

# The normativity of belief and the need for a theory of epistemic motivation\*

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## 1. Introduction

We are very full of the idea, nowadays, that belief is constitutively normative. But despite being widely championed and amply discussed, the idea remains not altogether as clear as we might wish. I will argue in this talk that part of the unclarity about it comes from the fact that we don't have a theory of epistemic motivation. A theory, that is, of how we are motivated by judgements featuring the norms constitutive of belief.

I will argue for this claim with an example. I will show that Boghossian's latest argument for the normativity of mental content, which has the normativity of belief as one of its premises, doesn't work without a particular theory of epistemic motivation. Boghossian's argument is based on two theses:

- Belief is constitutively normative; and
- Belief is conceptually primary.

Recently, this argument has been criticised for both of these theses. (Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007) discredit the first; Miller (2008) the second.) But although I have my own doubts about each thesis, the focus of this talk is not their individual plausibility but their mutual consistency. In particular, I will argue that the normativity of belief thesis undermines the primacy of belief thesis, unless Boghossian embraces a particular theory of epistemic motivation. I will use these thoughts on how Boghossian needs a theory of epistemic motivation to show that we all need such a theory for the proper understanding of the normativity of belief.

## 2. Boghossian's argument

Boghossian's argument for the normativity of content goes like this:

- (P1) '[A] judgment type is normative just in case you can't understand judgments of that type without understanding that they imply oughts.'
- (P2) '[A]tributions of belief are normative judgments in this sense'. (The normativity of belief thesis.)
- (P3) We can 'understand content only through our understanding of belief'. (The primacy of belief thesis.)
- (C) So, 'the notion of content [is] a constitutively normative notion' (2003: 41).

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## 2.1 Premise 3

Let me start with premise 3. Boghossian's strategy is to establish, in the first instance, the conceptual priority of belief over desire. (The hope is that the argument would then fairly easily extend to belief's general primacy.) The argument is that **(i)** one can have the concept of belief without having the concept of desire (2003: 41); but **(ii)** one cannot have the concept of desire without having that of belief (2003: 42). To put it crudely, **(i)** we can imagine a pure believer with no desires, while **(ii)** we can't imagine a pure desirer without beliefs. And so,

there is no...difficulty imagining a judge who thinks of someone merely as a believer and not as a desirer, and so no difficulty in claiming that someone could have the concept of belief but not the concept of desire... [By contrast we cannot] coherently think of a creature as wanting various things to be true, without thinking of it as having any views whatsoever about how they actually are (2003: 42).

I will have no quarrel with the impossibility of a beliefless desirer. But I will argue that the possibility of a pure desireless believer is threatened by belief's normativity.

## 2.2 Premise 2

Before I substantiate this charge, though, a word on premise 2. There are two parts to Boghossian's thesis that belief is constitutively normative: an interpretation of belief's norm for correctness; and an interpretation of the constitutive relation between belief and this norm. First, the norm which constitutively governs belief is 'A belief that p is correct only if p is true'. Second, the constitutive relation is to be understood not as one of analytic implication, but rather as a condition on understanding the concept of belief. (This is the purport of premise 1 of the argument.) For any two facts A and B, 'B is constitutive of A' means that:

it's a condition on understanding what it is for A to obtain that one understands what it is for B to obtain. In other words, B is constitutive of A means: grasping the concept of an A-fact requires grasp of the concept of a B-fact. (2003: 37)

So, the thesis that belief is constitutively normative is this:

Marco could not be said to understand what it is for Ebenezer to *believe* that Mallory reached the summit unless he understands that Ebenezer's belief is correct only if Mallory did reach the summit, unless he understands, that is, that Ebenezer ought to believe that Mallory reached the summit only if he did (2003: 38, italics in original).

This is the sense in which belief is normative, then: we can neither grasp the concept of belief nor (a fortiori) attribute beliefs to others, without grasping an ought-statement - that one ought to have the belief that p only if p is the case. (In what follows, I call this norm 'the belief-norm'.)

### 3. The normativity of belief properly understood

I now argue that if we accept that belief is constitutively normative, Boghossian's requirement of grasping the belief-norm insufficiently characterises what it is for someone to grasp the concept of belief. This is not in itself a problem for Boghossian, since he thinks that the above normative condition is only partially constitutive of belief. (He explicitly repudiates the view that 'content attributions ... are *exhausted* by oughts', 2003: 32.) As I show in the next two sections, however, once we have spelt out what is missing from Boghossian's characterisation of belief, the thesis of belief's normativity undermines belief's primacy, unless we reject the most widely accepted theory of motivation.

