

You cannot take the ought out of thought

In ‘Does thought imply ought?’ Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi (forthcoming) argue that the hypothesis that belief is constitutively normative is false. Their reasoning is this: those who claim that belief is constitutively normative (e.g., Boghossian 1989, 2003; Wedgwood 2002) maintain that the truth norm is essential to belief.¹ Such a norm is a consequence of the thesis that

- (1) For any p : the belief that p is correct if and only if p is true.

We can restate (1) as saying that for any subject, S , and any proposition, p :

- (2) For any S, p : S ought to (believe that p) if and only if p is true.

We can break (2) down into two conditional statements:

- (2*) For any S, p : if the proposition that p is true, then S ought to (believe that p).
- (2**) For any S, p : if S ought to (believe that p), then the proposition that p is true.

We ought to reject (2*), they say, because among the true propositions are propositions so complex that we cannot believe them. It follows from this and the principle that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’ that there are truths we ought not believe. Although some (e.g., Boghossian 2003) who defend the thesis that belief is constitutively normative defend only (2**), it is clear that a defense of (2**) is too weak to amount to a defense of the normativity thesis. (2**) places no requirement on believers at all. If p is true, (2**) does not imply that you ought to believe it. If p is false, (2**) does not imply that you ought not believe it since ‘It’s not the case that you ought to believe p ’ does not entail ‘It is the case that you ought not believe p ’. As (2**) implies naught an ought, the normativity thesis cannot follow from (2**) alone.

¹ Actually, this is not correct. Conee and Feldman (2004) insist that evidential norms are essential to belief. It would complicate the discussion needlessly to consider possible alternative formulations of the norms of belief. Since Bykvist and Hattiangadi focus on truth rather than, say, evidence or knowledge, I shall follow their lead.

We should grant that Bykvist and Hattiangadi have succeeded in showing that if you want to defend the normativity thesis, you should avoid defending anything along the lines of (2) or (2*). Doing so requires you to reject ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. We can grant that (2**) is too weak to serve the needs of those who defend the view that belief is essentially normative. There is, however, an alternative formulation of the truth norm that their argument does not address. We shall see that it is strong enough to establish the normativity thesis.

I would like to begin by offering two arguments that suggest that there is some essential connection between a belief’s deontic status and truth. If there are some essential connections between a belief’s deontic status and truth, it would be surprising if the normativity thesis were false. Suppose God comes from down on high and tells me that I ought to believe p . I thereby come to know that I ought to believe p . It seems I know it is not the case that it would be wrong to believe p if I know I ought to believe p , so I come to believe p . Assume I do so on the basis of competent deduction. Knowing what I know about the nature of belief, I cannot both know myself to believe p without believing p to be true.² I infer that p is true. It seems I do so knowingly. It seems that knowledge should transmit across each inference, but if (2**) were false, it is possible that someone ought to believe p even if p is not true. If (2**) were false, either (a) contrary to how things appear I cannot knowingly infer that p is true when I know I ought to believe p or (b) since at least I have knowledge of the contingently true conditional that if I am put in a position to know I ought to believe p I could thereby knowingly deduce p , I have contingent *apriori* knowledge. I would prefer to accept neither (a) nor (b).

The first argument suggests that (2**) must be correct. A second argument supports a second essentialist thesis about the relation between the truth of a belief and its deontic status:

- (3) For any S , p : if the proposition that p is not true, S
ought not (believe that p).

Suppose Audrey reports that Cooper believes p . We know that Audrey is a bit more knowledgeable than Coop, so we ask her what she makes of Coop’s belief. It seems

² I am not suggesting that it is impossible for someone to believe p without believing that p is true. What I am suggesting is only that those of us who think about the nature of belief and know a thing or two about belief can reason from the premise that I am permitted to believe p to the conclusion that I am permitted to believe that p is true.

positively inconceivable to me that Audrey might say *correctly* that while Coop believes p and p is not true, it is not the case that Coop ought not believe p . It seems that nothing further is needed to judge with certainty that Coop believes something he ought not beyond establishing that p is false and that p is something he believes. Any further information excuses his mistake.

If you want to defend the normativity thesis and say that there is some essential connection between the truth of a belief and its deontic status, you should not go with (2), but with (3). Does (3) capture the spirit behind (1)? I cannot see why it would not. It is true that (3) is weaker than (2). That is one of its virtues. Because it is weaker than (2), there is no obvious conflict between (3) and 'ought' implies 'can'. If you thought that (3) was too weak to serve the needs of those who defend the normativity thesis, you would have to say that defenders of the normativity thesis were committed to:

- (4) For any S, p : S ought to (believe that p) if and only if
the belief that p is correct.

I see no reason to think that (4) is the sort of thing that follows from the normativity thesis. Moreover, (4) is not independently plausible. It seems to be the sort of thing we ought to reject for just the same reason we rejected (2). Surely there is such a thing as a correct belief and surely it is madness to say that we are under an obligation to collect them all. Some correct beliefs are too complex for us to grasp.

If you adopt the view that epistemic obligations are primarily negative (e.g., Sutton 2005), enjoining us to refrain from misrepresenting the world rather than enjoining us to also represent correctly every last one of its details, a view that combines (2**) and (3) is the natural view to adopt. I cannot see how someone could consistently endorse both (2**) and (3) without conceding that they think belief is essentially normative. Since such a view is not touched by any of the arguments offered by Bykvist and Hattiangadi, the normativity thesis is still up for consideration.

References

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