



The Aim of Belief

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CHAPTER

4 There Are No Norms of Belief

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Abstract

Papineau argues that there is no distinctive species of normativity attaching to beliefs: while there are indeed valid prescriptions about the adoption of beliefs, these are always prescriptions that arise from general considerations of moral value, or personal value, or possibly aesthetic value, and not from any distinctive species of doxastic value. The chapter also considers whether the attitude or the content of belief is ‘constituted by norms’, and argues that nothing genuinely prescriptive follows from any sense in which this is true.

Keywords: [aim of belief](#), [epistemology](#), [normativity](#), [truth](#), [value](#)

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1. Introduction

This chapter will argue that there is no distinctive species of normativity attaching to the adoption of beliefs.

The reference to ‘distinctive’ is not redundant here. I do not of course wish to deny that there are some valid prescriptions that apply to the adoption of beliefs. However, I shall argue that these are always prescriptions of a kind that arise in connection with other human activities as well as belief-formation. More specifically, I shall maintain that all such prescriptions arise from considerations of moral value, or personal value, or possibly aesthetic value, and not from any distinct species of doxastic value.¹

In what follows I shall focus on a subclass of belief-involving prescriptions, namely those which involve the pursuit of truth. This is not the only possible kind of belief-involving prescription. For example, it is usually valuable to acquire beliefs about significant subject matters rather than unimportant ones, and to avoid excessive costs in acquiring beliefs—and these values will generate their own prescriptions about belief acquisition. Moreover, from the point of view to be defended here, prescriptions relating to the pursuit of truth are not dominant to or incommensurable with such further prescriptions: all will together contribute to determining what ought to be believed, all things considered. Still, for present purposes it will be enough to consider prescriptions relating to truth. This is because my opponents are concerned specifically with this kind of dimension of belief-evaluation and not with such further pragmatic considerations as significance or cost-limitation. After all, those who hold that there is some distinctive kind of

p. 65 'correctness' governing beliefs are thinking of correctness in the sense of truth and not in some more extended pragmatic sense. So it will ↪ be enough here if I can show that even prescriptions relating to truth do not involve any special kind of normativity.

2. The truth is often valuable

There are unquestionably many cases where it is valuable to have true beliefs, and to this extent we certainly ought to pursue the truth. But my view is that the truth is valuable in all such cases for moral, or personal, or aesthetic reasons, and not for any *sui generis* doxastic reason.

For example, doctors have a moral duty to acquire true beliefs about how to cure diseases. But this does not mean that there is some special category of doxastic normativity, any more than the moral propriety of driving carefully means that there is a special category of automotive normativity. Both cases are simply instances of moral norms.

Again, it can often be personally valuable² to acquire true beliefs. It is personally valuable to me to have accurate information about the Tottenham Hotspur's fixture list this season. But this too implies no special category of doxastic normativity. It is simply a special case of something being valuable for me.

Sometimes accurate information can be personally valuable as an end and not just as a means. Many people devote their lives to finding out certain historical or scientific facts, for example, and success in such projects can be as intrinsically valuable to them as anything. But again this does not require us to posit any special kind of normativity beyond that arising from personal value.

It is possible to imagine cases where acquiring truths might be of aesthetic value. But these cases too will not require any kind of normativity that is specific to the adoption of beliefs.

3. The cogency of a truth norm

Some philosophers have argued on principled grounds against any *sui generis* norm prescribing true belief. They do not think that any such norm can be cogently formulated. This is not my view. I think that such a norm can be cogently formulated all right. This issue is whether it can be defended.

Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007) have argued that the principle

█ (1) (You ought to believe p) if and only if (p)

contains only advice that is patently misguided.

Thus they point out that the right-to-left implication—if p , you ought to believe p —amounts to the absurd advice that you ought to be omniscient.

p. 66 And they point out that the left-to-right implication carries no advice at all, since it amounts to the thesis that: if not- p , then it is not the case that you ought to believe p . This tells us when a certain ought-claim does not hold, but nothing about when any ought-claims do hold.

These are telling points against taking (1) to be a norm of truth. But the moral is not that such a norm cannot be formulated, but that it needs to be formulated differently.

Daniel Whiting (2010) responds to Bykvist and Hattiangadi by suggesting that a better formulation would be

█ (2) (you *may* believe p) if and only if (p).

Taken right-to-left, this now says that: if p , then you may believe p . This permits you to believe truths, but does not imply the absurd requirement that you should believe them all.

And taken left-to-right, this says: if not- p , then it is not the case that you may believe p —that is, if not- p , then you ought not to believe p . Far from being empty, this contains the very substantial prescription that you ought not to fall into error.

