The Normativity of Belief and Self-Fulfilling Normative Beliefs

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1. As Descartes famously pointed out in the *Second Meditation*, the thought that someone is thinking is true anytime anyone thinks it. Furthermore, thinking it makes it true. Conversely, anytime anyone thinks that it is not the case that someone is thinking, this thought is false, and thinking it makes it false.

    I will argue that the propositions ‘There is at least one true normative proposition’ and ‘There are no true normative propositions’ have very similar properties. The proposition ‘There is at least one true normative proposition,’ like the proposition ‘Someone is thinking,’ is true anytime anyone believes it, and, in an important sense, it is made true by someone’s believing it. Conversely, anytime anyone believes that there are no true normative propositions, the proposition he believes is false and his believing it makes it false.

    Although these claims may appear to express the anti-realist position that normative facts are constructed out of our attitudes or judgments, we will see that the key premise from which they are derived is inconsistent with a fully general constructivist position about normative facts. In order to see this, though, we will need a clear understanding of the question to which metanormative constructivism is an answer.

    Having established that the key premise of my argument is inconsistent with metanormative constructivism, I conclude by rehearsing the argument for this premise that I have presented elsewhere and defending the argument against two types of objection that have been levelled against it.
2. Before presenting my main argument, I need to clarify the sense of “normative proposition” I am employing. Compare the proposition:

(a) If anyone has ever caused pain to a small child for fun, then at least one wrong action has been committed.

With the proposition:

(b) At least one wrong action has been committed.

Although, both propositions are normative in one sense, only the truth of the unconditional claim, (b), entails the existence of a normative property (or, if one prefers, the instantiation of a normative property). An error-theorist about normative judgments might accept the following conditional:

(c) If there are non-natural, intrinsically motivating properties or states of affairs, then there exist wrong acts.

But by accepting (c), he does not thereby commit himself to the existence of any wrong acts. By “normative proposition” I thus will be referring to propositions whose truth entails the existence of normative properties (or, if one prefers, the instantiation of normative properties).

Notice that (a) has a chance of being a necessary truth, whereas (b) does not; the truth of (b) depends on the contingent fact that someone has performed an action. (If (b) were a necessary truth, then it would be true whenever anyone thought it. But it would not follow that it would be made true by someone’s thinking it.)

3. The proposition ‘Someone is thinking’ is true anytime anyone even considers it. Merely wondering whether someone is thinking or assuming that someone is thinking is enough to make it true that someone is thinking. Merely wondering whether there is at least one true normative proposition or assuming that there is at least one true normative proposition does not make it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition. However, I shall now argue that if anyone ever believes that there is at least one true normative proposition, then
his believing this (or believing anything for that matter) makes it true that there is at least one true normative proposition.

Here is the argument:

(1) I believe that there is at least one true normative proposition.

It is a conceptual truth about belief that:

(2) Believing that p is correct if p and incorrect otherwise.

This is the crucial premise. I will come back to the reasons for accepting it later, but for now let us see where it leads.

Is (2) a normative proposition in the sense I have defined? No. (2) is equivalent to the following conditional:

(2) If someone believes that p, then their belief that p is correct if p and incorrect otherwise.

(2) does not entail that anyone believes anything and therefore does not entail that there have ever been any correct or incorrect beliefs. So (2) does not entail that the normative property of correctness or incorrectness has ever been instantiated. But if (2) is true, my believing that there is at least one normative proposition does make it the case that:

(3) My belief that there is at least one true normative proposition is correct if there is at least one true normative proposition and incorrect otherwise.

Is (3) a normative proposition in the sense I have defined – does (3) imply that there exist any normative properties? It does not say whether my belief has the normative property of being correct, but it does say that my belief is normatively assessable in the sense that it is either correct or incorrect. Whether this is sufficient for (3) to count as a normative proposition in my sense is a tricky question. We can leave it aside, however, since I don’t need to claim that (3) is a normative proposition for the purposes of this argument.

If (3) is true, either my belief is correct or incorrect, which means that:
Either the normative proposition that my belief is correct is true or the normative proposition that my belief is incorrect is true.

Thus, even if we don’t know whether my belief is correct or whether it is incorrect, we do know that:

At least one normative proposition is true.

The inference from (4) to (5) depends on the claim that the notion of correctness involved in the statement of (2) is a normative concept. If correctness is not a normative concept, then claiming that someone’s belief is correct or claiming that someone’s belief is incorrect does not commit one to the truth of some normative proposition. So why think that the notion of correctness as employed in describing the relation between belief and truth is a normative concept? My grounds for thinking this will emerge when I give my argument for (2).

We can conclude from (1) and (5) that:

My belief that there is at least one true normative proposition is correct.

Assuming that correctness is a normative predicate, the truth of (6) consists in my belief’s having the normative property of being correct. Thus (6) clearly is a normative proposition in the sense I have defined.

