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Belief and the Right Kind of Reason

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RESUMEN

De acuerdo con el absolutismo doxástico, hay una norma de la verdad que es constitutiva tanto del estado como del concepto de creencia. Dos argumentos prominentes a favor de este punto de vista son: i) que la distinción entre el “género de razón correcto” y el “género de razón erróneo” o creencia explica el carácter absoluto de la norma de la creencia, y ii) que la creencia es exclusiva en el sentido de que uno no puede sopesar consideraciones sobre qué creer, de la manera en que uno puede sopesar objetivos para acciones. Aquí examino algunos argumentos que parecen amenazar tanto i) como ii), y afirmo que no logran mostrar que el género correcto/incorrecto de razón carece de justificación y que uno puede sopesar el objetivo de la creencia del mismo modo que uno puede sopesar las metas de las acciones.

PALABRAS CLAVE: creencia, normatividad, norma de la verdad para la creencia, género de razón correcta, Max Schroeder, Andrew Reisner, David Papineau.

ABSTRACT

According to doxastic absolutism, there is a norm of truth constitutive of both the state and the concept of belief. Two prominent arguments in favor of this view are i) that the distinction between the “right kind of reason” and “the wrong kind of reason” or belief explains the absolute character of the norm for belief, and ii) that belief is exclusive in the sense that one cannot weigh considerations about what to believe in the way one can weigh goals for actions. I examine arguments which purport to threaten both i) and ii), and claim that they do not succeed in showing that the right/wrong kind of reason is unjustified and that one can weigh the aim of belief as one can weigh goals for actions.

KEYWORDS: Belief, Normativity, Norm of Truth for Belief, Right Kind of Reason, Mark Schroeder, Andrew Reisner, David Papineau.

I. DOXASTIC ABSOLUTISM

Recent philosophy of mind has rediscovered an insight of early phenomenology: a number of mental intentional attitudes such as beliefs, desires, hopes and intentions have “correctness conditions”.¹ The correctness condi-

tions of an intentional state are neither identical to their intentional contents nor to their satisfaction conditions. Each kind of attitude has, to take up the schoolmen's terminology, its own formal object. Thus the formal content of fear is that something is fearful, the formal content of hope is that there something which is hopeful, the formal content of a conjecture is that a state of affairs is probable, the formal content of a belief is a proposition. The specific intentional content of an attitude is the content that it turns out to have, say the desire that she is happy, the fear that this crocodile might attack me, the belief that there are a lot of crocodiles around, etc. The satisfaction condition of an attitude is the property which makes it correct. Thus the satisfaction condition of desire is its being realized, the satisfaction condition of a belief is that its content is true (the familiar notion of a direction of fit is equivalent). Now the correctness condition is yet something else than the intentional content, the formal content and the satisfaction condition. The correctness condition for an emotion like fear is the feature which makes the attitude "fitting" with respect to its content and satisfaction condition. The correctness condition of an emotion like fear is that one fears that p (say that there are crocodiles around) and that the state of affairs described by p be fearable, or an appropriate object of fear. The satisfaction condition for a conjecture that p is that p is probable, the correctness condition is what relates the attitude to the kind of object or state of affairs that it fits (indeed here the familiar terminology of "directions of fit" is closely related with this scheme). The correctness condition for conjecturing that p is that p is correct if and only if p is probable. The satisfaction condition is a purely descriptive feature: it is a state of affairs (or an object). But the correctness condition is a *normative* feature: it says when an attitude is "right", appropriate or "fitting."² Now what are the correctness conditions for belief? The obvious candidate is truth. A belief that p is correct if it is true. As Alan Gibbard phrases it:

For belief, correctness is truth. Correct belief is true belief. My belief that snow is white is correct just in case the belief is true, just in case snow is white. Correctness, now, seems normative ... The correct belief, if all this is right, seems to be the one [a subject] ought, in this sense, to have [Gibbard (2005), pp. 338-39].

