

# Desires are conceptually prior to beliefs

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## Long Abstract

In two recent papers, Paul Boghossian has argued that beliefs are conceptually prior to desires (Boghossian 2003, 2005). Allan Miller has subsequently argued that Boghossian's argument is unconvincing, and goes on to provide *prima facie* reason to think that the concepts of beliefs and desires are in fact interdependent (Miller 2008). In this paper, I argue for a more radical claim, namely that there is *prima facie* reason to think that the conceptual dependence is the *opposite* of what Boghossian supposes: desires are, in at least one important sense, conceptually prior to beliefs.

In addition to its independent interest, this claim has implications for a number of significant issues. Boghossian relies on the claim that beliefs are conceptually prior to desires in his argument that mental content is normative. Boghossian accepts that there is nothing about content *per se* that generates normative correctness conditions, but thinks that such correctness conditions stem from the attitude of *believing* such contents to be true. But if that were the case, mental content would be normative only in the context of being believed, and not, for example, in the context of being desired. In order to arrive at a general thesis about mental normativity, Boghossian thus claims that all propositional attitudes *depend conceptually* on the attitude of believing, thus extending the normativity of believed content to the content of those other attitudes. For example, one can desire P only if one does not believe that P; one can be happy that P only if one believes that P, etc.<sup>1</sup> This means that if desires were conceptually prior to beliefs, despite Boghossian's claim to the contrary, his argument for the normativity of content would be unsound.

Another issue that the claim of the present paper has implications for concerns the analysis of belief itself. Many philosophers have been attracted to the claim that belief is in some fundamental sense governed by truth. *Normativists* understand this claim in terms of a constitutive norm of correctness for belief, e.g. that believing P is correct if and only if P is true.<sup>2</sup> I have argued that the claim is best understood in *teleological* terms, as saying that when a person believes that P, she has the aim of believing P truly, or at least has some sub-intentional surrogate of such an aim.

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<sup>1</sup> For recent criticism of the claim that mental content is normative, see Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007), Steglich-Petersen (2008), and Glüer and Wikforss (2009). For a recent defence of the analogous idea about mental *attitudes* (as opposed to content), see Zangwill (2005, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For proponents of the normative interpretation, see N. Shah (2003), N. Shah and D. Velleman (2005), R. Wedgwood (2002), P. Boghossian (2003), among others. For discussion of the correct form of the truth norm, see K. Bykvist and A. Hattiangadi (2007), K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss (2009), among others.

This interpretation gives rise to something similar to the norm of correctness, namely a criterion of *success*. Trivially, if believing P entails having the aim of believing P truly, believing P will be successful if and only if P is true – at least as far as the truth aim is concerned.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, such an analysis can be successful only if aims or desires are conceptually prior to beliefs. So if Boghossian is right that beliefs are conceptually prior to all other proposition attitudes, or even if Miller is right that beliefs and desires are conceptually on a par, the teleological account of belief fails.

However, in the following I will not focus on these possible implications of the claim that desires are conceptually prior to beliefs, but only on the claim itself. I will begin by providing some general considerations about the idea of one concept being ‘conceptually prior’ to another. On the basis of this, I will briefly argue that Boghossian’s and Miller’s arguments are inconclusive. I will then argue that in at least one important sense, having to do with the use of mental concepts in interpretation of behaviour, desires are conceptually prior to beliefs.

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<sup>3</sup> See D. Velleman (2000) and A. Steglich-Petersen (2006, forthcoming a, forthcoming b) for this interpretation.

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