According to this line of argument, ultimately it is the truth of (1) that is responsible for the truth of (6). So we can conclude that:

The fact that I believe that there is at least one true normative proposition makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition.

Conversely, my belief that it is not the case that there is at least one true normative proposition makes itself false. Here is the argument:

I believe that there are no true normative propositions.

(1'), combined with:
(2) If someone believes that $p$, then their belief that $p$ is correct if $p$ and incorrect otherwise.

yields:

(3’) My belief that there are no true normative proposition is correct if there are no true normative propositions and incorrect otherwise.

(3’) entails:

(4’) Either the normative proposition ‘NS’s belief is correct’ is true or the normative proposition ‘NS’s belief is incorrect’ is true.

Thus:

(5’) It is not the case that there are no true normative propositions.

Therefore:

(6’) My belief that there are no true normative propositions is incorrect.

Since (1’) is ultimately responsible for the truth of (6’). We can conclude that:

(7’) My believing that there are no true normative propositions makes it the case that there are true normative propositions.

Believing that $p$, for any $p$, makes it the case that there exists a mental state that either has the property of being correct or the property of being incorrect. Thus, believing anything at all makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition. This is why the belief that there are no true normative propositions is self-refuting.

4. Earlier, I claimed that merely wondering whether or assuming or desiring that there is at least one true normative proposition will not make it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition.
But, given that normative properties are instantiated whenever anyone believes anything, the following claim is almost certainly true:

If anyone ever wonders whether or assumes or desires that there is at least one true normative proposition, then there is at least one true normative proposition.

It seems impossible to conceive of a person as being in one of these states without having any beliefs at all. To desire that \( p \) seems to require believing that \( p \) is not the case; to wonder whether \( p \) seems to require believing that it is possible that \( p \); to assume that \( p \), at least in the context of reasoning, seems to require believing claims about what other propositions \( p \) entails.\(^1\) But if this is so, then it follows from the fact that anyone has any of these attitudes that there is at least one true normative proposition, because having any of these attitudes requires having some beliefs, and believing anything entails the existence of some normative property.\(^2\)

Of course there are many true normative propositions that are not made true by my beliefs about anything (e.g., moral truths), much less my belief that there is (or is not) at least one true normative proposition. The fact that there is at least one true normative proposition is also grounded in the facts that make these other normative propositions true. But then, if the truth of the proposition I believe – that there is at least one true normative proposition – is grounded in facts that are independent of my belief, in what sense does my believing it make it true? In this sense:

If there were no antecedent normative truths prior to my believing that there is at least one normative truth, my believing that there is at least

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1 See Boghossian (2003) for a discussion of the ways in which having these other attitudes requires having beliefs.

2 Along with all of his other doubts, might Descartes have come to doubt that there is at least one true normative proposition by the end of the First Meditation? Even if it were possible to doubt everything, it is hard to see how one could be in that state and not at least believe that one was in such a complete state of doubt. That kind of doubt necessarily is a conscious achievement, if it is possible at all, and thus must be a state that one recognizes oneself to be in.
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one true normative proposition would make it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition.

The point is that all that it takes for the proposition I believe to be true is that I believe it. My conclusion therefore is best stated as follows:

Believing that there is at least one true normative proposition is sufficient to make it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition.

Have I shown that a normative judgment can make itself true? That depends on whether the proposition that there is at least one true normative proposition is itself a normative proposition. Recall that according to my definition of a normative proposition, a normative proposition is one whose truth entails the existence of a normative property. If it is true that there is at least one true normative proposition, then it follows according to this definition that there is a normative proposition $M$ that is true, and it follows from the truth of $M$ that there exists a normative property whose instantiation makes $M$ true. So, if my definition of a normative proposition is correct, it follows that believing that there is at least one true normative proposition makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition: it is a self-fulfilling belief.

5. What is the metanormative status of my conclusion that believing that there is at least one true normative proposition makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition, or more generally, that believing that $p$ makes it the case that one is in a state of mind that either has the normative property of being correct or the normative property of being incorrect? Do these claims imply the anti-realist position there is a class of normative facts – correctness facts – that are metaphysically grounded in, or constituted by, attitudinal facts?

Before attempting to answer this question, we need to clarify what it means. The most famous version of the question I have in mind was asked by Plato in the *Euthyphro*. Plato asked Euthyphro:

Are pious things pious because the gods love them or, instead, do the gods love pious things because they are pious?
Plato’s question has the following form:

Does object 3 O have property P because subject S has attitude A towards O, or, instead, does subject S have attitude A towards O because O is P?