But what entitles us to say that the correctness feature is unique, and that it is the right one? Indeed satisfaction conditions and formal objects for attitudes are, so to say, rigid: fears are supposed to be fears *of* something, conjectures that something is the case, beliefs are supposed to be true. That is what they *are*, by nature. But why should we suppose that correctness conditions are unique? Is it correct to fear only fearable things? To desire only desirable things? To take as probable only probable states of affairs? Can't we fear plenty of things, including those which are not the normal objects of fears, as in phobias? Can't we conjecture things which fail to be probable? And can't

we believe plenty of things which are false, and moreover systematically do so? The point here is not that when the objects or our attitudes do not fit the proper object or satisfaction condition the attitudes are *wrong*. The point is: why should we say that someone who would fear a lot of unfearable things, who has phobias, is not really fearing? Why should we say that someone who makes all sorts of crazy conjectures is not really conjecturing? Do we fail to conjecture if we do not target our conjectures at probable states of affairs? Do we fail to believe if we do not aim to believe what is true? In other words, why should correctness conditions be *absolute*? Why should beliefs be correct only when they are true? Can't correctness for attitudes, and for beliefs in particular, not be a purely *relative* matter? After all there are many ways in which plenty of things can be correct. A beach can be correct if one can swim on it, if your intention is to swim. But it can be correct if it is sunny only, for you might also desire to be suntanned irrespective of your desire to swim. Or it can be correct if it is quiet, for you do not want to have many noisy people around. On some other criteria it has to be classy, where particular people congregate, etc. There are a variety of criteria of correctness for beaches, restaurants, sea trips, police stations, armchairs, philosophy jobs, cakes, etc. Why not for beliefs? Why can't we be relativists about correctness conditions? José Zalabardo formulates this as the opposition between doxastic relativists and doxastic absolutists:

According to doxastic relativism, beliefs count as right or wrong relative to the criterion employed in each assessment, and no particular criterion enjoys a privileged status that justifies speaking of beliefs as right or wrong simpliciter, according to whether they satisfy this criterion. (According to doxastic absolutism), by contrast, there is a criterion such that whether a belief satisfies it will determine whether the belief is right or wrong in an absolute sense. Beliefs that satisfy this criterion are right, and beliefs that don't satisfy it are wrong, independently of how they fare with respect to other criteria [Zalabardo (2010), p. 1].

David Papineau expresses a particularly uncompromising kind of doxastic relativism when he says:

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 valuable to acquire true beliefs. It is personally valuable to me to have accurate information about the Tottenham Hotspurs 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 [Papineau (forthcoming)].

I intend here to defend doxastic absolutism against doxastic relativism. There are a number of versions of this view, though. Some take the correctness conditions governing mental states to depend upon social norms, other to depend on statuses acquired within a community, others on various conditions of assessment.³ They also depend upon whether the correctness conditions are supposed to be governed by goals or to depend upon norms. The version in which I am interested bears upon norms. I shall take doxastic relativism to be the thesis according to which there is not one manner for beliefs to be correct, and doxastic absolutism to be the thesis that the correctness conditions of belief are unique and exclusive and are so because belief is constitutively governed by a norm of truth [Wedgwood (2002), Boghossian (2003), Shah (2003), Engel (2005)]. The absolutist view does not entail that our beliefs cannot be caused in many ways. But the causal profile of a belief is distinct from its normative profile. According to doxastic absolutism the connection between belief and truth (or between an attitude and its object) is not a merely descriptive one – that we happen to believe something for some reason which causally explains our believing – but a normative one – we ought to believe what is believable (or to admire what is admirable). One of the distinctive theses associated to absolutism is that correctness conditions determine the essence of belief, or its concept. One of the distinctive theses of doxastic relativism is that there is no such essence.