Glüer and Wikforss (2009, 2010) have raised a different difficulty. They argue, against Boghossian (2003) and Steglich-Petersen (2010), that any norm which gives advice about believing p conditional on whether p or not- p cannot provide any real guidance to subjects.

Their point is that subjects will first need to take a view on whether p , in order to know whether they are in a situation to which the norm applies. But by then it will be too late for the norm to guide them, for they will already have settled their belief as to whether p .

This point is well-taken, but it does not follow that there is no sense in which a norm like (2) can provide guidance to believers. This norm cannot provide direct guidance, but it may well issue in derived prescriptions about effective means to the end of satisfying it. Thus someone who is concerned to satisfy (2) by avoiding error may have reason, with respect to specific subject matters, to conform to such prescriptions as: ‘believe p only if you have considered relevant alternatives’, or ‘believe p only if your informants are experts’, and so on. And here there is no difficulty of the kind Glüer and Wikforss are raising, since it is perfectly possible to ascertain whether one has considered relevant alternatives, or has consulted experts, without yet having settled the question of whether p .

In what follows I shall understand a norm of truth as offering guidance in this way, by issuing prescriptions about effective means to the end of satisfying (2).

4. An objection

It will help to clarify the position that I am outlining here to consider an obvious objection. It is not always of moral, personal, or aesthetic value to avoid false belief. But, even so, it is always wrong to believe falsely. So there must be some further kind of normativity that attaches specifically to the adoption of beliefs (cf Kelly 2003).

p. 67 The thought here is that, for any proposition p , something has gone wrong if you believe p when not- p is the case. But nothing need have gone wrong from a moral, personal, or aesthetic perspective. So the error here must be a distinctive species of doxastic error.

There are two possible ways of responding to this objection. First, I could insist that it is always of moral, personal, or aesthetic value to avoid false beliefs. Alternatively, I could deny that it is always wrong to believe falsely.

For the purposes of this paper I do not need to decide between these responses. Both avoid any distinctive kind of doxastic normativity. Still, for what it is worth, I prefer the second option to the first.

To see why, let us start with the idea that it might always be personally valuable to avoid false beliefs. Now, it is certainly valuable for me to have true beliefs rather than false ones on issues of practical concern to me. If my practical decisions are based on accurate information then my projects will succeed, whereas if I act on misinformation they may fail. However, not all information is of practical relevance for me. It will never matter to any of my decisions if I have false beliefs about the names of the kings of ancient Assyria. So we have as yet been shown no reason to suppose it is personally valuable to avoid false beliefs about such impractical matters.

True, as I said earlier, knowledge is sometimes personally valuable as an end and not just as a means. For many historians, scientists, and others, information can be of intrinsic and not just practical value. Still, not everybody aims at truth in this disinterested way. And even the disinterested seekers of truth do not have *all* facts as their aim: none of them will regard it as intrinsically valuable to avoid false beliefs about the number of blades of grass on my lawn. So again it seems that there are cases where no personal value attaches to avoiding falsity.

Let us turn now to the idea that is always *morally* valuable to avoid false belief. The most plausible defence of this claim would appeal to the importance of testimony in social life. Human beings are constantly transmitting beliefs to others, and so arguably have a standing responsibility to ensure that they do not transmit falsehoods. After all, even if there are some facts that will never be of practical or intrinsic significance to anyone, it is hard to be sure of this with respect to any specific fact. So the only acceptable principle would seem to be that you should always avoid speaking falsely.

One difficulty with this testimony-based line of argument is that it seems defeasible. Suppose that you *did* know of some specific fact that it will never be of practical or intrinsic significance to anyone. This would then seem to undermine the putative moral requirement to avoid falsity. Just as with rule utilitarianism, considerations in favour of a good rule of thumb do not show that one should stick to this rule in cases where the considerations do not apply.

Moreover, this testimony-based line of argument only applies to those beliefs that *are* going to be transmitted by testimony. It has no grip on beliefs that subjects are certain to keep to themselves, either because they are committed to secrecy, or because they have no one to talk to (imagine someone irrevocably marooned on a desert island). Since these beliefs are not going to be transmitted, arguments involving testimony cannot imply any moral requirement to make sure they are not in error.

I take it that there is no question that the avoidance of error is always aesthetically valuable.

So I conclude that it is *not* always of personal, moral, or aesthetic value to avoid false belief. And since I deny any distinctive species of doxastic normativity, I therefore accept that there are cases where there is nothing at all wrong with believing falsely.

I have already cited the examples of the kings of Assyria and the blades of grass on my lawn. If nothing practical hinges on these matters for me, and I am going to keep my opinions to myself, I say that there is nothing wrong with my having false beliefs on these matters.