Questions that have this form have been at the centre of philosophical disputes in ethics. Here are some familiar examples: Are right actions right because some community approves of them or does that community approve of them because they are right? Do I have reason to do something because I desire to do it (or would desire to do it under conditions C), or do I desire to do it because I have reason to do it? However, it seems we can also ask a similar types of questions about epistemic properties. Here is an application of the Euthyphronic schema to the claim that believing that p is correct iff p:

Is S’s belief that p correct iff p because we judge that S’s belief is correct iff p, or do we judge that S’s belief that p is correct iff p because S’s belief is correct iff p?

Like Plato’s, this is a metaphysical question. Someone who asks it is not asking what the claim that ‘S’s belief that p is correct iff p’ means or how we come to know that it is true; they are asking, rather, what makes such a claim true, if it is true. In asking the question one thus presupposes that statements about the correctness of a belief express, as they appear to, truth-evaluable judgments.

But exactly what is the metaphysical question being asked? The question is how facts about belief’s standard of correctness stand in relation to the other facts there are. Specifically, we want to know if these normative facts are grounded in or constituted out of other kinds of facts.

Is there a criterion by which we can determine whether one fact is grounded in another? It might be thought that the following counterfactual test is the measure for metaphysical ground:

A facts are grounded in B facts iff there are no possible worlds in which there are A facts but no B facts.

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3 “Object” is intended capaciousely to include anything that has properties, including acts, states of affairs, and character traits.
To say that $A$ facts are grounded in $B$ facts is to claim that in some sense $A$ facts are asymmetrically dependent on $B$ facts. The problem is that this test does not pick out an asymmetric relation between $A$ facts and $B$ facts, since it is compatible with the truth of the following counterfactual:

There are no possible worlds in which there are $B$ facts but no $A$ facts.

What about the following fix?

$A$ facts are grounded in $B$ facts iff there are no possible worlds in which there are $A$ facts and no $B$ facts but there are possible worlds in which there are $B$ facts but no $A$ facts.

This criterion does describe an asymmetric relation between $A$ facts and $B$ facts. The problem is that it rules out certain intuitive cases of grounding relations. Intuitively there seem to be cases of necessarily co-extensive facts in which one fact grounds the other. Plato, after all, thought that it was a necessary truth that all and only what the gods love is pious. He thus was committed to the following counterfactuals:

For all $x$, there are no possible worlds in which $x$ is pious and the gods do not love $x$.

For all $x$, there are no possible worlds in which the gods love $x$ and $x$ is not pious.

If the counterfactual test for metaphysical ground were correct, then piety could not ground the gods love nor could the gods’ love ground piety. Plato’s question would make no sense. But Plato’s question appears to be perfectly intelligible. Even if we know that piety and the gods’ love are necessarily co-extensive, it seems to make sense to ask whether things are pious because the gods love them or whether the gods love pious things because they are pious. If, as Plato thought, it is possible for one necessary truth to ground another, then the counterfactual test for metaphysical ground is inadequate.

So how should we understand the notion of metaphysical ground? It seems to me that we need to be open to the possibility that there is no
reductive account to be had, that metaphysical dependence is a primitive notion. Even if metaphysical ground can be reductively explained, we don’t know how to do it yet. In addressing our Euthyphronic question about belief’s standard of correctness, we must work with whatever intuitions we have about how to deploy this notion. The important point is that our intuitions about metaphysical ground are not fully captured by our intuitions about counterfactual dependence.⁴

6. I think that the failure to distinguish between metaphysical ground and counterfactual dependence may mislead us into thinking that the argument I have given that believing that there is at least one true normative proposition makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition implies a constructivist position about normative facts. Once we focus on the question of metaphysical ground and not merely counterfactual dependence, however, we will see that my argument is in fact inconsistent with constructivism.

Remember that the conclusion that believing that \( p \) makes it the case that there is at least one true normative proposition was derived from the claim that the property of believing that \( p \) is itself a normative property. It is a conceptual truth about belief that truth is its standard of correctness. This means that for a mental state to be a state of believing that \( p \), it must have the disjunctive property of being correct if \( p \) or incorrect if \( \neg p \). If a mental state didn’t have this property, it wouldn’t be a belief that \( p \). But if it has this property, then either it has the normative property of being correct or the normative property of being incorrect. In coming to believe that \( p \), one thus comes to instantiate a normative property.

A constructivist position about belief’s norm of correctness thus must be a position about belief itself. The constructivist must claim that the fact that \( S \) believes that \( p \) is metaphysically grounded in someone’s judgments. As I argued earlier, this position cannot be adequately captured by biconditionals of the following form:

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S \text{ believes that } p \text{ iff } T \text{ judges that } S \text{ believes that } p \text{ under conditions } C.
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⁴ See Rosen (2010) for a much fuller discussion of the notion of metaphysical ground.
This biconditional merely tells us that \( S \)'s belief that \( p \) and \( T \)'s belief that \( S \) believes that \( p \) co-vary. It doesn’t tell us whether \( T \)'s judgment is metaphysically prior to, and thus capable of grounding, \( S \)'s belief that \( p \). In addition to asserting the biconditional, the constructivist thus must claim that the right-hand side of the biconditional has meta-
physical priority: \( T \)'s judgment that \( S \) believes that \( p \) makes it the case that \( S \) believes that \( p \).