In what follows, my objectives are to try to answer two distinct kinds of arguments against doxastic absolutism. The first attacks directly the view that there is only one right kind of reason to believe and is a version of the so-called “wrong kind of reasons” argument against the “buck passing account” of value. The other attacks the idea that the correctness conditions of belief are constitutive of the essence or concept of belief. Both, in my view, fail to provide grounds for doxastic relativism.

II. THE WRONG KIND OF REASONS PROBLEM FOR BELIEF

We can think of correctness conditions for an attitude as the conditions under which an attitude fits a certain property. Here the property is truth, and the corresponding view for the attitude of belief is that believing is the most fitting attitude that one can have to a truth [Philippis-Griffiths (1963)]. But is believing the only kind of attitude one can have to a truth? And if we think of the normative connection between belief and truth in terms of reasons – if we say that what is fitting or correct to believe is what there are most reasons to believe – the problem can be put in terms of reasons to believe: are our reasons to believe only reasons of the evidential kind, *i.e.* reasons pertaining to whether a belief is true or based on appropriate evidence? The problem has an analogue for values. Brentano proposed to “call a thing *good* when the

love relating to it is correct. In the broadest sense of the term, the good is that which is worthy of love, that which can be loved with a love that is correct."⁴ This idea was rediscovered by proponents of the "fitting attitude" conception of value, who claim that to value something is to have the appropriate reasons towards it. This has come to be known as the "fitting attitude" or "buck passing" conception of value: "To value something is to take oneself to have reasons for holding certain positive attitudes toward it and for acting in certain ways in regard to it" [Scanlon (1998), p. 96]. Fitting attitude accounts, however, face a problem – known as the *wrong kind of reason* problem: it seems that reasons to value something do not always bear on the object's value. For example an evil demon will torture you to death unless you admire him. You have a reason to admire the demon, but he has nothing admirable. Or suppose that you have reason to praise your boss's necktie since otherwise you will not get your promotion. You ought to praise his tie although it is ugly [Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004)]. The problem is easily transposed to belief. The evil demon (or for that matter Orwell's 1984 character O' Brien) will torture me to death unless I believe that $2+2 = 5$. I have a very good – indeed a compelling – reason to believe that $2+2= 5$, although I ought not to believe this obvious falsehood. Clearly the fact that the demon threatens me is the wrong kind of reason to believe that $2+2 = 5$, although it may be, in a sense, a good reason for me to believe this. But what is the ground for this difference between the "right" and the "wrong" kind of reason? In the case of belief, the distinction resembles the common one between epistemic reasons to believe and pragmatic reason to believe, or the distinction between having a reason to believe and having a reason to cause oneself to believe, which is familiar from the literature on doxastic voluntarism, or such distinctions as that between extrinsic and intrinsic reasons to believe.⁵ The right kind of reason for a belief is an epistemic reason, and the wrong kind of reason is a pragmatic one. But this answer seems to beg the question. For, and in the first place, the doxastic relativist (who might in the circumstance be also a pragmatist about belief) will ask, why should we suppose that non-epistemic reasons – prudential, or perhaps aesthetic reasons – for believing are not *good reasons* or not reasons at all? The prospect of my future promotion is, after all, an excellent reason for me to believe, or at least to try to make it the case that I believe – that my boss's necktie is pretty. Or to take the stock case, the prospect of my recovering from cancer is an excellent (pragmatic) reason for me to believe that I shall recover from cancer, if that belief is apt to cause my recovering from cancer, even though I have adequate epistemic reasons to believe the contrary (say that my doctor told me so). In the second place, we need also to draw the distinction between the right kind and the wrong kind of reason in full generality for all kinds of attitudes, and not only for beliefs.

A number of writers have tried to articulate the distinction in terms of a distinction between reasons which we have in virtue of the *object* or the *con-*

tent of the attitude on the one hand, and reasons that we have in virtue of the *attitude* or *state* that we have (Parfit (2011) talks of “state-related reasons *vs* object-related reasons,” Piller (2004) talks of attitude-given reasons *vs* content given reasons). Thus my reason to believe that my boss’s tie is pretty is a reason related to the fact that it is desirable for me to have the *attitude* of believing that the tie is pretty. My reason to believe that my boss’s tie is ugly is a reason related to the content or object of my belief. The claim behind this distinction is that the right kind of reasons are those which are object or content related, whereas the wrong kind of reasons are those which are attitude or state related.

