Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

Does thought imply ought?

KRISTER BYKVIST & ANANDI HATTIANGADI

It is widely held that, for belief, correctness is truth (Boghossian 1989, 2003; Engel 2001; Gibbard 2003, 2005; Shah 2003; Velleman 2000; Wedgwood 2002, 2007a, 2007b). This is often captured by the more precise claim that:

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

On the face of it, (1) looks trivial, particularly if we interpret 'correct' as synonymous with 'true' and take 'belief' to refer to the proposition believed. However, as proponents of the thesis take pains to point out, the claim is not trivial: 'correct' is interpreted as a normative term, not synonymous with 'true', but as concerning what one ought to do (Gibbard 2003, 2005; Boghossian 2003; Wedgwood 2002); and it is applied to the psychological state or act of believing, not the proposition believed (Wedgwood 2002: 267). Moreover, (1) or its close cousins are said to be constitutive of belief.

Given the insistence on the interpretation of 'correct' as a *normative* term, (1) can be restated more clearly as follows:

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

In this paper, we shall argue that the hypothesis that belief is constitutively normative is false. In the next section, we will briefly present the view that

ANALYSIS 67.4, October 2007, pp. 277–85. © Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi

belief is constitutively normative. In the following section, we will argue that it is not constitutive of belief that one ought to believe that *p* if and only if *p* is true.

1. *The normativity of belief*

The claim that belief is constitutively normative means that it is a fundamental or constitutive feature of belief that a subject ought to believe a proposition if and only if the proposition is true. For example, in a recent paper, Allan Gibbard claims that,

> 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: 338–39)

In this passage, Gibbard suggests that the psychological state of believing is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. He also says that he takes 'correct' to be a normative term; that a correct belief is one that a subject ought to have. Paul Boghossian echoes this thought, with approval, when he says: 'it seems right to say ... that correctness is a normative matter, a matter of whether one ought to do what one is doing, and that the correctness conditions of one's thought are *constitutive*.'[1] The most straightforward interpretation of what is being claimed here, thus, is that a subject ought to believe that *p* if and only if the proposition that *p* is true. This is the principle we will consider, and reject, in the next section.

The claim that belief is *constitutively* normative is that the truth norm is *essential* or *fundamental* to belief (Boghossian 2003; Gibbard 2003; Velleman 2000; Wedgwood 2002, 2007b). That is, the claim is that it is necessary for a given mental state to be the belief that *p* that you ought to be in that mental state if and only if the proposition that *p* is true.

2. *An unsatisfiable requirement*

Principle (2) – the claim that one ought to believe that *p* if and only if *p* is true – is ambiguous, since the 'ought' can take wide or narrow scope. If it takes narrow scope, it should read:

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

[1] Boghossian 2003: 35. Boghossian ultimately endorses a weaker position – that *S* ought to believe that *p only if p* is true. We will discuss that view presently.

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

(2a) is untenable for reasons that may be familiar from the controversy over the normativity of meaning (Glüer 1999; Wikforss 2001; Hattiangadi 2006, 2007). First, (2a) can be broken down into two conditional statements, as follows:

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

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

(2a*) is clearly false. It says that for any true proposition, you ought to believe it. However, there are not only infinitely many true propositions, but, given that any conjunction of true atomic propositions is itself a true proposition, there must be some true propositions that are extremely complex – certainly far too complex for most humans to believe. Take a proposition that is too complex for you to believe. Since you cannot believe this proposition, and since 'ought' implies 'can', it follows that it must be false that you ought to believe the proposition, even if the proposition happens to be true. Since (2a*) is meant to hold for any subject and any proposition, but surely does not hold for propositions too complex to be believed, (2a*) must be false.

One might denounce the 'ought' implies 'can' objection on the grounds that it is merely *psychologically* impossible to believe extremely complex propositions, and 'ought' does not imply 'psychologically can'. For example, suppose that you find yourself laughing uncontrollably at your friend's new haircut (Sinnott-Armstrong 1988: 116). Your friend is wounded, yet you cannot stop laughing. Despite your inability to control your laughter, it nevertheless seems true that you ought to stop laughing. Hence, 'ought' does not seem to imply psychological possibility. If it is merely psychologically impossible for you to believe extremely complex propositions, it would nevertheless be the case that you ought to believe them, when true. However, your inability to believe arbitrarily complex propositions does not seem to be on a par with your inability to stop laughing at your friend's haircut. Whereas your inability to control your laughter is an aberration, your inability to believe arbitrarily complex propositions is not. It is not *humanly* possible to believe arbitrarily complex propositions – and this is arguably a form of metaphysical or biological impossibility, as opposed to psychological. Limits on how much information a human brain can store, and limits on the length of human lives place limits on the complexity of the propositions we can believe.