Sometimes there will also be a positive value to having false beliefs. Suppose some quite untreatable form of cancer is common in John's family and that he indeed has it. There is a simple enough test, but John doesn't take it, because he is confident that he doesn't have the cancer. (He feels great!) As a result, he avoids the distress and unhappiness that would be occasioned by his learning the truth. Now, John hasn't bothered to check his belief, and as a result has persisted in a falsity. But, supposing this makes no practical difference to anybody (the cancer is untreatable, remember), I say that he has done nothing wrong at all. I recognize no doxastic offence that weighs against the advantage of his avoiding the truth.³

5. Practices

Do I really want to deny that it is always 'incorrect' to believe falsely? Well, I of course recognize a sense in which this claim is true. But from my point of view this sense of 'incorrect belief' is simply a variant on 'false belief'. This terminological equivalence by itself cannot establish that it is always *valuable* to avoid falsity, or imply any valid *prescriptions* about ways of achieving this.

Still, the point might be pressed. 'Incorrect' is not the only apparently evaluative word in this area. We have a whole range of terms that seem designed specifically to evaluate whether beliefs have been acquired in such a way as to prevent falsity—'know', 'justified', 'rational', 'evidence', 'confirm', and so on. On the face of it, this kind of terminology seems to commit us to a normative attitude to the avoidance of false belief across the board, even where there is nothing of personal, moral, or aesthetic value in play. If you form a definite view about the number of blades of grass on my lawn without counting properly, or about your having cancer without taking the appropriate tests, we will still say that your belief is *unjustified*, even if we agree that from a personal, moral, or aesthetic perspective nothing has been lost and something may even have been gained.

If we take evaluations like these at face value, they would seem to provide a positive argument for a distinctive kind of doxastic normativity. You have not violated any personal, moral, or aesthetic prescription in forming your belief, yet you have done something wrong. So you must have transgressed some further kind of prescription.

However, I do not accept that we should always take epistemological evaluations at face value as committing us to substantial prescriptions about what ought to be done.

I am happy to agree that all human societies have a *practice* of making epistemological evaluations: we constantly assess whether or not others' beliefs are justified. But the social existence of a practice cannot in itself establish any normative facts. That people just happen to behave in certain ways cannot show it is right to do so.

Still, perhaps the issue is not that the practice exists, but that *we* engage in it. Even those sceptical about doxastic normativity, like myself, must surely admit that beliefs formed without evidence are *unjustified*? And doesn't this then commit us to definite prescriptions about how to form beliefs?

But it should not be taken for granted that 'evaluating' things by the standards of some practice always carries genuine prescriptive force. Such evaluations standardly presuppose the value of the aim of the practice. And even if this aim is generally valuable, there can be cases where it is not. In such cases, a positive evaluation by the standards of the practice will correspond to no genuine prescription.

As an analogy, consider the game of chess. When examining a game, we will evaluate possible moves as 'weak', 'good', 'brilliant', 'best', and so on. But such evaluations presuppose that it is valuable to win the game. Imagine a case where it is not. You have no personal stake in the result and do not care whether you win or lose. Moreover there is no moral virtue in your winning and indeed it would badly distress your opponent. Your 'best' move may be to move your queen (otherwise it will be pinned in two moves' time). But does it follow that you *ought* so to move your queen? I say not, if this is supposed to carry genuine prescriptive force. While there is an obvious sense in which this is your 'best' move, this sense does not automatically have normative content.

I say the same about epistemological evaluations. They presuppose that it is valuable to avoid falsity. By and large, this presupposition holds good. But there are cases, of the kinds instanced above, where nothing of value will be lost by a false belief and something may even be gained. In such cases a belief may be 'unjustified' in the sense that it has been acquired in some haphazard way. But it will not follow that it *ought* not to have been so acquired. The judgement that the belief is 'unjustified' carries no prescriptive force on its own, independently of some further value attaching to the aim of truth.⁴

6. The peculiarity of distinctive doxastic norms

So far I have explained the position that I want to defend but have said nothing about why it is preferable to the alternative.

I am inclined to argue that my position needs no particular defence. A view which explains all the phenomena without positing any distinctive kind of doxastic normativity is preferable to one that does not.

The status of any distinctive doxastic normativity would be extremely obscure. Why should we be moved by this kind of normativity, given that it is supposed to remain even in cases where we attach no other kind of value to the truth?

Moreover, how are distinctively doxastic prescriptions supposed to interact with others? Take the earlier case of John, who wilfully allows himself to believe without evidence that he does not have cancer. The avoidance of unnecessary distress gives him a positive personal reason for persisting in his belief without checking it. But for the defenders of doxastic normativity the danger that he is in error presumably gives him reason to take the test. What then should John do, all things considered?