But, the doxastic relativist will ask, why suppose that attitude or state – given reasons are of the wrong kind and object or content-given reasons of the right kind? Why should the latter only enjoy the privilege of being reasons for our attitudes? This sounds arbitrary, for after all, the prospect of my promotion, or of my not being tortured, are excellent and *bona fide* reasons for me to praise or to believe.

To this the absolutist can answer that the distinction is actually more profound: the point is not that attitude-related reasons are the wrong kind of reason, but that they seem not to be reasons at all. I can desire to believe that *p*, and through some deviant route, cause myself to believe that *p*. But my desire to believe cannot be a genuine reason to believe. Only reasons which are based on my sufficient evidence that *p* is true can be reasons. My desire to have a belief which will bring me comfort, pleasure or relief, as justified it can be from a practical or prudential point of view, cannot be a genuine reason to believe. The same is true of intentions. I can have a reasons to intend something if such intending can be beneficial to me (say a large reward), but my real reasons to intend must be reasons which stem from the object of my intention (as Kavka’s toxin puzzle testifies). This answer amounts to a scepticism about the wrong kind of reason problem: it simply denies that there is such a problem, for the wrong kind of reasons are not reasons at all [Skorupski (2011), pp. 87-92]. The problem with this answer is that it seems to beg the question: to say that only reasons to believe or to intend are genuine reasons, and that reasons to desire to believe or to desire to intend are not genuine reasons is just to presuppose that the former and not the latter are “the right kind of reason”. Remember that talk of the “right kind of reason” here is supposed, on the fitting attitude analysis of value, to give us an informative and non-circular account of value: if we content ourselves with saying that the right kinds of reasons are those which are capable of yielding value, we have achieved nothing at all. Similarly if we say that the right kind of reasons for belief are those which we have reason *to believe* and the wrong kind of reasons are those that we have only reasons *to bring it about that we believe*, we seem to learn nothing at all [Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), p. 402].

I shall come back to this circularity objection below. For the moment, let us grant that it is effective, and that it leads us to find a non-circular way to characterize the distinction.

III. THE MARKS OF BELIEF AND THE SO-CALLED UBIQUITY OF STATE-GIVEN REASONS

The only way to draw the line between the right and the wrong kind of reasons seems to list a number of criteria or marks specific of each kind of reasons. A number of writers have proposed various such differentiating features with respect to belief and to the distinction between evidential and pragmatic reasons for belief [see e.g. Foley (1993), Kelly (2003), Harman (1998), Shah (2003), Hieronymi (2005), Schroeder (2012)].

- (1) *Directness*⁶ It seems easier to believe something on the basis of evidence than to believe something for a pragmatic or prudential reason: reasons to believe are typically direct and immediate, whereas reasons to desire to believe are typically indirect and mediate.
- (2) *Rationality* .The rationality of evidential reasons seems to be of a different sort from the rationality of pragmatic reasons. In particular if you are indifferent between option A and option B it is rational for you to choose arbitrarily A or B and it would be irrational to suspend your choice (see Buridan's ass), whereas if you have equal evidence for A and for B it is rational to suspend your judgment, and it would be irrational to assent to A rather than to B. The fact that one accepts a belief for a pragmatic reason does not seem to make it more rational. Another difference associated to rationality is that failures of rationality are easier to detect in the practical domain than in the theoretical or epistemic domain, or put otherwise, failures to exercise freedom of action are easier to detect than failures to exercise freedom of thought [Pettit and Smith (1996)].
- (3) *Correctness*. Evidential reasons are central to our evaluating a belief as correct, whereas pragmatic reasons do not seem to bear on the correctness of a belief.
- (4) *Phenomenology* . There is a certain "flavor" to pragmatic reasons that makes them feel intuitively like reasons for other attitudes that exhibit some of the other characteristics of pragmatic reasons for belief (for instance reasons to desire to believe feel like reasons to desire to intend).