In order to establish this claim of metaphysical priority, the con-
structivist must specify what it is for \( T \) to judge that \( S \) believes that \( p \) and what the conditions are under which \( T \)'s judgment makes it the case that \( S \) believes that \( p \), and he must do this without presupposing that \( S \) believes that \( p \). Unless he is committed to meeting this condition, his claim that \( T \)'s judgment is metaphysically prior to \( S \)'s belief has no content. But he must do more than meet this condition as it applies to some particular belief. The metanormative constructivist’s position is that all normative facts, and thus all belief facts, are grounded in judgmental facts. So he must claim that the entire class of judgmental facts that ground normative facts, and thus ground belief facts, can be specified without presupposing the existence of any beliefs. But judgments such as \( T \)'s are themselves expressions of belief. To judge that \( S \) believes that \( p \), \( T \) must believe that \( S \) believes that \( p \). But if this is so, then the constructivist obviously cannot specify the judgmental facts that he claims metaphysically ground normative facts without presupposing belief facts, and thus without presupposing the normative facts that are entailed by belief facts.

Although my conclusion that believing that there is at least one true
normative proposition makes it the case that there is at least one true
normative proposition appears to express a constructivist position
about normative facts, the key premise that leads to this conclusion
in fact undermines the possibility of such a position. If we accept that
it is a conceptual truth about belief that it has a standard of correct-
ess or, alternatively, that belief has the essential property of having a
standard of correctness, we cannot so much as coherently formulate a
fully general metanormative constructivist position.

7. We have now seen that the claim:

(a) It is a conceptual truth about belief that believing that \( p \) is correct
    if \( p \) and incorrect otherwise.
entails both:

(b) The belief that there are normative truths is a self-fulfilling belief.

and:

(c) Metanormative constructivism is false.

Given the controversial nature of (b) and (c), you may reasonably wonder whether the claim that entails them, (a), is true. Specifically, you might question the normative interpretation of “correctness” that is required to underwrite the inferences I have drawn from (a). After all, people often use “correct” to talk about truth. If this were the notion of correctness in play, then (a) would be a tautology. More importantly, unless truth is itself a normative property, this use of “correctness” would not imply that “correctness” expresses a normative concept.

I do think that sometimes when we say that someone’s belief is correct we mean merely to convey that we think the proposition they believe is true. Furthermore, I don’t think that truth is a normative property. Nonetheless, I think we are committed to the existence of a normative relation between truth and belief. To see why, we must examine the deliberative perspective. The argument I am about to give is a truncated version of the one I have given elsewhere. The most I can hope to do here is to make the argument seem worthy of serious consideration.

Just as we deliberate about what to do, we also deliberate about what to believe. By “deliberation” I mean reasoning that is aimed at concluding in an intention or action, in the one case, and belief, in the other case. There are two kinds of reasoning that conclude in belief. Most often, we ask ourselves whether some proposition is true and conclude either that it is or that it isn’t, thereby arriving at a belief.

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5 Strictly speaking, propositions, not beliefs, are true or false. The claim that a belief is correct thus cannot be equivalent to the claim that it is true. But it might be equivalent to the claim that the proposition believed is true.

But sometimes we explicitly ask ourselves whether to believe some proposition. For example, when a soothsayer tells me I will be rich, it is natural to ask myself, not just whether it would be entertaining to pretend that what he said is true, but whether to really believe what he said.

When I do explicitly ask myself whether to believe what the soothsayer said, this question, unlike the question whether to pretend that what he said is true, immediately collapses into the question whether what he said is true: the deliberative question whether to believe that \( p \) collapses into the question whether \( p \). What does it mean to say that one question collapses into the other? It means that we immediately see that only judgments that are relevant to answering the question whether \( p \) are relevant to answering the question whether to believe that \( p \). When I ask myself whether to believe what the soothsayer said, I immediately see that this question can be answered by; and only by, determining whether what he said is true, which in turn requires me to determine whether there is evidence that what he said is true.\(^7\) The question is why deliberation has this structural feature.

This claim about the structure of deliberation is a claim about what it is like to deliberate about what to believe; it is a claim about the phenomenology of deliberation. As such, it cannot be falsified by the truth of some philosophical claim that conflicts with it. It would be falsified, though, if it were shown to be contrary to our experience of deliberation. Are there any clear cases, then, in which someone intends their reasoning to conclude in a belief whether \( p \) but doesn’t seek to answer the question whether \( p \)?