So, what is missing in the above account of the constitutive normativity of belief? For Marco to understand that Ebenezer believes that Mallory reached the summit, I suggest, it is not enough to grasp that the belief-norm is applicable to Ebenezer's attitude. Marco must also understand that Ebenezer's attitude was *motivated* by the belief-norm. And so, by Boghossian's definition of constitution, an attitude's being motivated by the belief-norm is partly constitutive of its being a belief. My argument for this extra constitutive condition on belief, in outline, is this:

- (1) If belief is normative, we can't understand that an attitude is a belief without understanding that it is governed by the belief-norm (as well as that the norm obtains, as per Boghossian).
- (2) But we can't understand what it is for an attitude to be governed by a norm, without understanding that the attitude was motivated by this norm.
- (C) So, being motivated by the belief-norm is partly constitutive of belief.

#### 3.1 Step 1

The first step of this argument follows directly from the constitutive normativity of belief. That the belief-norm applies to someone's attitude insufficiently characterises that attitude as belief. All (non-hypothetical) norms apply to everyone, be they constitutive or not. The mark of the constitutive is this. 'A norm *N* is constitutive of an attitude type *A*' means that one can't grasp that norm *N* is applicable to an attitude, without understanding that the attitude is not an *A*-attitude unless it is governed by norm *N*. By contrast, to understand that a non-constitutive norm is applicable, one needn't understand that - or how - it governs my attitudes or actions. Take 'One ought not to kill'. It may never govern my actions, but it is no less true that it applies to them. So, grasp of the concept of belief requires understanding that it is constitutively *governed* by the belief-norm.

To labour the obvious, suppose Ebenezer judged 'I ought to have a belief that p only if p is true' and then went on to wonder about whether Mallory reached the summit. And suppose, too, that his deliberation and ensuing attitude was, as a matter of fact, governed not by the belief-norm, but by the norm 'One ought to hold p as true only if p helps one's current argument'. In this case Ebenezer's ensuing attitude would be one of supposing p for the sake of argument, not of believing that p. If Marco ascribed a belief to Ebenezer, he would be *misapplying* the concept of belief, because the belief-norm does not govern Ebenezer's attitude. Similarly, if Marco thought that the belief-norm *applied* to Ebenezer's attitude he would be confused, again because the belief-norm does not govern Ebenezer's attitude (of supposing for the sake of argument). In other words, if belief is constitutively normative, we can't understand that the belief-norm applies to an attitude without understanding that the attitude is governed by the belief norm. But according to Boghossian and other friends of the normativity of belief, we can't grasp that someone has a belief without understanding that the belief-norm applies to his attitude. So, grasping that someone has a belief requires understanding that his attitude is *governed* by the belief-norm.

### 3.2 Step 2

Now the second step of my argument: we cannot understand what it is for a norm to govern an attitude without understanding that the norm motivates the attitude. One way of unpacking what it is for a norm to govern an attitude, is by contrasting norm-following with merely acting in accordance with the norm. The key contrast seems to be precisely that merely acting in accordance with a norm does not involve being governed by the norm. If we unpack this (without getting into deep rule-following waters) the intuitive difference between following and compliance seems to be that when I follow a norm, first, I see it as applicable to me; and second, I am guided by it. When I merely comply with a norm, by contrast, I need not know that it is applicable to me, but more importantly, my action or belief must not be guided by the norm. My behaviour must just happen to accord with what the norm prescribes. The norm is, say, that one ought to save lives when possible; I run around saving lives, but not because I am guided by the norm, but out of boredom or vanity.

Now, being guided by a norm can't be merely a matter of being *caused* by it to act or believe in certain ways. Were this so, my behaviour would not be deliberately guided. I would not be able to violate the norm, and a norm's being capable of violation is a condition for its being genuinely normative. Nor can being guided by the norm be a mere matter of having the belief that the norm applies to me. For Ebenezer in the imagined case did have the belief that if his attitude was to be one of belief, he must adopt it only if Mallory reached the summit. But he

wasn't interested in having a belief; he deliberately let another norm guide his attitude to Mallory's reaching the summit, and so his attitude ended up being one of assuming for the sake of argument.