A similar line of reasoning leads Boghossian to settle on (2a**). He says,

> ... although it is true that, for any p, if p, then it is correct to believe that p, it doesn't follow that if p, one ought to believe that p, for it's

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

> clearly impossible to believe *everything* that is true. I'm inclined to hold, therefore, that one can infer p from 'One ought to believe that p', but not the other way round. (Boghossian 2003: 37)

He maintains, moreover, that 'the holding of this norm is one of the defining features of the notion of belief: it's what captures the idea that it is constitutive of belief to aim at the truth. The truth is what you ought to believe, whether or not you know how to go about it, and whether or not you know if you have attained it' (Boghossian 2003: 38–39).

The trouble is, it is not at all clear whether (2a**) captures the intuitions Boghossian takes it to capture. In contrast to (2a*), which places too demanding a requirement on believers, (2a**) places no requirement at all. (2a**) does not capture the thought that the truth is what you ought to believe, since (2a**) is not normative in any interesting sense – it does not imply that a subject is under any obligation under any circumstances whatsoever. Obviously, if *p* is true, nothing whatsoever follows from (2a**) about what *S* ought to believe. Less obviously perhaps, if *p* is false, nothing whatsoever follows about what *S* ought to believe. For, if *p* is false, it only follows that it is not the case that *S* ought to believe that *p*. It does not follow, from the falsity of *p*, that *S* ought not to believe that *p*. There is an important difference between 'it is not the case that *S* ought to believe that *p*' and 'S ought not to believe that *p*' – the former states that *S lacks* an obligation to believe that *p* and the latter states that *S has* an obligation not to believe that *p*. The former is compatible with it being permissible for *S* to believe that *p*, while the latter is incompatible with its being permissible for *S* to believe that *p*. Hence, whether *p* is true or false, (2a**) does not tell *S* what to believe. Since (2a) is the conjunction of (2a*) and (2a**), it is clearly untenable.

Ralph Wedgwood has suggested a more plausible response to the 'ought' implies 'can' objection – that we restrict the true propositions one ought to believe to those propositions that one has actually considered.[2] Wedgwood's suggestion is more precisely captured as follows:

(3) For any *S*, *p*: if *S* considers whether *p*, then *S* ought to (believe that *p*) if and only if *p* is true.

This seems to solve the problem. For, it seems plausible to suppose that any proposition you can consider, you can believe. Arbitrarily complex true propositions are ruled out simply because you cannot consider such complex propositions, and it is only if you consider a true proposition that you ought to believe it.

[2] Wedgwood, personal communication.

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

Nevertheless, this response faces problems. There are some propositions such that it is logically impossible to believe them truly: if they are true, then you don't believe them, and if you believe them, then they are false. These 'blindspots' (Sorensen 1988) are not truly believable. Here are two examples:

It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining.

There are no believers.

If it is true that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining, then it follows that you do not believe that it is raining. If you do believe that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining, it follows that the proposition is false.[3] Similarly, if it is true that there are no believers, then it follows that you do not believe that there are no believers; if you believe that there are no believers, then your belief must be false. Obviously, there are numerous further examples of this kind.

Substituting the first example into (3), we get:

(4) For any *S*, *p*: if *S* has considered whether it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining, then *S* ought to (believe that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining) if and only if it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining is true.

Now, suppose that the proposition *that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining* is true. This implies that *S* does not believe *that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*, since if *S* did believe this, then at least one person would believe that it is raining and the proposition would be false. But if it is true *that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*, (4) implies that *S* ought to believe *that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*. However, the truth of the proposition is not compatible with *S*'s believing it. If she believes it, then it is false, and if it is true, then she does not believe it. Wedgwood's restriction to beliefs that you have considered does not help in this case, for you can *consider* whether it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining, though your believing it is not compatible with its being true.

The problem here is not that the proposition cannot be believed, but that the obligation to believe a proposition if and only if it is true cannot be satisfied. This is not a violation of the principle that 'ought' implies 'can', but that 'ought' implies 'can satisfy'. This is the principle that, if I have an obligation to believe that *p*, then it is possible for me to *discharge* or *satisfy* this obligation. Or, more generally:

[3] This is assuming, of course, that if you believe *that p & q*, then you believe *that p* and you believe *that q*, which obviously holds for minimally rational believers.