Are we supposed somehow to measure the two considerations against each other to determine the right thing for him to do overall? But this looks odd. How bad does the doxastic sin have to be in order to outweigh the advantages of avoiding distress? Once we put to one side any moral, personal, or aesthetic reasons for avoiding error, there doesn't seem to be much room left for the idea that some doxastic transgressions are more heinous than others.

Perhaps then we shouldn't think of distinctive doxastic prescriptions as coming in degrees. There is simply the sin of false belief, and no sense in which some such sins are worse than others. However, this now seems in tension with the view that distinctively doxastic evaluations have genuine prescriptive force. If we can't even ask *how* bad it is for John to persist in his unjustified belief, along the

way to considering whether or not this doxastic failing outweighs the non-doxastic considerations on the other side, then it starts to look doubtful that doxastic evaluations are really relevant to what we *ought* to do.

These difficulties about distinctive doxastic prescriptions surely argue in favour of a theory that avoids them.

7. Constitutive norms

Defenders of distinctive doxastic norms recognize these difficulties, but maintain that they are unavoidable. This is because they think that the very state of believing is *constituted* by distinctive doxastic norms.⁵ Subjects who are not governed by the relevant norms do not qualify as believers (cf Wedgwood 2002).

p. 71 If this is right, then the very existence of believers implies that there are distinctive doxastic norms. Maybe these norms leave us with philosophical problems. But we cannot deny that they exist without denying beliefs.

From the perspective of my opponents (let me call their position ‘doxasticism’ henceforth), my account of belief-involving prescriptions starts too late. I take the existence of beliefs for granted, and then consider how various kinds of familiar value—personal, moral, aesthetic—might attach to the avoidance of false belief. But the doxasticists will object that there wouldn’t be any beliefs to attach such values to in the first place, were it not for the *prior* doxastic norms which constitute beliefs. We can only value beliefs in personal, moral, and aesthetic ways if we are capable of forming beliefs—and this capability rests on a distinctive set of doxastic norms.

It will be useful to distinguish two different versions of the doxasticist claim that the state of believing is constituted by distinctive norms. According to the first version, the *contents* of beliefs are constituted by norms. According to the second, the very *attitude* of believing is constituted by norms.⁶

On the first version, you wouldn’t be capable of believing *that p*, for any content *p*, unless you were governed by norms specifying appropriate conditions for adopting that specific belief.

On the second version, you wouldn’t be capable of *believing that p*, or indeed believing anything—as opposed to desiring, hoping, fearing, and so on—unless you were governed by norms regulating the generic attitude of belief.

The first content-constituting version of doxasticism is motivated by theories which account for the contents of beliefs in terms of norms specifying when you *ought* to form those beliefs. Theories of content in the verificationist tradition, like Dummett’s explanation of content in terms of assertibility conditions, or Brandom’s inferentialism, be cases in point. For theories like this, subjects can only possess the belief that *p* if they know which conditions comprise evidence that *justifies* the formation of the belief that *p*.

In a previous paper (Papineau 1999) I discussed this content-constituting version of doxasticism at length. My central point in that paper was that theories which explain content in terms of norms are not the only possible theories of content. There is also a range of ‘naturalist’ theories of content, including success-semantics, teleosemantics,⁷ and Fodor’s asymmetric dependence theory, which explain content in causal or historical terms without invoking norms at any stage. From the point of view of such naturalist theories, the only normativity governing belief formation is of the ↪ familiar instrumental kind aimed at ordinary moral, personal, or aesthetic values. I further pointed out that theories that take the contents of beliefs to be constituted by norms face a range of difficulties that do not arise for naturalist theories, and that this argues against the content-constituting version of doxasticism. I shall not repeat my analysis of content-constituting doxasticism here, but will instead concentrate on the attitude-constituting version in what follows.

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Now, the attitude-constituting version of doxasticism can itself be defended either as a corollary of the content-constituting version, or as independently motivated. To see it as a corollary of the first version, note that someone who explains content in terms of content-specific norms, as in neo-verificationist accounts of content, will take these norms to constitute *both* the content *and* the attitude. Norms specifying canonical evidence will specify the conditions under which you ought to *believe* some content. So the

content-constituting approach will automatically imply norms of error-avoidance, simply as an upshot of the various specific norms which breathe different contents into different beliefs. These content-specific norms will simultaneously determine the content of beliefs *and* constrain believers to adopt them only when (there is evidence that) they are true.

