

Epistemic Norms and the Normativity of Belief

by

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Preface

Early on in grad school I had a few experiences that were formative for this thesis. Their content didn't appear to be *about philosophy* at the time, but they did collectively start to give me an impression of the characters that made up my lot – the lot in which I, of course, was a fairly stereotypical member. On an early phone conversation with my mother, I made some remark about my cousin. It was, as far as I recall, true, but unflattering. My mother responded, “You shouldn't think that about her – she's your cousin!” I remember being struck at the time with the seeming absurdity of that response. Because (somewhat unfortunately for my mother) I am who I am, I asked her to clarify: “Wait, do you mean that I shouldn't say it? You do agree it's true, right?” She demurred about whether it was true – a telling sign, I thought! – and doubled down: “No, I'm saying that you shouldn't have even believed it in the first place!” My mom, I concluded to myself, was evidently deeply confused. Sure, there was no reason to go around saying unflattering things that didn't need to be said, but surely the only thing that determined whether I should *believe* those things was whether or not they were true!

Pub hangouts were populated by groups of grad students from different departments – economists, art historians, political scientists... I noticed early on that the philosophers had a rather distinctive habit that no one else seemed to share. We were prone to correcting people – each other, friends from other departments, ourselves, sometimes all of the above in a single utterance. The striking part was how little the corrections usually mattered. More often than not they were simply distractions from the overall trajectory of some tale or other. Someone would set out to tell a story and a philosopher would interrupt to provide

some correction of a trivial detail. Or sometimes it was a sustained interruption in order to debate the importance of a nearby distinction or the truth of some factual matter. Whatever the variety, the corrections apparently seemed sufficiently fitting or necessary for us to judge them worth it. I started talking about this habit with friends and we gave it a name – fact-a-donning! Fact-a-don strikes again!

Maybe a good explanation of what unites these occurrences is just rudeness or some kind of curious social ineptitude. That is almost certainly true. But it's at least a very particular *breed* of curious ineptitude and one that seems to plague philosophers at rates higher than the general population. And besides, there were other pieces of the puzzle. It didn't take long to realize that a certain way of carrying oneself in seminars or a certain attitude towards one's own work seemed straightforwardly linked to success. The surer one seemed about the quality of their work, the likelier they were to talk about it and write about it and solicit feedback. And, it's not hard to see, the more one produced and the more feedback one got, the better things seemed to go. So even though at the beginning, the confidence and the beliefs in the goodness of one's work in many cases appeared unwarranted, the strategy (if it could even be called that) seemed like a winner. The trick was just how to cultivate those beliefs.

These things together started to shake loose a kind of commitment that I think I had before held pretty deeply. It was a commitment to the value of getting at the truth – wherever and whenever. How important *was* believing the truth? Was it important to set one's beliefs right about insignificant features about one's family members? Or to make sure that everyone had the correct background beliefs when listening to a friend's story, no matter their relation to the narrative arc? I take it the answers to these questions are likely obvious to a lot of people (probably people whose friends like them more). But I think there's something about philosophers that can make it seem to us as if the value of true belief reigns supreme – that if one is in a position in which one's evidence licenses the adoption of a belief, don't suspend or think about something else - go ahead! Get to the bottom of it! Believe it! We will have thereby added a true belief to the stock and

whether or not we choose to act on that belief is a separate matter entirely! That if believing that one's work is good or one is talented in philosophy correlates with eventually becoming a better philosopher, well, *ideally* one would get themselves to do the thing that creates the better results and figure out how to do it without deceiving oneself!

In the *Republic*, Socrates talks about the nature of philosophers. They always love learning, he says, about that which is unchanging and real. "They must be without falsehood – they must refuse to accept what is false, hate it, and have a love of the truth." Is it possible, he asks, "for the same nature to be a philosopher – a lover of wisdom – and a lover of falsehood?" Of course not, agrees Glaucon. Socrates goes on, "Then someone who loves learning must above all strive for every kind of truth from childhood on" (485a-d).

If, by striving for truth and refusing to accept falsehood, what we uncover is that we were wrong – that it's not true that every truth is worth having and that we must hate all falsehoods – then what? Maybe Socrates is right that the *true* philosophers love truth indiscriminately. I, however, difficult as it often feels, am striving for what I see as a better – a lesser – relationship with the truth, and even more popularity in pubs.

Abstract

Epistemologists frequently claim that the question “What should I believe?” demarcates the field of epistemology. This question is then compared to the question asked in ethics: “What should I do?” The question and the ensuing comparison, it is thought, specify both the content and the normativity at stake in epistemology. I argue that both of the assumptions embedded in this demarcation are problematic. By thinking of epistemology’s focal question in this light, first, we risk importing our assumptions about the epistemic domain into our understanding of the nature and normativity of the belief state, and second, we come to have a false picture of the normativity that supposedly underlies the domain.

In Chapter 1, “The Doxastic Account of the Epistemic”, I explore a range of views that assume there to be an essential connection between belief and truth. I look at views that treat all beliefs as attempts to believe the truth, views that consider belief’s biological function to be accurate representation, and views that hold that the very concept of belief is a normative concept. I go on to explore instrumentalist conceptions of belief’s truth connection and conduct an inquiry into the value of true belief. I conclude that neither the value of true belief nor an essential connection between belief and truth can explain epistemic normativity.

In Chapter 2, “Evidential Exclusivity, Correctness, and the Nature of Belief” I note that epistemologists have recently argued that the best explanation for the apparent truth of a pair of claims - “Transparency” and “Exclusivity” - is that belief is subject to a standard of correctness such that a belief that p is correct if and only if p is true. I argue that the proposed explanation unduly privileges one part of belief’s full functional profile - its role in deliberation - and that a more complete consideration of belief’s role in cognition

suggests an alternative explanation for Exclusivity and Transparency but denies belief's standard of correctness.

In Chapter 3, "Tradeoffs and Epistemic Value", I look at a debate about whether epistemic norms are teleological. Though it's standard to assume in keeping with teleology that certain goals or values explain the content of our norms, a collection of recent papers have aimed to show that this assumption can't be correct because teleological norms countenance tradeoffs but epistemic norms don't countenance tradeoffs. I note that the kind of non-teleological view that countenances no tradeoffs whatsoever is actually quite extreme and virtually unheard of in ethics. I go on to make the case that norms that license no tradeoffs can't reasonably be taken to be grounded in value at all, and thus can't be understood to give rise to necessary normativity. I conclude by suggesting that we broaden our conception of the epistemic domain to recognize teleological norms that provide recommendations for methods of inquiry or pursuit of significant truth or knowledge.