Well, aren’t there people who believe that God exists on the basis of calculating the expected benefits of so believing? When they deliberate about whether to believe that God exists, they presumably do not feel compelled to ask themselves whether God does exist. Instead, they ask whether it would be in their interest to believe that God exists, or, less selfishly, whether they would be a better person if they believed

\(^7\) Pertinent evidence is not restricted to evidence that directly bears on the truth of the proposition that the soothsayer asserted. It may, for example, include facts about the soothsayer himself, such as that he is honest and has a good track record with respect to these matters. Such considerations obviously constitute evidence that what he said is true.
that God exists. If this is so, then there are instances of deliberation in which the question whether to believe that \( p \) does not collapse into the question whether \( p \), contrary to what I have claimed.

I do not think that these are clear cases. First of all, it is not at all clear to me what it is that different people claim to believe in claiming to believe that God exists. But putting aside that worry, it certainly is not clear that anyone ever actually concludes deliberation in a belief that God exists solely on the basis of considering whether it would be beneficial to have that belief. Deliberation is an activity that can be made fully conscious. Although it may depend on the exercise of non-conscious capacities, the contents of deliberation must be capable of being brought to conscious awareness without losing their deliberative role. This means that in order for the judgment that it would be beneficial to believe that God exists to deliberatively lead one to believe that God exists, this judgment must be capable of playing this role even when one is made fully conscious of its role. The only way that I can see how this could happen is if one believed the following proposition:

If it is beneficial to believe that \( p \), then (probably) \( p \).

But of course if one believed this proposition, then the judgment that it would be beneficial to believe that God exists would be evidence that God exists, at least in one’s eyes, and thus one’s deliberation would not conflict with my description of the phenomenology of deliberation after all. In determining that it is beneficial to believe that God exists, one would take oneself to be answering the question whether God exists.

Whether or not you agree with me about such cases, I hope you will agree that they do not constitute clear counter-instances to my claim about the structure of deliberation. I think it is a good methodological principle to first try to explain the cases about which we have stable and clear judgments before moving on to cases whose description we are not sure about. What needs explanation, then, is why, in all cases of deliberation whose description we are sure of, the question whether to believe that \( p \) immediately gives way to the question whether \( p \). At this stage of our investigation, we should take no stand on the modal status of the structural claim about deliberation. For all we know, the
structural claim about deliberation may state a contingent truth about central instances of human deliberation, or it may state a necessary truth about deliberation as such. Nonetheless, it is a striking fact that in these clear cases the question whether to believe that $p$ gives way to the question whether $p$ rather than some other question (or no particular question). When we deliberate about what to do, after all, that question gives way to the question of what it would be desirable to do. Why doesn’t the question what to believe similarly give way to the corresponding question what it would be desirable to believe? Why don’t different agents determine what to believe differently according to their varying interests?

The reason that every agent focuses his attention on determining what is true, I claim, is that every agent accepts the norm of truth as the authoritative norm for belief. We can express this norm in the language of correctness: a belief that $p$ is correct if $p$ and incorrect otherwise. Although I find it natural to express this norm this way, this is not crucial. What is important is not the language that we use to describe the norm of truth but the normative role that truth actually plays in our deliberation. When an agent deliberates about whether to believe that $p$, the acceptance of this norm is what constrains the agent to focus on, and only on, considerations bearing on the truth of $p$. Someone who did not apply the norm of truth to his deliberation would not be deliberating about whether to believe that $p$, but instead, insofar as we could say they were deliberating at all, would be deliberating about whether to assume or pretend that $p$ or whether to take some other attitude towards $p$.

But why does every agent accept the truth norm as the authoritative norm for belief? Why aren’t there any agents who instead accept prudential or moral norms as having authority over their beliefs? The reason for the ubiquitous acceptance of the authority of the norm of truth for belief is that the norm is contained in the concept of belief. To conceive of a mental state as a belief that $p$ is to conceive of it as a

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8 As we shall see, my explanation of the structural feature of deliberation commits me to the claim that it is a necessary feature of deliberation and thus holds of all instances of deliberation. Since I don’t think we have a firm pre-theoretical view about the modal status of this feature of deliberation, this is neither a virtue nor a vice of my explanation.
state of mind that is correct if $p$ and incorrect otherwise. When asking oneself whether to believe that $p$, insofar as one is competent with the concept of belief, one thus will apply this norm. Deliberation, on this picture, is reasoning aimed at forming a belief in accord with the norm for belief. Given that the norm for belief is truth, one must aim at truth if one is to form a belief on the basis of deliberation.\(^9\)

8. There are two ways to refute my explanation of the truth-focused character of doxastic deliberation. One is to show that my hypothesis does not actually explain this feature of doxastic deliberation. The other is to put forth an alternative, better explanation of this feature than I have given. Let me begin with an objection of the former type.\(^10\)

I have claimed that when we deliberate about whether to believe that $p$ we apply the norm of truth to our reasoning because this norm is constitutive of the concept of belief. But it might be objected that the mere fact that there is a constitutive norm for belief won’t explain the truth-focused character of deliberation. Unless agents also have an overriding motive to comply with this norm, the mere fact that it is a constitutive norm for belief is inert to explain why they focus solely on truth in deliberating about what to believe. And the mere fact that the norm for belief is constitutive of belief does not entail such a motive. After all, the mere fact that there is a constitutive norm of promising that one should keep one’s promises doesn’t entail that someone who makes a promise can’t decide to break it, or that he can’t decide to make a promise he intends to break. Unfortunately, people do such things all too often. So the mere fact that the norm of truth is constitutive of belief does not entail that agents will attempt to comply with it.

