EVIDENTIAL EXCLUSIVITY AND THE (NON-)NORMATIVITY OF BELIEF

Paper gist: We should deny belief's standard of correctness!

Extended abstract: Recently epistemologists have used a pair of related claims, *Exclusivity* and *Transparency*, to draw conclusions about features of the belief state. In particular, they have concluded that the best explanation for the existence of these apparent constraints on doxastic deliberation is that beliefs are subject to a standard of correctness such that a belief that *p* is correct only if *p* is true[1]. Though virtually all epistemologists seem to endorse some version of belief's standard of correctness, there's a lot of variation in extant accounts regarding the kind of normative import they take that standard to have. On the stronger end of the spectrum are accounts that take the standard to express a constitutive feature of the normativity of belief that's ably glossed by the deontic "ought" and necessarily gives rise to principles of belief governance. On the weaker end of the normative spectrum are accounts that take correctness either to be a non-normative/purely descriptive trait or to be normative in a merely rule-implying sense that does not generate genuine normative reasons.

In this paper I deny both the stronger and weaker versions of belief's standard of correctness. Whereas we took belief's standard of correctness to provide the best explanation for Exclusivity and Transparency and in so doing to illuminate the normative nature of belief, I will claim that the proposed explanation unduly privileges just one part of belief's full functional profile – belief's role in deliberation. A more complete consideration of the belief state will render the standard of correctness proposal unsatisfactory and lay the path for an alternative explanation that accounts for Exclusivity and Transparency but denies belief's standard of correctness.

In section 1, I'll explain Evidential Exclusivity[2] (the claim that during doxastic deliberation only what are taken to be evidential considerations can play a role as motivating reasons to have a doxastic attitude towards a particular proposition) and Transparency[3] (the claim that during doxastic deliberation the first-personal question "whether to believe that *p*" immediately, non-inferentially gives way to the question "whether *p*"), clarify their relationship to one another (Transparency entails Evidential Exclusivity), and show how they're taken to arise from and be explained by belief's standard of correctness.

In section 2, I'll highlight two observations about Evidential Exclusivity and Transparency: first, the apparent possibility of deliberate suspension in cases of roughly balanced evidence[4], for example in certain cases of testimony and inductive generalization,

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[1] There's a lot of debate in the literature about the content of this norm - in particular whether the norm should say "iff" or "only if". There are reasons to prefer "only if" because it seems like we shouldn't believe everything that's true, for example all trivial entailments of our beliefs that no finite cognitive machine could ever support. The exact content of the norm won't matter for this paper, so I'll stick with Shah's "iff".

[2] Steglich-Petersen (2009), McHugh (2015), Sharadin (2016)

[3] Transparency was introduced by Evans (1982) and revisited by Moran (2001). This formulation comes from Shah and Velleman (2005).

and second, the apparent possibility of reasonable divergence in synchronic and diachronic judgments about the normative status of a belief. In particular, I will call attention to the fact that doxastic processes are ways of forming, maintaining, and revising beliefs and that deliberation is but one kind of doxastic process that aims to focus agents on evidential considerations alone. When we broaden our lens to include an examination of other doxastic processes, we notice that there are many that seem to be directed toward a different end – an end that we might broadly characterize as enhancing an agent's wellbeing. We will look at some of the ways in which cognitive filters of selective attention, representation, and recall interact with doxastic processes to influence the doxastic outputs of the believer. Systematic and significant correlations between predictably evidentially isolated beliefs and non-depression, improved motivation, and improved engagement with one's environment can justify an agent's diachronic endorsement of the normative status of these beliefs. This diachronic endorsement conflicts with the synchronic condemnation that EE/T claims necessarily arises and illuminates a problem with the explanation. Though my aim is not to deny EE/T, – after all, I'd be happy to interpret the Standard of Correctness explanation as a conditional claim – the problems that I raise illustrate the data points that a successful alternative explanation must ultimately account for.

In Section 3 I will take a closer look at how philosophers have understood belief's Standard of Correctness. We will take as examples Gibbard[5], who tells us that the correct beliefs are the ones a subject *ought to have*, McHugh[6] and Engel[7], who tell us that *believers who believe falsely believe wrongly* in a sense in which they *couldn't sensibly fail to care about it*, and Wedgwood[8], who tells us that false beliefs are *necessarily* defective. Whereas a strong view about the normative implications of correctness begins to emerge from the previous claims, I will show how epistemologists have assumed that a weaker view of the normativity of belief's correctness standard acts as a kind of default position.

I will go on to propose a distinction between two ways of interpreting the standard's normative force. The distinction that I suggest maps onto a distinction familiar from Schroeder's division between norms of classification and norms as force-makers[9] and Parfit's distinction between norms as rule-implying and reason-implying[10]. Although proponents of belief's standard of correctness most often take the standard to apply to belief necessarily, we should understand norms as force-makers and reason-givers only when they promote states of affairs with value. The arguments of Section 2 show that it can't be the case that the correctness in play in belief's standard of correctness is normative in the strong sense that necessarily gives rise to reasons to follow it.

In Section 4 I turn to the weaker interpretation. Theorists who doubt the possibility of a strong construal of the correctness standard's normativity tend to settle on a kind of fallback position: though the standard of correctness might not give rise to any necessary principles of belief governance, it's a basic fact about belief that it's a state that's correct only if it's true. In accordance with Section 3's distinction between two senses of normativity,

[5] Gibbard (2005)
[6] McHugh (2017)
[7] Engel (2013)
[8] Wedgwood (2013)
[9] Schroeder (2003)
[10] Parfit (2011)

both Schroeder and Parfit give norms of etiquette and game rules as examples that fall into the weak sense category. I explore an analogy between belief's standard of correctness and token etiquette and games norms. I argue that in the etiquette and game domains, although we can imagine contexts in which we might have overriding reason to flout particular norms, when we deploy such considerations, we've clearly departed from evaluation from *within the domain of etiquette* or from *within the domain of the given game.* In other words, there's a sense in which the *standard of the norm exhausts the conceptual role.* But this is distinctively different from the belief domain, in which non-evidential considerations are not clear departures from evaluation from within the belief domain. This will be the jumping off point for my argument that belief cannot be thought to have a standard of correctness such that a belief is correct only if it's true – even in the weak sense.

Finally, in Section 5, I'll put together the pieces: I'll use a cognitive theory of creature construction to provide a novel alternative explanation that shows how a doxastic system that allows frequent non-epistemic manual overrides suffers from rule erosion and long-term instability. My view shows how EE/T can arise in a way that will account for both of the observations that the Standard of Correctness proposal left unexplained, and succeeds where the Correctness proposal failed – in accounting for the core features of belief's *full* functional profile (on the input side I'll highlight its very distinctive sort of evidence-sensitivity, and on the output side, its role in motivation) – not just its role in deliberation.

References:

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