Prima facie these criteria or marks can serve to sort out evidential from pragmatic reasons for belief – at least taken together, since it is not clear that each one of them is sufficient individually. If we accept that evidential reasons for belief are “the right kind” and pragmatic reasons “the wrong kind” the criteria seem to correspond to the distinction between attitude-given and object-given reasons: in particular the criterion (1) of mediacy or indirectness of the former is explained by the fact that attitude-given reasons involve at least implicitly an instrumental judgment to the effect that there are benefits to be in a certain attitude, whereas object given reasons do not rest upon any such instrumental judgment [Kelly (2003)]. Nevertheless the necessity and sufficiency of these criteria has been challenged, in particular by Schroeder (2012).

Schroeder argues that the distinction between “the right kind” and “the wrong kind” of reasons for attitudes cannot be accounted for by appeal to the difference between “object-given” and “state-given” reasons. He claims that the characteristic “earmarks” of object-given “right” reasons can be present in state/attitude-given reasons. There are, according to him, state-given right-kind reasons *for* attitudes and not just such reasons against them. In particular there can be state-given right kind of reasons *not* to intend or *not* to believe. For example, it may be rational for an agent not to intend to do a trip if he has more urgent matters to deal with at the present moment or if he expects to receive relevant information concerning that trip. Such reasons for not intending are intuitively state-given, as they have to do with the disvalue of forming an intention at a given time and not with the disvalue of the intention’s object-action A, but these are nonetheless reasons of the right kind. Similarly there can be state-given reasons *not* to believe (assent to) a proposition if there is insufficient evidence for its truth, or if one is awaiting relevant information. For instance one might want to defer judgment as to a condition of one’s health (say that one has a skin cancer) by waiting for the results of a particular medical examination. In such cases of withholding or of suspension of judgment, the reasons to believe (rather: to withhold or to suspend judgment) are attitude or state-given, but they are clearly of the right kind.

Schroeder has not given only a negative argument against the univocity of the right kind/ wrong kind distinction. He argues further that all reasons for and against attitudes consist in the benefits and costs of the attitudes in question. So, in a sense, all reasons for attitudes are ultimately state-given. So-called ‘object-given’ reasons are only a special subclass of state-given reasons. For example, the point of intending seems to be to close off practical deliberation “in order to allow us to coordinate and control our own actions across time [or in order to coordinate our own actions with the actions of other agents] and make decisions at times at which we have more available cognitive resources” [Schroeder (2012), p. 483]. Thus reasons against and for intentions are cases of reasons of the right kind. Similarly, the distinctive role of belief seems to be to close off uncertainty, so that “we have something to

rely on, in reasoning” [ibid, p. 484]. Since there are benefits in reasoning if we rely on truth, this explains why evidence is a reason of the right kind. But it also explains why the fact that further evidence is forthcoming can be a right-kind reason to postpone making up one’s mind.