However, this is not the only way to defend the attitude-constituting version of doxasticism. It can be motivated quite independently of considerations to do with content. Suppose that we take propositional contents for granted, as items to which we can adopt a range of different propositional attitudes—desiring, hoping, fearing, and so on, as well as belief. We might then ask what differentiates these various attitudes—and in particular what differentiates belief from the others. And to this question a natural answer is that belief has a distinctive ‘direction of fit’. It ‘aims at the truth’ in the sense that it is governed by the normative requirement that its contents ought never to be false, whereas the other attitudes can properly be adopted even when their contents are false.

In what follows I shall assume that attitude-constituting doxasticism is motivated in the latter way, and not as a corollary of the content-constituting version. As I said, I do not wish to repeat my criticisms of content-constituting doxasticism. Instead I shall focus on those arguments for doxasticism that do not assume contents are normatively constituted.

8. The aim of belief

It is a familiar thought that the attitude of belief has a distinctive ‘direction of fit’. It ‘aims at the truth’. Beliefs ought to fit the way the world is. By contrast, desires ought to alter the world.

There are different ways of filling out the thought that belief ‘aims at the truth’. The kind of doxasticism that is now at issue needs to understand it as the thesis that beliefs are governed by a norm of truth, and that the nature of belief is constituted by its being governed by this norm—in short, that it is essential to belief that it is governed by a norm of truth.

p. 73 There is a lot to discuss in this thesis, but before proceeding I would like to make it clear that this is not the only way of filling out the thought that belief has a distinctive ‘direction of fit’. From my own perspective, I am happy to agree that belief ‘aims at the truth’ in a way other attitudes do not. But I would explain this in terms of *biological design* rather than norms.

From the point of view of biological design, beliefs have quite different functions from desires. The two kinds of state are specialized in quite different ways. Desires relate to results. Each desire type has the function of generating actions that will lead to some specific outcome, such as food, or fine wine, or watching Tottenham Hotspur play football. By contrast, beliefs have no results to call their own. Their function is not to produce specific results, but to help whichever desires are active to select those actions that will conduce to their satisfaction. To do this, beliefs need to carry information about the environment, information that is relevant to which actions will produce which results. So the function of beliefs is to fit the way the world is, where the function of desires is to change it.

Some readers might be wondering whether this kind of biological account is really an alternative to the view that the nature of belief depends on norms. After all, biological functions can be equated with activities that are ‘designed’ or ‘supposed’ to occur, and to this extent can be viewed as specifying ‘norms’ of functioning. However, while I have no great objection to this kind of terminology, it is not the kind of norm that is at issue in this paper. We are here concerned with norms that have prescriptive force—that indicate what *ought* to be done. Purely biological ‘norms’ have no such implications.

As I understand claims about biological functions, they are equivalent to claims about selectional histories. They report on the effects for which certain items were selected in the past. Now, it certainly does not follow, just because some item was selected for some effect in the past, that it is valuable that it should produce this effect. For example, certain human hormones have been selected to make us act aggressively in competitive situations. But this does not mean that we *ought* so to act. Talk in terms of biological ‘norms’ if you wish. But do not conflate them with genuinely prescriptive norms.

One last point about the biological approach to beliefs. It might seem implausible to suppose that all beliefs and desires can be understood in terms of biological function. Surely many beliefs and desires, indeed most, have no genetic basis whatsoever. There is nothing in my genes that determines me to have desires or beliefs about fine wine or Spurs football.

But it is a mistake to equate the biological with the genetic. The development of human beings and other organisms involves many elements apart from genes, and many of these elements have functions other than those for which genes have been selected. There is a range of ways in which this can occur: derived functionality, inter-generational selection of non-genetically inherited traits, and intra-generational selection of ontogenetic traits. All these processes can be considered cases of biological design, but none involves functions for which genes have been selected. Once this kind ↵ of non-genetic design is taken into account, it is not at all obvious that the biological approach is incapable of dealing with the full range of human beliefs and desires (see MacDonald and Papineau 2006).

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There is obviously a lot more to say in filling out the biological story. But this is not the place. The point of these last remarks was not to develop a detailed positive account of the nature of belief, but simply to make it clear that there is an alternative to the idea that this nature is constituted by norms. Having pointed out that the doxasticist option is not the only possible account of the nature of belief, let me turn to some more specific difficulties it faces.

9. Governance

A first question relates to the idea that beliefs are *governed* by a norm of truth. What does this amount to? Does it just mean that it is *true* that belief is constitutively subject to a norm of truth—that believers are in this sense *subject* to a norm? Or does it mean that believers must be sensitive to the norm—that their practice is in some sense *guided* by it?