Being guided by a norm is a matter of bringing one's belief or action in line with it, a matter of doing something deliberate<sup>1</sup>. And doing something deliberate is doing it out of a motive - to alleviate my boredom, to get into tonight's headlines, to observe the belief-norm. Over and above being a matter of causation and of having the right beliefs, then, being guided by a norm is a matter of my being *motivated* by the norm, of endorsing it for a particular attitude and letting it be one of the attitude's shaping influences. But if this is right, and belief is constitutively governed by the belief norm (as per step 1 of my argument), then we cannot understand what it is for an agent to have a belief, without understanding how the belief-norm can *motivate* his belief. Being motivated by the belief-norm, in other words, is constitutive of belief.

#### 4. The problem for Boghossian

Once we have acknowledged that belief has an irreducibly motivational element, Boghossian's overarching argument for the normativity of content starts looking unwell, given the received view of motivation. For motivation, it is classically supposed, is a conative matter and not merely a matter of having the right beliefs. (This is why we said earlier that norm-governance can't only be a matter of having the *belief* that the norm applies.) But if this is the right view of motivation, then the normativity of belief thesis undermines the primacy of belief thesis. How so?

The argument for the primacy of belief, recall, relies on the possibility of a pure believer without any desires. Yet I have just shown that, on the standard view of motivation, accepting belief's normativity means accepting that a conative attitude is a constitutive part of the concept of belief. To go back to Boghossian's example, I cannot understand that Ebenezer has a belief that Mallory reached the summit without understanding that his attitude to Mallory's reaching the summit is *motivated* by the belief-norm. Since, however, motivation is a conative matter on the standard view, a pure believer with no conative attitudes turns out to be impossible.

Depending on how liberally we construe the notion of desire, the last claim may amount to a direct denial of the conceptual primacy of belief *over desire*. But remember that the primacy

<sup>1</sup> I don't mean to suggest, of course, that *belief* is directly under our control. All we need here is that we have indirect control over our beliefs. But this much is needed, in any event, by the normativity of belief thesis itself: if the belief-norm is to be genuinely normative, it must be capable of being followed and violated. And Boghossian accepts this condition on genuine normativity (2003, 37).

of belief over desire is only the first step in Boghossian's argument for belief's primacy over all other attitudes. So we need not be too precise about the sort of attitude involved in motivation. As long as it is any attitude other than belief, Boghossian's argument is in trouble.

And the trouble is due to the constitutive normativity of belief. What distinguishes constitutive norms from other norms is that we cannot understand that a constitutive norm is applicable to an attitude of type *A* without also understanding that unless my attitude is governed, and so motivated, by this norm, it is not an *A*-attitude. And it is precisely this distinguishing mark of constitutive norms that stirs trouble for the desireless believer. So if we accept premise 2 of Boghossian's argument for the normativity of content, we can't accept premise 3.

## **5. The solution and the need for a theory of epistemic motivation**

How to save Boghossian's argument? I can only see one option: to realise that the charge of unsoundness is kindled by the standard theory of epistemic motivation; and to adopt an alternative theory, which reconciles the two premises. Let me explain.

One of the inveterate debates in metaethics is over the nature of motivation. The orthodox line, which we towed above, is so called Humeanism about motivation. According to this view, in order for motivation to occur, a desire or some other conative attitude needs to be present. So, for me to be motivated to open the fridge and get a beer, I need to have an appropriate desire - for beer, for a drink, or whatever - as well as various beliefs. Anti-Humeans deny the necessity for desire or any other conative attitude. They think that a belief, on its own, can sometimes motivate an action. Beliefs that a normative proposition obtains are their pet candidates for desire-free motivation. So the belief that I ought to save the drowning child (say) can, according to the anti-Humean, motivate me to save her in the absence of any desire (to save her, to get into today's headlines, and so on).

This debate is standardly played out in the theory of action. To salvage Boghossian's argument, we need to transpose it to the question of *epistemic* motivation, since what is at issue here is how the belief-norm for correctness motivates one to come to have a belief, rather than to perform an action. Now, neither epistemic Humeanism nor epistemic anti-Humeanism yet exists as an explicit philosophical position. And this is the point of the present paper. Many arguments presuppose a position on epistemic motivation. So, if we are trying to get clear on the thesis of the normativity of belief, not to mention have sound arguments at our hands, we need to be explicit about the view of epistemic motivation which tacitly animates this thesis.