It does not seem to me that Schroeder’s considerations undermine the right/ wrong distinction and the evidential reasons/pragmatic reasons distinction for belief⁷. There is an answer to his argument on the part of the doxastic absolutist (or the sceptic about the right/wrong kind of reason distinction) which he himself gives. The distinction advocated by Schroeder is not really a distinction among reasons not to intend or not to believe, but rather a distinction among reasons for withholding belief or intention. But withholding intention with respect to A is not just a matter of lacking intention; it is itself a positive attitude – and similarly for withholding belief. Finally, the response goes, since withholding is an attitude after all, the object-given/state-given theory can apply to reasons for it after all – the right-kind reasons featured in my argument will simply turn out to be reasons which bear on the object of withholding rather than on the object of belief. Which only makes sense, the objection goes, because we are talking about reasons for withholding, after all, and not reasons for belief [Schroeder (2012), p. 476]. Schroeder accepts the argument, but still maintains that it does not show that there cannot be right kinds of reasons which are of the attitude or state-given kind. We can certainly grant him this point, but the fact that there can be state of attitude-reasons for not to believe (let us leave aside intentions here) in no way undermines the distinction between evidential and pragmatic reasons to believe, for the reason why the patient withholds his judgment about his potential illness awaiting more evidence from the medical tests remains as evidential as it was in the case of a first-order belief: he suspends judgment because he lacks evidence, for an evidential, and not for a pragmatic reason. The reasons that we have for suspending judgment in the absence of relevant or of supplementary information do not stop being *evidential* reasons. The same sort of remark goes with other doxastic attitudes than belief or suspension of judgment, such as acceptance, suppositions, hypotheses or all the cases where one takes a certain attitude in the course of a reasoning although one is not sure of the truth or of the evidence: for pragmatic reasons one *accepts* that a certain belief is true, although one does not assent to the corresponding proposition. Still the reasoning in question remains regulated by a norm of truth and of evidence. That there can be intermediate cognitive decisions or attitude related actions in the course of the reasoning does not mean that the ultimate goal or norm of the reasoning has ceased to be epistemically, evidentially or truth-driven. Schroeder thus may have shown that some evidential reasons can have some characteristics of state-given reasons, but he has not shown that evidential reasons are not, in the end, reasons to which one *responds* [Hieronymi (2005), Parfit (2011), p. 426] when one considers whether

to believe something, and not reasons which we have because they have an instrumental character.⁸ So his argument does not undermine doxastic absolutism.

IV. WEIGHING THE CORRECTNESS OF BELIEF?

There is a specific mark or criterion for the difference between right and wrong reasons for beliefs which is not listed in the marks (1)-(4) above, although it may seem to be implicit in the first mark of directness and the third about correctness: typically, when we assess a belief with respect to its correctness, we do not balance this correctness with other criteria: we take directly the belief to be correct because it is true or based on appropriate evidence, and we do not evaluate its correctness with respect to other criteria, such as the belief's utility, or comforting character, or pleasantness, and the like. In other words the epistemic reasons for belief seem to be the *only* kind of reasons that one considers, and ought to consider, when one forms a belief. They are, in Steglich-Petersen's phrase, "exclusive", in contrast with our reasons for acting, which may be diverse. The point is more easily formulated in terms of the familiar idea that belief has an "aim" or "goal" which is truth, and has been presented by Owens (2003) as a *reductio* of the idea that truth is the aim of belief. Owens argues that if truth were an aim or a goal of belief, in some teleological sense, then it would have the characteristic of other aims, namely to be susceptible to be weighed or balanced against other aims. That may well be the case, Owens argues, for other attitudes than belief, such as guessing. For instance if I have to guess, in a quiz show, on a certain matter (say whether Madame de Pompadour was left handed), I may, at a certain point balance the aim of guessing a true answer on the basis of my very poor information, with the aim of winning the quiz by answering with a blind guess if an answer has to be given quickly and if the amount of the prize is so big that it's better to try a blind guess than answering nothing. But if I have to form a *belief* about that matter, there is no point in weighing the evidential goal against a pragmatic goal. Believing is not like guessing: it answers only one kind of reason.

