someone believes  $p$  only if she is committed to the rule: for all  $q$ , it is correct to believe  $q$  iff  $q$  is true.

Objection 1: The normativity of chess playing is performance normativity. The person who plays chess, indeed, aims “to win a game of chess by making only legal moves.” But her aiming is *literal* aiming, in the *OED* sense: she wants to win, and she intends to do so by making legal moves. If we are to understand epistemic normativity as analogous to chess normativity, then we are back to the intentional conception of the aim of belief (§2).

Note that in chess, someone isn’t playing chess unless she is aware of the rules. So what is required, in the case of belief, is not only that the believer intend to believe (a dubious requirement already), but that she intend to engage in a practice governed by the truth rule. As in §2, this is psychologically implausible.

Objection 2: If the essentialist appeals to the presupposed norm conception, she will reduce epistemic normativity to rational normativity, and in particular the normativity of consistency. So if we want to know why it is epistemically bad to form ones beliefs in an irrational way, our account will say: because doing so is irrational, since it involves one in a contradictory state of mind. But one of the things we set out to explain was *why* it’s bad to be a contradictory state of mind.

## 7. The normative conception

THE NORMATIVE CONCEPTION OF THE AIM OF BELIEF: Necessarily,<sup>4</sup> it is correct to believe  $p$  iff  $p$  is true.<sup>5</sup> (Wedgewood 2002, p. 267, Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 499)

## 8. The argument from judgment

Other versions of (what I take to be) the same argument: the appeal to Moore’s Paradox (Railton 1994, p. 72)<sup>6</sup> and the argument from doxastic involuntarism (Williams 1973, pp. 148-50). Shah and Velleman’s (2005) version (see also Moran 1988, p. 148) relies on the idea that “the deliberative question *whether to believe that p* inevitably gives way to the factual

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<sup>4</sup> Again, necessity is the minimum here. Most theorists say that the standard of truth is a “constitutive” standard of correctness (Railton 1994, p. 71, Wedgewood 2002, p. 268, Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 498). Again, the key thing is that the standard flow from the nature or essence of belief, as such.

<sup>5</sup> Is this even adequate, as a ground of epistemic evaluation? Isn’t this the normative fact that needs explaining? Yes and No. Yes, the essentialist who appeals to the normative conception of the aim of belief is left with some unexplained normativity in her account. But No, because she will have explained one species of normativity (epistemic) in terms of another (the constitutive normativity of belief). The account would still illuminate the source of epistemic normativity.

<sup>6</sup> Though I think Railton’s view is importantly different from those I’m discussing here.

question *whether p.*” (p. 499) This is what they call the “transparency of doxastic deliberation to factual inquiry.” (Ibid.)

The best explanation for the transparency of doxastic deliberation to factual inquiry ... is that the concept of belief includes a standard of correctness, to the effect that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. (Ibid. pp. 499-500)

More schematically, then:

- SV1. Necessarily, deliberation about whether to believe  $p$  is transparent to deliberation about whether the belief that  $p$  would be true.
- SV2. The best explanation of SV1 is that, necessarily, it is correct to believe  $p$  iff  $p$  is true
- SV3. Necessarily, it is correct to believe  $p$  iff  $p$  is true.

I call this the argument from judgment because I draw a distinction between beliefs that are the result of conscious deliberation about what to believe, and other episodes of believing. The former are *judgments*. Judgment is a species of belief. But it's a rare and unusual species. Most of our beliefs are not the result of doxastic deliberation.

In general, we shouldn't conclude anything about the nature of  $\Phi$ ing from the nature of deliberate  $\Phi$ ing. Deliberate  $\Phi$ ing may have features that are not features of  $\Phi$ ing in general. So even if SV1 is true (something my friend Jason D'Cruz takes issue with), SV3 isn't well supported by it.

In this case, there's a good explanation for why deliberate  $\Phi$ ing has a feature that  $\Phi$ ing, in general, doesn't have. Conscious deliberation about whether to believe *will* (perhaps necessarily, or perhaps given the kind of creatures that we are, but at least typically) lead one to intend or desire that the result of one's deliberation be a true belief.<sup>7</sup> And thus judgement does aim at truth, in the intentional sense discussed in §2. One who judges that  $p$  is one who has consciously deliberated about whether to believe  $p$ , and thus one who has intended or desired to believe  $p$  only if  $p$  is true. Thus her act of judgement is a failure, by her own lights, unless it is true. But this feature of judgment is explained by the formation of an intention to believe  $p$  only if  $p$  is true. And that, I argued in §2, is precisely what is absent in many cases of believing.

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<sup>7</sup> Setting aside, for now, cases like Pascal's wager. Even setting those counterexamples aside, there is a lingering question of what explains this fact about conscious doxastic deliberation. I consider that elsewhere; the jist is that some activities are such that their conscious, deliberate performance (but not their performance in general) necessarily (or at least given the kinds of creatures that we are) involves literally aiming at some goal.