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

'Ought' implies 'can satisfy': If I have an obligation to perform action A, then it is possible for me to do A while being obligated to do A.[4]

The principle that 'ought' implies 'can satisfy' seems as plausible as the principle that 'ought' implies 'can'. Just as one cannot be obligated to do the impossible, one cannot be obligated to satisfy requirements that are impossible to satisfy. Just as one is not blameworthy for failing to do the impossible, one is not blameworthy for failing to satisfy a requirement it is impossible for one to satisfy. Moreover, it is clearly not merely a psychological impossibility to satisfy (4), but a logical impossibility. Since (4) is an instance of (3), and if one accepts that 'ought' implies 'can satisfy', then (3) must be false.

Perhaps these peculiar blindspots can be accommodated by making the following change to the principle:

(3a) For any *S*, *p*: if *S* considers whether *p*, and *p* is truly believable, then *S* ought to (believe that *p*) if and only if *p* is true.[5]

(3a) does not imply that you ought to believe that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*, even when that proposition is true. However, (3a) is nevertheless too weak, for it tells you absolutely nothing about what you ought to do when faced with these peculiar propositions. (3a) does not tell you that you ought *not* to believe that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*. Yet, intuitively, this is precisely the right response to the proposition that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*: you should not believe it even if it is true. And (3a) does not capture this. More importantly, this intuition seems to conflict with the original principle. That is, given some plausible assumptions, we generate a conflict if we combine (3a) with:

(5) For any *S*, *p*: if *S* considers whether *p*, and *p* is not truly believable, then *S* ought not to (believe that *p*).

The conflict arises because true propositions that are not truly believable might consist of conjuncts each of which is truly believable. The proposition that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining* is a clear example of such a proposition. Suppose that you consider this proposition and suppose that it is true. Given that the proposition is not truly believable, it follows from (5) that you ought not to believe that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*. However, if you consider

[4] This principle is discussed in relation to moral oughts in Bykvist, forthcoming 2007.

[5] Thanks to Timothy Chan, Stephanie Garner, and Michael Bench-Capon for suggesting this principle and for helpful discussion.

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

a conjunction, you must in so doing consider each of the conjuncts. By hypothesis, the conjunction is true, which implies that each of the conjuncts is true – and although the conjunction may not be truly believable, each conjunct is. Given that you have considered each conjunct and given that each conjunct is both true and truly believable, it follows from (3a) that you ought to believe that *it is raining* and that you ought to believe that *nobody believes that it is raining*. That is, assuming both (3a) and (5), you ought to believe that *it is raining* and you ought to believe that *nobody believes that it is raining*, but you ought not to believe that *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*. This is a violation of the principle that:

(6) If you ought to (believe that *p*) and you ought to (believe that *q*), then you ought to (believe that *p* and *q*).

This principle has intuitive pull, even though it is not entirely uncontroversial (for instance, in the face of lottery and preface paradoxes). However, many of those who defend the normativity of belief have reason to accept this principle, since they also defend the normativity of content (e.g. Boghossian 1989, 2003; Gibbard 2003, 2005; Wedgwood 2002, 2007a, 2007b). If content is constituted by norms, it is plausible that (6) will be constitutive of the ordinary concept of *and*.

Furthermore, no matter whether (6) is accepted, the normativist is still forced to accept the existence of doxastic dilemmas. Suppose again that it is raining and that you are considering the proposition that it is raining, a proposition no one believes. Given the truth of this proposition and (3a), you ought to believe that it is raining. Similarly, given (3a) and the fact that no one believes that it is raining, you ought to believe that no one believes it is raining. However, if you satisfy the first obligation – to believe that it is raining – then, given (5) and the fact that you now believe that it is raining, you ought not to believe that no one believes that it is raining. That is, even though each obligation is satisfiable separately, and therefore conforms to the principle that 'ought' entails 'can satisfy', they are not *jointly* satisfiable. Crucially, in this case, if you were to believe the things you ought to believe, you would end up in a situation in which you believe something that you ought not to believe in that situation.

Perhaps the normativist would like to recoup and opt for the wide scope interpretation of (2), given that the narrow scope interpretation is clearly hopeless. This principle can be expressed as follows:

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

(2b) tells you that there are two combinations that will satisfy the requirement: either you believe that *p* and *p* is true, or it's not the case that you

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

believe that *p* and *p* is false. At the same time, it tells you that there are two combinations that you ought to avoid: either you believe that *p* and *p* is false, or it's not the case that you believe that *p* and *p* is true. (2b) does not obviously fall prey to the same objections as (2a). For, (2b) cannot be broken down into the conditionals (2a*) and (2a**), since in those conditionals the 'ought' took narrow scope.