Owens' argument is put in terms of an aim or goal of belief, but the same point could be put in terms of a norm for belief: there is but one norm or standard that governs believing, which is truth. Now the doxastic relativist denies this [Papineau (forthcoming)]. He claims that there could be alternative correctness conditions depending upon the conditions of assessment of a belief. I shall come back to this claim in the next section. For the time being, let us only concentrate on truth as an aim or goal for belief. Is it right to say that this aim cannot be weighed or balanced against other aims? Steglich-Petersen (2009) argues that it is not right. The cases that he gives are actually similar to those used by Schroeder: there are cases when a subject can deliberate about forming a belief, and balance the aim of truth against other aims, when the resources

that the subject must devote to the formation of the belief are not available (for instance I may defer the formation of a belief about global warming if doing so would involve a lot of scientific inquiries and consultation of experts), and there are cases where the consequences which follow from arriving at a belief are unpleasant (for instance a school teacher might decide to abandon her investigation about who among the pupils broke the window in reflecting about the unpleasant task of having to scold whom she found to be the culprit. In such cases, Steglich-Petersen argues, one weighs the aim of reaching the truth against other (practical or quasi practical) aims: economy of cognitive resources or peace in the class. There is no doubt that such weighing occurs, and we could add that such decisions can often occur in the course of inquiry after truth: sometimes we simply have to stop gathering evidence, for endless inquiries on a matter would be costly, or we might want to balance truth with other cognitive aims (for instance by preferring simpler to more complex theories). As Harman (2004) says, there are indeed “pragmatic factors” in theoretical reasoning.

But these cases have nothing to do with the truth aim or norm for belief. They do not concern cases where one suspends or brackets the truth aim or the norm of truth for belief. An agent’s decision not to investigate global warming or about who broke the window is no exception to the truth aim or norm, for what the latter requires is only that *when one sets up to consider a belief for its truth, then the belief one forms has to be true*. The truth norm does not require us to form a given belief or not to form it. It only requires that *once we deliberate about what to believe, the answer is expected to be true*.⁹ It does not concern the antecedent decision, or absence of decision, that one might take to deliberate about the truth. Once we are in the business of deliberating about truth, there is no other aim or norm in place. This might sound trivial or Pickwickian: if one aims at truth, then it’s at truth that one aims. But it is easy to make the confusion between *belief aiming at truth* (or being normed by truth) and *aiming at having true beliefs*.¹⁰ The second aim can indeed be suspended. But the fact that it can be suspended does not entail that the first has been suspended. The weighing does exist, but is not part of the belief-formation process.

I have been talking in terms of aims and goals. But it should be clear that the aim of belief here is not an aim when it concerns the very nature of belief: it has to be a criterion of correctness, which itself is best interpreted as a norm [Engel (2013)].

V. THE CONSTITUTIVE NATURE OF THE NORM AND SCHMELIEVING

I shall not here try to articulate and defend the view that the norm of truth is constitutive of the nature or concept of belief, in particular against the objection that this norm cannot govern our beliefs. I shall just examine one of

the doxastic relativist 's arguments, to the effect that the normativity of belief is a purely contingent matter, given by David Papineau (forthcoming) . The doxastic relativist is not someone who denies that there are any *reasons* for our beliefs. In other words he is, to borrow the term used in metaethics, an *ir-realist* or a *nihilist* about reasons for belief. There are actually good grounds to reject this kind of irrealism [Shah (2010)]. The doxastic relativist is the theorist who tells us that the fact that our beliefs are correct if and only if they are true is only a contingent feature of our biological and social upbringing, and of the practices that we are engaged in in our societies. According to David Papineau it is perfectly possible to imagine, and indeed perfectly possible that there exist societies which do not have the practice of believing truths and only truths, just as it is a purely contingent matter that an individual has cancer :

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... 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. 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 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.) [Papineau (forthcoming)].

There is no doubt that not only we can imagine, but also that such a community of schmelievers could (metaphysically) exist. But what would that show? Only that there are people who have either decided, or who by convention have engaged in the practice of valuing false beliefs, or of not taking epistemic reasons and evidence as the main reason for believing. Indeed it is perfectly conceivable that there exists a community who would have the established practice of guessing – hence weighing the aim of their