I think it is clear that the former reading is not enough for doxasticism. After all, even I am happy to allow that it may be *true* that believers ought always to pursue the truth, indeed that this may be necessarily true. For this is in itself perfectly consistent with the position I am defending in this paper. Maybe the reason you ought always to pursue the truth is that it is always morally valuable to do so, or alternatively that it is always personally valuable to do so. True, I offered various reasons in Section 4 for doubting that the truth *is* always morally or personally valuable. But, as I said there, these doubts are not essential to my position. My central thesis in this chapter is that the normativity of belief is not *distinctive*, not that it is not universal. This thesis is perfectly consistent with the claim that believers ought always to pursue the truth.

What if it is specified, not only that believers ought to pursue the truth, but that this norm is *sui generis*, and does not derive from extrinsic considerations such as moral or personal value? Well, this claim is indeed incompatible with the position I am defending here. But the trouble now is that it is simply an assertion of what I deny. If doxasticists are to offer anything more than a blank restatement of their position, they need to give us some account of *why* this norm is built into the nature of belief.

The only option here seems to be to posit a more intimate connection between belief and a norm of truth than that this norm *applies* to believers. The idea would be that, in order to be a believer, you must be *guided* by a norm of truth. The norm must make a difference to your intellectual practice, and it is this difference that makes it the case that your attitude is one of belief.

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We don't have to understand this as requiring that believers always *conform* to the relevant norm. By way of analogy, note that someone is still playing chess even if they cheat a bit. Similarly, we might allow that someone is still a believer even if they are occasionally indifferent to the demands of truth. Still, consistently with this we can ↵ require that they at least be *sensitive* to the norm, in the sense that they are aware of it and have some inclination to conform to it. Someone who doesn't know the rules of chess or blatantly ignores them just isn't playing chess.

10. Believers and schmelievers

So the idea is that, in order to be a believer, you must be sensitive to a *sui generis* norm of truth.

Let us distinguish three different components to this idea.

First, there is the *metaphysical* claim that in reality there is a significant propositional attitude that is constituted in part by sensitivity to the norm. Among the intellectual relations that people can bear to propositional contents, one requires *inter alia* that they are

sensitive to the truth norm.

Second, there is the *conceptual* claim that our concept of *belief* refers to this relation. We would not count someone as *believing* something unless they were sensitive to the truth norm.

And, third, there is the *factual* claim that most of the people we count as believers actually are believers in this sense—that is, in most cases where we classify someone as believing something, they actually have the metaphysical relational property constituted by sensitivity to the truth norm.

Now, as it happens I have various views about these claims. I don't see much to object to in the first metaphysical claim—after all, it just points out that one relational property that people *could* possess involves a certain norm-sensitivity, which is hard to deny (though we may wish to debate exactly how 'significant' this property is). By contrast, I am strongly disinclined to accept the second conceptual claim—it seems highly doubtful to me that our concept of belief implies any kind of sensitivity to any norms (though it may well make some assumptions about the cognitive design of beliefs). As to the third factual claim, I am agnostic—even if it isn't required by our concept of belief, it may still be true that believers generally display some norm-sensitivity.

But all this is beside the point. Suppose that I concede all three claims in full, for the sake of the argument. I say that, even so, no prescriptive facts of any kind will follow. If you look at the three claims, it seems clear that they imply nothing about what *ought* to be the case.

This is because they fail to take us beyond facts about our actual *practice* with the attitude of belief. If we grant these claims, then people whom we classify as believers are in fact sensitive to a norm of truth; moreover, we take this into account when we classify them as *believers*, withholding this classification from those who are not so sensitive to the norm. However, as I stressed in Section 5, the mere existence of a practice cannot deliver any normative facts on its own.

p. 76 We must be careful not to be misled by talk of 'norms' in this context. This terminology can be read in two different ways, and we need to avoid running them together. On the one hand, talk of 'norms' is often used to *describe social facts*. In this sense, to say ↵ that a 'norm' exists in some society is simply to say that this society engages in a certain practice, that its members constrain each other to observe some regularity of thought or behaviour. On the other hand, talk of 'norms' can be understood as implying that a certain practice is *valuable*. In this sense, to say that a 'norm' exists is to assert that some practice *ought* to be observed and encouraged.

In line with this, let us distinguish a 'descriptive' from a 'prescriptive' sense of 'norm'. Clearly the one does not imply the other. I might think that some practice is valuable and so ought to be upheld, while recognizing that a given society—perhaps my own—does not in fact uphold it. Conversely, I might recognize that a given society—perhaps my own—does in fact uphold some practice, while denying that this practice is valuable and ought to be followed.

In particular, then, I might recognize that certain societies—including my own—have a practice of upholding a certain norm of truth, and yet deny that that this practice is always valuable and that the relevant norm ought invariably to be upheld.

This is my position. I am happy to agree, at least for the sake of the current argument, that human societies, including our own, have an established practice of pursuing the truth. But I do not accept that this means this practice is always valuable.