The above claim that Boghossian's argument for the normativity of content is unsound,

obviously turns on a Humean view of epistemic motivation: that a belief's being motivated by a norm requires the presence of a conative attitude. This conative attitude blocked the possibility of a desireless believer and the primacy of belief thesis. If we adopt an anti-Humean view of epistemic motivation, however, things cheer up. It is not my intention to develop a full-fledged account of this view here. (The beginnings of such an account are to be found in my (2009).) I will say just enough to show how it can bail out Boghossian's argument.

The way the belief-norm motivates me, on the anti-Humean view, is not through a desire to comply with it, or any other conative attitude. What motivates me is simply the belief 'I ought to have *this* belief that Mallory reached the summit only if he did', in combination with the fact that I am after having a belief - rather than a supposition, or a wish, or a desire - about Mallory's reaching the summit. If Boghossian adopted this view of epistemic motivation, then he could agree that being motivated by the belief-norm is constitutive of belief (as I have argued he should), and maintain without contradiction the primacy of belief. If belief on its own can motivate, then we can explain the agent's being motivated by the belief-norm without appeal to a conative attitude. So, we could think of someone as having beliefs without thinking of him as having any other attitude. And so, the pure desireless believer is possible. Assuming that Boghossian's argument for the impossibility of a beliefless desirer works, then, his overarching argument would at least not harbour an obvious tension.

Now, Boghossian is not entirely unaware of the issue of motivation. He is at pains to show that the belief-norm is non-hypothetical, and so to eliminate the possibility of a desire vitiating the concept of belief through being a condition for the *applicability* of the belief-norm. Contrasting the belief-norm with norms for assertion, he writes:

the aim of truth is built into the nature of belief in the way that it is not built into the nature of assertion. If that's right, then we don't need to invoke any auxiliary desires in order to explain why *these ought statements come out true* (2005: 209, my italics).

But if this argument works, it only averts the danger of desire infiltrating the concept of belief through being part of the belief-norm itself. It does not foreclose the possibility of desire getting into belief through belief's other constitutive condition: that the belief-norm motivate the attitude. It is not enough, in other words, to establish that the *truth* of the norm-statement does not depend on the agent's desires, as Boghossian aims to do. This is true of all non-hypothetical norms, be they constitutive or not. We can concede that the norm is true and applies to Ebenezer regardless of his desires. But since that can be the case and Ebenezer can still fail to have the belief due to not being motivated by the belief-norm, desire must also be ruled out at the level of how the norm motivates. And I have argued that the only way to do this is by being anti-Humeans about epistemic motivation.

## 6. Conclusion

To many philosophers, far from looking like a solution, this would look like a dilemma for Boghossian - either his argument is unsound, or he must adopt the counterintuitive anti-Humean view of motivation<sup>2</sup>. Being an anti-Humean myself, I do not see things quite in this light. But regardless of which way our bread is buttered on this issue, the above thoughts make one thing clear: if we are to establish the normativity of content via a normative view of belief, we need a theory of epistemic motivation. Now, this need for a theory of epistemic motivation for understanding the normativity of *content* stems from Boghossian's particular and rather idiosyncratic move from the normativity of an attitude - belief - to the normativity of content. But the more general - if also more modest - moral of the paper is that, whether we buy this particular move or not, we cannot understand the normativity of *belief*, at any rate, without a theory of epistemic motivation.

Once the cat of motivation is out of the bag, of course, it will bring with it all the standard metaethical quarrels: are epistemic normative judgements truth-apt? (cognitivism vs non-cognitivism); is there a necessary connection between making an epistemic normative judgement and being motivated by it? (internalism vs externalism); and so on. We will need, that is, a comprehensive metaethics of belief. The above arguments, for example, all assume that the judgement that I ought to believe *p* only if *p*, is cognitive in nature; I called it a belief. And this is precisely what non-cognitivists (like Gibbard, against whom Boghossian pitches some of his argument) would deny. But we needn't get addled in detail just yet. All I hope to have shown for now is that until we acknowledge the need for a theory of epistemic motivation, the normativity of the mental will remain as 'shrouded in unclarity' as ever.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the view has been gaining in popularity in metaethics proper. Two of its more prominent friends are Dancy (1993) and Nagel (1978).