\(^9\) How does this norm-infused description of deliberation relate to the earlier, more minimal description I gave of deliberation as reasoning aimed at concluding in a belief? My hypothesis yields a particular interpretation of reasoning and thus yields an interpretation of what it means to aim to arrive at a belief on the basis of reasoning.

\(^10\) The objection I am about to give is similar to objections that have been made recently by Steglich-Petersen (2006, 506–7), Gluer and Wikforss (2009, 45–52), and Sharadin (unpublished manuscript). I do not claim, though, that my objection is identical to any one of these objections.
Furthermore, there is a good reason to think more generally that normative judgments cannot entail overriding motives. It is a central fact about norms that they can be violated. As exemplified by the case of promise-breaking, people don’t always do what they ought to do, or even what they judge that they ought to do. So the mere fact that one accepts the norm of truth for one’s beliefs does not guarantee that one will comply with the norm. And if it did, then it wouldn’t really be a norm at all, since then it couldn’t be violated.

I think that this objection is based on a misunderstanding of what we are attempting to do when we deliberate. When we ask ourselves whether to believe that \( p \), we are attempting to form a belief on the basis of reasons. Thus the question whether to believe that \( p \) must be a normative question, such as whether I ought to believe that \( p \) or whether believing that \( p \) would be correct.

Notice that describing the deliberative question whether to believe that \( p \) as the normative question whether believing that \( p \) would be correct doesn’t already pack in the truth-oriented character of such deliberation. What still needs to be explained is why whenever anyone asks himself whether believing that \( p \) would be correct, this question gives way to the question whether \( p \).

My hypothesis that the norm of truth is constitutive of belief is meant to explain this fact. Here is how it does so. In deliberating whether to believe that \( p \), I am attempting to form a belief by answering the normative question whether believing that \( p \) would be correct. In applying the concept of belief, I recognize that believing that \( p \) is correct iff \( p \). If this is so, I cannot see myself as trying to answer the question whether believing that \( p \) would be correct unless I seek to determine whether \( p \). If I seek the answer to any other question, I can no longer see myself as attempting to determine what it would be correct to believe.

For example, I can seek to determine whether it would be desirable to believe that \( p \), but, if I do, I can no longer see myself as attempting to determine whether it would be correct to believe that \( p \). The problem is not that I will be deliberating badly about whether believing that \( p \) is correct if I focus on whether it would be desirable to believe that \( p \). The problem, rather, is that if I focus on whether it would be desirable to believe that \( p \), I will no longer be able to see myself as even attempting to determine whether it would be correct to believe...
that $p$.\textsuperscript{11} This doesn’t mean that I will actually believe every proposition that I judge I have sufficient evidence is true. But it does mean that I cannot believe a proposition on the basis of deliberation – on the basis of my attempt to believe what I have most reason to believe – unless I judge that I have sufficient evidence that it is true.

9. Assuming, then, that my hypothesis does actually explain the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation, the question arises whether there is a competing hypothesis that explains it better. One hypothesis, variants of which have been suggested by several authors, is that we all have a desire to have true beliefs, at least about those matters about which we care to have beliefs.\textsuperscript{12} If this were true, how would it explain the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation? If deliberation in general were aimed at desire-satisfaction, then successful deliberation about whether to believe that $p$ would require focusing on what belief it would be desirable to have. If we desired to have true beliefs, then satisfying this desire would require focusing on whether $p$.

But if deliberation is focused on desire-satisfaction in general, then it ought to focus on all of the desires that might be satisfied or frustrated by having a particular belief. I may want to have true beliefs about my attractiveness and intelligence, but false beliefs may be required to satisfy my vanity. In such cases, the hypothesis under consideration predicts that both evidential and pragmatic considerations will be weighed in deliberation about whether to believe that I am attractive and intelligent.

Unfortunately, this prediction is not borne out by experience. Even if I want to believe that I am attractive and intelligent because believing these things will make me happy, when I deliberate about whether to believe that I am attractive and intelligent, considerations relevant

\textsuperscript{11} Think about another case. I attempt to determine whether to go to a movie tonight. Should we say that I am deliberating badly about that question if I focus on whether grass is green, or should we say instead that I am no longer attempting to determine whether to go to a movie and am now deliberating about something else? Obviously, the latter description is the correct one.