Of course, as I have conceded throughout, there are plenty of circumstances in which it is indeed valuable to achieve truth for extrinsic reasons. These are the many cases where there are moral, personal, or aesthetic reasons for having true beliefs. So, to the extent that we are dealing with cases of this kind, the pursuit of truth is indeed valuable.

But this value does not somehow derive solely from the existence of the practice itself, but from the further circumstance that the end it is directed to—the pursuit of truth is in many cases of moral, personal, or aesthetic value.

Correspondingly, I say that there is nothing valuable about the truth-pursuing practice in those cases where there is no moral, personal, or aesthetic reason to believe truly. For example, there is nothing valuable about upholding the requirements of truth in the earlier examples of the person who forms a belief about the number of blades of grass on the lawn without counting properly, or

about having cancer without taking the appropriate tests. This would be like saying that you ‘ought’ to make the best move in chess even when nothing of value would flow from this.

To drive the point home, let us consider a community which does not, as a matter of descriptive fact, uphold some general norm of truth. The members of this community form cognitive states whose cognitive function is to track the truth, and these states are prompted by perception and guide action in just the way that normal beliefs do. But in this society there is no blanket social requirement that such states should be true, and no sensitivity on the part of thinkers to any such general principle.

We might say that this is a community of ‘schmelievers’ rather than believers. They have a different practice from us.

p. 77 Are they violating any prescriptive norms? Well, there are the prescriptions which derive from the many moral, personal, or aesthetic reasons for achieving truth. Schmelievers are indeed in danger of violating these prescriptions by forming false \hookrightarrow judgements. But this does not show that there are any further *sui generis* prescriptions that they violate. In cases where no moral, personal, or aesthetic reasons advise in favour of truth, as with the blades of grass or the denial of cancer, then the schmelievers are doing nothing wrong if their insensitivity to standards leads them into error. (And lest you think that the virtue of avoiding error in the extrinsically valuable cases provides a general rationale for believing rather than schmelieving, note that there is nothing to stop schmelievers specifically setting themselves to avoid error in these specific cases.)⁸

11. The possibility of schmelieving

It might have occurred to some readers to ask whether it is *possible* for human beings to be schmelievers. The requirement for schmelieving is that you should be insensitive to the norm of truth that guides ordinary human beings. However, it is a familiar point that believing is not a matter of choice (cf footnote 3 above). We cannot choose our beliefs in the way we choose our actions. Given this, it might seem that humans have no option but to respect a standard norm of truth.

Now, I certainly do not want to suggest that belief can be a matter of direct choice. Still, it is a further question whether humans have no option but to respect a norm of truth.

Recall the discussion in Section 3. I there distinguished between a general norm of truth of the form (2)—you may believe *p* if and only if *p*—and such more specific directives as may issue from this norm, such as ‘believe *p* only if you have considered relevant alternatives’, or ‘believe *p* only if your informants are experts’.

Now, there seems no doubt that, with some specific directives of this latter kind, alternative options are indeed open to human beings. To take a substantial and topical example, consider the current debate about ‘evidence-based medicine’. This is a genuine dispute about the extent to which the beliefs of medical practitioners ought to be subject to certain standards. Should doctors suspend judgement about the efficacy of treatments that have not been tested in randomized clinical trials? Opinions differ. But there would be no point to this debate if alternative standards were not genuine options for the medical profession.

Still, even if specific directives like this are optional, there may be some more basic standards of truth which humans are incapable of ignoring. Perhaps the very general principle (2) itself, abstracted from any more specific directives it may imply, fails to offer any practical guidance, for the reasons Glüer and Wikforss give, and so is not the kind of standard that we might or might not ignore. But what about some intermediate directive like the following?

(3) Match your beliefs to the evidence you currently possess.

p. 78 It is arguable that humans have no choice but to respect some directive of this kind. Note that none of the cases discussed in this chapter has involved any violations of this principle. On the contrary, all my examples of variant approaches to the truth have hinged on people adjusting what evidence is available to them, not on their ignoring it once they have it. Thus John the cancer sufferer made sure he avoided certain evidence; people who consult experts are seeking out certain items of extra evidence; advocates of randomized clinical trials are recommending that we acquire evidence of a certain form; and so on. Implicit in all these examples is

the assumption that, while we can control what evidence is available to us, it is not a further question how we are then to respond to it.