attitude with respect to truth or some other objective – instead of the practice of believing. Would that in any way show that the nature of belief is such that it is not governed by a norm of truth? No, for the schmelievers are violating various personal and social policies about believing. Nothing indicates that their cognitive states are states belonging to a different essence from that of belief. Papineau's argument would go through if he could show that the divergence in practice between believers and schmelievers induces a difference in the kind of state in which they are when they adopt this practice. At no point has Papineau shown that the schmelievers do not have the concept of belief. Actually one could use an argument like Williams' (1970) against the possibility of believing at will. If the schmelievers adopted the policy of schmelieving instead of believing, they would at least have to conceive of their states as states which differ from believings, and would thus implicitly accept that there is a state, believing, which obeys different norms. They might even weigh the divergent norms from this state, in the fashion indicated in the preceding paragraph. But if they do, this would in no sense impugn on the fact that they do not weigh the fundamental norm when it comes to belief formation.

Papineau is actually aware of this. He writes that there is a principle like:

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

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 paper 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 [Papineau, *ibid.*].

But this is just to admit that there is something which is the right reason for belief. At no point the schmelievers have the choice to reject this principle. So it turns out that schmelievers are just a special tribe of believers.

VI. CONCLUSION

We can return to the objection of circularity which was addressed to the sceptics about the right/ wrong reason to believe. It seems that to insist on the intuitive idea that to have reasons to believe and to have reasons to want to believe are quite different things, since it seems to be question-begging, for what is the ground of the distinction? Aren't our reasons to want to believe just as much reasons as our reasons to believe can be? Is there really a difference between reasons that one has to *make it the case* what one believes and

reasons *to* believe? If one is not convinced by the considerations given here, it seems that the only way by which one could reject the distinction would be to deny that there is a distinction between the truth of the content of an attitude and the utility of having an attitude with that content. In other words, one would have to accept a pragmatic theory of truth, according to which a proposition is true if and only if it is useful or beneficial [Skorupski (2011) p. 88].

But is it a price that a doxastic relativist wants to pay? David Papineau, for one, is not ready to pay this price:

Evolution has instilled in us the habit of matching our beliefs to the evidence. 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 [Papineau (forthcoming)].

But if we have no choice but to match our beliefs to the evidence, it seems clear that our reasons for believing cannot be put on a par with our reasons to believe, and that it gives us a clear enough sense in which we *ought* to believe on the basis of the evidence, rather than upon our fancies or upon our interests.

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NOTES

¹ See the references to Husserl and Brentano, given by Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004), by Mulligan (2012), and Findlay (1968). Searle (1983) has rediscovered these distinctions.

² The failure to draw these distinctions, or the denial that they are relevant is what leads to deflationism about the normativity of attitudes. I have examined this point in Engel (2013).

³ In varying degrees I take Brandom (1994), Stich and al. (2003), and McFarlane (2005) to be doxastic relativists.

⁴ Quoted by Rabinowicz and Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004).

⁵ *Locus classicus*: Williams (1973). Pamela Hieronymi (2005), (2006) proposed, for belief, the extrinsic/intrinsic terminology, as well as the distinction between *evaluative* and *manipulating* reasons

⁶ Schroeder (2012) labels this “asymmetry of motivation”. The feature of directness and immediacy has been exploited by Shah (2003) and Hieronymi (2006), (2005) in their accounts of the norm of truth for belief. But I do not deal with it here, and do not rest my present argument for doxastic absolutism upon it (as I did elsewhere, see Engel 2007).

⁷ For similar doubts about the results of Schroeder’s strategy, see Hieronymi (forthcoming).

⁸ Hieronymi (2005) and to appear has a specific account of the right/wrong kind of reasons in terms of the answering a certain kind of question. I cannot deal with this account here, but I largely agree with it in the criticism of doxastic relativism that it entails.

⁹ This feature of belief deliberation is indeed the one on which Shah (2003) insists under the name of the “transparency” of belief. It has been criticised (in particular by Zalabardo (2010)).

¹⁰ For a very good account of this confusion, see Vahid (2006). The point was recently rediscovered by Sullivan-Bisset and Noordhof (2013) in their criticism of Steglich-Petersen (2009).

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