\textsuperscript{12} See Velleman (2000), Steglich-Petersen (2006), and Sinhababu (unpublished manuscript) for variants of this hypothesis. I initially discussed this hypothesis in Shah (2006, 490–92).
to whether believing that I am attractive and intelligent will make me happy play no role within my deliberation; only considerations that I take to be relevant to whether I am attractive and intelligent enter into my deliberation. Of course, which considerations I take to be relevant to determining whether I am attractive and intelligent may be causally influenced by my desire to believe what will make me happy, but these considerations cannot directly enter into my deliberation; their influence must occur outside my conscious awareness.

The only way that I can see to fix the hypothesis so that it can explain why only truth-directed considerations are consciously entertained in doxastic deliberation is by strengthening the influence of the desire for true beliefs. If the desire for true beliefs was an overriding motive, and deliberation sought to maximize desire-satisfaction, then it would make no sense for non-evidential considerations to enter into deliberation about what to believe.

While this hypothesis would explain the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation, we know from experience that it is false. Although it may be plausible that we have a desire to have true beliefs, we certainly do not always have an overriding desire for true beliefs. We often wish to believe things about ourselves whether or not they are true, simply because we know how much better our lives would be if we could believe these things.

The fundamental mistake that hypotheses that attempt to explain the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation in terms of desire-satisfaction make is that they conceive of deliberation in non-normative terms. But deliberation is a normative enterprise. We are not attempting to achieve desire-satisfaction when we deliberate about what to believe, we are attempting to believe what we have most reason to believe.

But might the proponent of the desire-based hypothesis claim to be capturing the normative character of doxastic deliberation? The idea would be to ground reasons for belief in our desires. But what we have just seen is that the only way to do this and capture the purely evidential nature of these reasons is by attributing to us a desire we do not have, namely an overriding or exclusive desire for true beliefs.

10. Is there an alternative, normative explanation of the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation that fares better than my own? Instead of conceiving of doxastic deliberation as aimed at
desire-satisfaction, we should, I have argued, conceive of it as aimed at *correct* belief. But why must one focus solely on truth-directed considera-
tions in order to fulfill this aim? My answer, remember, is that the norm that a belief that *p* is correct iff *p* is part of the concept of belief. Given that a doxastic deliberator takes himself to be aiming to form a correct belief, he must therefore focus solely on considerations relevant to determining whether *p*.

Sharon Street, however, has suggested a subtly different normative hypothesis to explain the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation. The hypothesis is that it is constitutive of being a believer that one takes truth to be the standard of correctness for one’s own beliefs, and thus that one takes evidence, and only evidence, that *p*, to be a reason for oneself to believe that *p*. According to this hypothesis, insofar as one is in the business of forming for oneself a belief about *p*, one will apply the norm of truth to one’s deliberation. If one did not, one would not be forming for oneself a belief about *p*.

How is Street’s hypothesis different from my own? According to my hypothesis, it is part of the concept of belief that a belief that *p* is correct iff *p*. According to Street’s hypothesis, it is part of the concept of belief that a believer that *p* thinks that his belief is correct iff *p*. Both hypotheses entail that in deliberating whether to believe that *p*, the agent of the deliberation will only consider whether *p*. Both hypotheses explain this feature of deliberation in terms of the agent’s application of the norm of truth.

We thus cannot choose between these hypotheses on the basis of their explanations of the truth-directed character of deliberation, since they explain this in the same way. We must look elsewhere.

The difference between the two hypotheses lies in their differing explanations of why the norm of truth enters deliberation. My hypothesis explains the application of the norm of truth in terms of the agent’s exercise of the concept of belief: applying the concept of belief, which one does when one asks whether to believe that *p*, involves applying the norm of truth to beliefs as such. Street’s hypothesis, instead, explains the application of the norm of truth in terms of the nature of being a believer: being a believer entails applying the norm of truth to one’s own beliefs.

13 See Street (this volume).
Although this difference between the two hypotheses does not imply any difference in the phenomenology of deliberation, it does imply other differences. First, notice that, unlike my hypothesis, Street’s hypothesis entails that a believer must apply the norm of truth to their beliefs in order for those states to qualify as beliefs. My hypothesis claims only that in order to attribute a belief one must apply the norm of truth. This is an advantage of my view because it allows for the possibility of beliefs that we are not consciously aware of and of believers who aren’t capable of applying norms to their beliefs and thus aren’t capable of self-attributing beliefs. These certainly are possibilities to which our common practice of belief attribution commits us. We attribute beliefs to creatures such as non-human animals and small children who don’t apply norms at all. Furthermore, we sometimes apply beliefs to normal human adults to explain their behaviour even though they are not conscious of having these beliefs. If having a belief involved applying the norm of truth to one’s belief, as Street’s hypothesis claims, all of these belief-attributions would be mistaken. I doubt that we can be moved to place as much credence in Street’s hypothesis as in these commonplace belief-attributions.