On the other hand, the immunity of (2b) to the foregoing objection leaves it open to another: namely, it does not capture the intuition that the truth is what one ought to believe, or that a false belief is faulty or defective. The reason is that what (2b) enjoins are *combinations*: the combination of your believing that *p* with its being true that *p* and the combination of its being false that *p* and your not believing that *p*. Because the 'ought' takes wide scope, one cannot detach from (2b) that you ought to believe that *p*, even when *p* is true (Broome 1999). As a general rule, when 'ought' takes wide scope over a conditional, detachment is not permitted. For example, from

> You ought (if you believe that *p* and believe that *p* implies *q*, believe that *q*)

And,

> You believe that *p* and believe that *p* implies *q*,

It does not follow that

> You ought to believe that *q*.

For, *q* might well be an absurd proposition, in which case what you ought to do is not believe that *p*, or not believe that *p* implies *q*. Similarly, it does not follow from (2b) that you ought to believe that *p*, even when *p* is true, and (2b) does not therefore capture the thought that the truth is what you ought to believe. Nor, for that matter, does (2b) capture the thought that a false belief is defective. From the falsity of *p* and (2b) it does not follow that you ought not to believe that *p*. (2b) says that when you believe a falsehood, all is not as it ought to be, but this does not imply that it is the belief which is faulty or defective.

Finally, it turns out that (2b) *does* fall prey to a version of the 'ought' implies 'can' objection presented above, for values of *p* such that the truth of *p* is unavoidable, yet *p* is unbelievable. For example, take the conjunction of all the necessary truths – a proposition that is far too complex for you to grasp. According to (2b), you ought to either bring it about that *p* is false or bring it about that you believe that *p*. But you can do neither. You cannot bring it about that *p* is false because *p* is a necessary truth. And you cannot come to believe that *p* because it is not humanly possible to

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014

grasp such a complex proposition, let alone believe it. Since 'ought' implies 'can,' (2b) must be false.[6]

Krister Bykvist
Jesus College
Oxford OX1 3DW, UK
krister.bykvist@jesus.ox.ac.uk

Anandi Hattiangadi
St Hilda's College
Oxford OX4 1DY, UK
anandi.hattiangadi@st-hildas.oxford.ac.uk

References

Boghossian, P. A. 1989. The rule-following considerations. *Mind* 98: 157–84.
Boghossian, P. A. 2003. The normativity of content. *Philosophical Issues* 13: 31–45.
Broome, J. 1999. Normative requirements. *Ratio* 12: 398–419.
Bykvist, K. 2007. Violations of normative invariance: some thoughts on shifty oughts. *Theoria* 73: 98–120.
Engel, P. 2001. Is truth a norm? In *Interpreting Davidson*, ed. P. Kotatko, P. Pagin and G. Segal. Stanford: CSLI Publications.
Gibbard, A. 2003. Thoughts and norms. *Philosophical Issues* 13: 83–98.
Gibbard, A. 2005. Truth and correct belief. *Philosophical Issues* 15: 338–50.
Glüer, K. 1999. Sense and prescriptivity. *Acta Analytica* 14: 111–28.
Hattiangadi, A. 2006. Is meaning normative? *Mind and Language* 21: 220–40.
Hattiangadi, A. 2007. *Oughts and Thoughts: Scepticism and the Normativity of Content*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Shah, N. 2003. How truth governs belief. *Philosophical Review* 112: 447–82.
Sinnott-Armstrong, W. 1988. *Moral Dilemmas*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Sorensen, R. 1988. *Blindspots*. New York: Clarendon Press.
Velleman, J. D. 2000. On the aim of belief. In his *The Possibility of Practical Reason*, 244–82. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wedgwood, R. 2002. The aim of belief. *Philosophical Perspectives,* 16: 267–97.
Wedgwood, R. Forthcoming 2007a. The normativity of the intentional. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. B. McLaughlin and A. Beckermann. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Wedgwood, R. 2007b. Normativism defended. In *Contemporary Debates in the Philosophy of Mind*, eds. B. McLaughlin and J. Cohen. Oxford: Blackwell.
Wikforss, Å. 2001. Semantic normativity. *Philosophical Studies* 102: 203–26.

[6] This argument presupposes the view that propositions are structured entities, and not, e.g., sets of possible worlds. For, on the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds, two necessary truths express the same proposition. However, this is widely regarded to be a problem for the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds, since it is implausible to suppose that the belief *that* 2 + 2 = 4 and the belief *that there is no greatest natural number* have the same propositional content.

Downloaded from http://analysis.oxfordjournals.org/ at University of Pennsylvania Library on January 6, 2014