So let me grant, for the sake of the argument, that some such principle as (3) is unavoidable for human beings. There are no doubt further issues here, about how exactly this ‘unavoidability’ is to be understood, given that there are certainly some bigoted and self-deceiving humans who do violate (3)—for this reason, the unavoidability had better be understood in terms of invariable ‘sensitivity’ to (3) rather than invariable conformity. Still, we can by-pass this issue here, as I want to conclude with a more basic point—namely, that even if (3) is indeed unavoidable for human beings, and to this extent schmelieving is not a real option for us, nothing of a prescriptive nature follows. We may have no choice but to always respect (3), but this does not mean that we *ought* always so to respect it.

If we have no choice about (3), *why* should this be so? It is not hard to imagine beings—the schmelievers—who are otherwise like us, but have no inclination to respect (3). There seems nothing metaphysically or biomechanically impossible about such beings. So what accounts for our difference from them?

The obvious answer is that our commitment to (3) stems from our evolved biological design. Recall my earlier remarks about the function of beliefs. The job of beliefs is to help desires select actions. In order to do this, beliefs need to carry information about the environment, the better to indicate which actions will be successful in satisfying desires in current circumstances. Now, it should be clear that, if beliefs are to fulfil this function, they need to be responsive to the environmental factors that they indicate, and not to internal psychological factors (such as what you expect, or what you would like to be true). It is essential to beliefs fulfilling their cognitive function that they are controlled by relevant evidence, rather than by other factors. And that is why we are built to respect (3), rather than being able to conform our beliefs to our wishes.

If we view our commitment to (3) in this light, then it should be clear that it carries no universal prescriptive consequences. There are plenty of other cases where our evolved biological design forces us to do things, even when they are of no value. I cannot help blinking when an object moves quickly towards my eye, nor can I stop myself breathing after holding my breath for two minutes. These are good habits as a general rule, which is why evolution has instilled them in us. But there can be cases where nothing of value flows from their exercise. Imagine that you can win a valuable bet by not blinking, and that circumstances are arranged so that no harm will come to you ↪ if you don’t. Even so, you can’t help yourself. You have no choice but to blink. But this doesn’t mean that you *ought* to blink. Insofar as prescriptive talk has a grip here, you surely *ought not* to blink. (‘Ought’ may or may not imply ‘can’. But it is clear that ‘can’t not’ does not imply ‘ought’.)

I think that the unavoidability of (3) is entirely analogous. Evolution has instilled in us the habit of matching our beliefs to the evidence. (It needs to be a habit, not a matter of choice, for the reasons given two paragraphs back.) This is a good habit as a general rule, because it conduces to successful action. But there are cases where nothing of value will flow from its exercise, as with the blades of grass, or the kings of Assyria, or John’s cancer. Even so, we can’t help ourselves. We have no choice but to match our beliefs to the evidence. But this doesn’t mean that we *ought* so to match our beliefs. If nothing of moral or personal or aesthetic value would be lost, then there would be nothing wrong with ignoring the evidence, even if we can’t.⁹

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Notes

- 1 Note that I view such prescriptions as arising when some end is *valuable*, and not when the end is *valued* or adopted as a goal. (Here I diverge from Kelly's (2003) discussion of doxastic normativity.) I take no stand on whether something's being valuable for some agent means that it must have some motivational grip on that agent.
- 2 We can think of items as personally valuable if some but not all individuals have reason to pursue them. Outcomes that individuals will enjoy are the most obvious examples, but personal value need not always depend on enjoyment.
- 3 I am not here suggesting that John can simply *decide* to believe he is healthy (because he can see he will be better off with this belief) (cf Williams 1970). Even so, there seems nothing incoherent in his deliberately avoiding evidence that is likely to make him change his mind.
- 4 For an alternative view of the connection between practices and norms, see Millar (2004).
- 5 True, there are also philosophers who posit distinctive doxastic norms without supposing that they are constitutive of belief, simply resting their case on the 'intuition' that such norms obtain. A number of epistemological 'internalists' would fit this bill. However intuition is a flimsy basis on which to rest such a contentious commitment.
- 6 This distinction between content-constituting and attitude-constituting norms is similar to Glüer and Wikforss' (2009) distinction between content-determined and content-engendered norms. They introduce their second category rather more abstractly than I do, however.
- 7 It might seem questionable to classify teleosemantics as a norm-free theory of content. Teleosemantics explains content in terms of the biological functions of cognitive states. Doesn't this appeal to what those states are 'designed' or 'supposed' to do, and therefore offer an account of the 'normativity' of belief? (cf McGinn 1989; Millikan 1993). However, this is not genuine normativity. See the next section.
- 8 Thanks to Kathrin Glüer for this point.
- 9 Thanks for comments on earlier versions of this paper are due to the participants at the Aim of Belief conference at the Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature in Oslo in June 2009, and also to Maria Alvarez, James Hill, Clayton Littlejohn, and the readers for Oxford University Press.