The second important difference is that unlike Street’s hypothesis, my hypothesis entails that, insofar as one conceives of someone else’s attitude towards \( p \) as a belief that \( p \), one is committed to applying the truth norm to their attitude. This is because, according to my hypothesis, the truth norm applies to beliefs as such, and thus to everyone’s beliefs, not just one’s own. According to Street’s hypothesis, though, it is only to one’s own beliefs that one must apply the truth norm.\(^{14}\) One is free to deny that the beliefs of others are governed by the truth

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\(^{14}\) If this hypothesis were correct, then a constructivist position about the truth norm would appear to still be open. Remember that the problem with a constructivist attempt to ground the truth norm in our attributions of it was that this required grounding beliefs themselves in our attributions of belief. Since our attributions of beliefs are themselves beliefs, and thus themselves constituted by the truth norm, this led to a vicious regress. But if attributing the belief that \( p \) to others does not involve a commitment to the truth norm for that belief, then the regress never gets going. If one is not required to apply the truth norm to other people’s beliefs, then one can attribute beliefs, including normative beliefs such as that a belief that \( p \) is correct iff \( p \), without being in a normatively constituted state oneself.
norm. This subjectivist feature of her hypothesis has implausible implications with respect to the phenomenon of disagreement.

To see this, let’s focus on an example. Adam and Tom disagree about the shape of the earth – Adam believes that it is round and Tom believes that it is flat. Their disagreement involves more than Adam’s representing the proposition that the earth as round as true and Tom’s representing the proposition that the earth as flat as true. Both pretending and wondering involve representing certain propositions as true in a sense: to pretend that \( p \) is to pretend that \( p \) is true, and to wonder whether \( p \) is to wonder whether \( p \) is true. But if Adam pretends that the earth is round and Tom pretends that it is flat, they do not disagree; similarly, if Adam wonders whether the earth is round and Tom wonders whether it is flat, they do not disagree. If Adam disagrees with Tom, Adam must have a commitment to the correctness of his own attitude and the incorrectness of Tom’s attitude. Pretending and wondering don’t involve such a commitment, but believing does.

Suppose Adam takes himself to believe that the earth is round and that he attributes to Tom the belief that the earth is not round. My hypothesis about belief explains why Adam thus is committed to thinking of himself as disagreeing with Tom. According to my hypothesis, attributions of belief, unlike attributions of other cognitive attitudes such as pretending or wondering, involve a commitment to the norm of truth: to see himself as believing that the earth is round, Adam must think that his belief is correct iff the earth is round, and in thinking of Tom as believing that the earth is not round, Adam must think of Tom’s belief as correct iff the earth is not round. Adam thus must think that either his belief or Tom’s belief is incorrect. Since Adam is committed to the truth of his own belief, unless he gives it up, he has no choice but to see Tom’s belief as incorrect, and thus to see himself as disagreeing with Tom.

According to Street’s hypothesis, though, it does not follow from the fact that Adam takes himself to believe that the earth is round and attributes to Tom the contrary belief that the earth is not round that Adam is committed to thinking that he disagrees with Tom about the shape of the earth. According to her hypothesis, Adam must think that his own belief that the earth is round is correct iff the earth is round, but he need not think that if his belief is correct – the earth is round, then Tom’s belief that the earth is not round is incorrect.
It is true that according to Street’s hypothesis, attributing to Tom the belief that the earth is not round commits Adam to the claim that Tom thinks that Tom’s belief is incorrect if the earth is round. But her hypothesis leaves open the possibility that Adam coherently thinks that Tom is making a mistake, that in fact Tom’s belief that the earth is not round is not governed by the truth norm.

This is an unstable position. How can Adam think that his own belief that the earth is round is governed by the truth norm but nonetheless also think that Tom is under an illusion in thinking that his belief that the earth is not round is governed by the truth norm? Such a position, at least with respect to beliefs about ordinary factual propositions with objective truth-conditions, doesn’t make sense. To think that someone believes the denial of what you believe is to think that you disagree with that person. Street’s hypothesis thus leaves conceptually open a possibility that is in fact conceptually closed.

11. This concludes my defence of my hypothesis that the best explanation of the truth-directed character of doxastic deliberation entails that it is a conceptual truth about belief that a belief that \( p \) is correct if \( p \) and incorrect otherwise. The main argument of this paper has been that this conceptual truth about belief entails the following pair of claims:

1. Believing that there is at least one true normative proposition is self-fulfilling.

2. Believing that there are no true normative propositions are self-refuting.

Although these claims may appear to imply a constructivist position about normative facts, I have argued that the conceptual truth about belief on which they are based is in fact inconsistent with metanormative constructivism.

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