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The Nought Belief Paradox

Abstract: A paradox is presented that poses new problems for both the truth norm and the knowledge norm of belief.

Nicholas Shackel *Erkenntnis* 2014. The final publication is available at link.springer.com

Williams 1973 suggested that belief aims at truth. The broad idea behind the metaphor is that there is a constitutive connection between belief and truth. Left like that, however, the idea remains vague. Recent literature has sought to make the idea definite by interpreting it in terms of a norm, for example:

I take it to be a conceptual truth that beliefs are correct when true and incorrect when false (Velleman 2000:277)¹

Such norms would be trivial if correctness were merely a synonym for truth. It is generally agreed that it must be taken as a normative term ‘concerning what one ought to do’ (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007:277). As Gibbard puts it ‘correctness is a normative matter’ (Gibbard 2003:85) which, as Boghossian (Boghossian 2003:35) points out, when taken generally yields principles expressed in terms of ‘ought’. So this gives us

Truth Norm: a proposition ought to be believed iff it is true. ²

Reservations can be raised for both directions of this bi-conditional. In epistemology it is widely accepted that a justified belief can be false and for anyone who thinks that what ought to be believed is what is justified, the left to right direction will look false. Nevertheless, the left to right direction has been widely accepted in the literature on the aim of belief. For example, those who accept that justification is a normative concept can still conclude

For any P , one ought to believe that P only if P It is in this sense that truth is the fundamental norm of belief, since someone who would not recognize the truth of this imperative would not understand the very concept of belief. (Engel 2001:47-8)

More broadly, in the literature on normativity a number of authors allow reasons and oughts to diverge. Dancy, whilst asserting a correlation and dependence between reasons and oughts, explicitly contrasts reason giving from ought-making (Dancy 2004:33). Perhaps the most extreme example is Broome’s (Broome 2006) suggestion of there being ought facts for which there are no contributory reasons.

In fact there are quite different approaches taken to the relation of justification and ought facts in epistemology, in the ethics of belief, in the philosophy of normativity and rationality, and in the philosophy of mind concerned with intentionality. Certainly, in some cases the work in one area is done with an eye on another, even to defend a specific position in another (see for example Adler 2002). Nevertheless, because of the very

¹ Cf. ‘a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true’ (Wedgwood 2002:267). ‘that truth is the standard of correctness for belief... is expressed in the prescription to believe that p only if p is true’ (Shah 2003:448). The most recent example I know: ‘More generally, true beliefs are correct or right, false beliefs are incorrect or wrong’ (Whiting 2013b:121).

² Cf. ‘For any p : One ought to believe that p only if pIf p , then one ought to believe that p .’ (Boghossian 2003:37). ‘For any S, p : S ought to believe that p if and only if p is true.’ (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007:277)

different treatments of the relation in these areas the assumption that what ought to be believed is what is justified is too quick.

The reason for this divergence in our case is, I think, that the literature on the aim of belief and the truth norm has been focused on the constitutive question, on whether what it is to be a belief is to be something for which truth sets a constitutive standard, and in that sense ought to be true. Justification would then be indirectly related to what ought to be believed, potentially to be explained in terms of the truth norm, making justifiers indicators of truth, indicators of a belief being as it ought to be. Those who relate justification directly to what ought to be believed are either directly rejecting that view or alternatively using 'ought' to mark something other than a constitutive standard of belief.

The right-to-left direction faces a problem of trivial truths such as the number of blades of grass that are on the lawn: ought that to be believed? It seems doubtful. There has been significant discussion of this problem with some willing to abandon this direction and some defending it as it stands. For example, it can be defended on the grounds that oughts indicate what is ideal and in characterising the constitutive standard of belief as truth we can idealise believers. Ideal believers ought, indeed, to believe all truths, however trivial. The trivial truth problem is merely a constraint that arises from the finitude of our minds. Given that finitude the domain of truths over which the norm applies is restricted by the *practical* context of the believer.

The reason for this short review of reservations about the norm is two-fold. First, to allow that whilst the norm is controversial and faces difficulties, it is yet defended and defensible. Second, to make it clear that the paradox presented here is an entirely independent problem for the norm that will stand even if other problems are resolved.

Before we turn to the paradox we must also note that for any such norm there are a family of related norms depending on exact terminology and the logical nature of the normative operator. 'Required', 'right', 'correct', 'proper', 'justified', 'permissible' might all be used in place of 'ought'. 'Required' and 'permitted' are duals,³ 'required' and 'forbidden' are inner negations,⁴ 'permitted' and 'forbidden' are outer negations.⁵ Each of 'right', 'correct', 'ought' can appear to be the inner negation of 'wrong', 'incorrect', 'ought-not' respectively in some contexts and the outer negation in others. So the family of related norms is very extensive. For some of them it is evident that the paradox I shall present would carry over by formulating the paradoxical proposition in the same terms. For others it is not. I am not here going to try to account for the whole family. I am sticking to 'ought' because it can be taken in a requiring sense, a permitting sense, a contributory sense, and an overall sense, and for these reasons it can generalise over the normative features of many other normative terms and is thereby the most general normative term.

A more complex issue is that of scope: whether the scope of 'ought' is wide or narrow. The idea that we may commit a modal fallacy in normative conditionals has been known and discussed for some time (e.g. Dancy 1977; Broome 1999, 2007). For example, consider Forrester's Gentle Murder Paradox (Forrester 1984). If you murder Fred you ought to murder him gently. You are going to murder Fred. Therefore you ought to murder him gently. Murdering him gently entails murdering him so you ought to murder him. A question about the first premiss is whether the whole conditional is in the scope of 'ought' (wide scope) or only the consequent (narrow scope). One way of resisting the paradox is to point out that the first premiss is not true unless taken as a wide scope 'ought' whereas

³ e.g. walking is required iff it is not permissible not to walk

⁴ e.g. walking is required iff it is forbidden not to walk

⁵ e.g. walking is permitted iff it is not forbidden to walk

the validity of the inference to the intermediate conclusion depends on taking it as having narrow scope, hence the argument is unsound or invalid.

I have developed the paradox by taking the norms to have narrow scope 'oughts'. Running the paradox on the norms taken as wide scope 'oughts' would involve the additional complexity of specifying conditions under which we can detach a normative consequent from a wide scope normative conditional. Those conditions are controversial but it is widely agreed that there *have to be* such conditions. For this reason, even if the norms should be taken as wide scope, I doubt (but have not proved) they can be saved from this paradox by that fact.

One response to the difficulties faced by the truth norm is to change the aim:

belief aims at knowledge. (Williamson 2000:47)

There has been less discussion of the formulation of this aim as a norm and for that reason its expression is both more scattered and not as much analysed. Nevertheless, I offer here a number of quotations in support of formulating it as a knowledge norm of the same form as our truth norm.

Left to right

one should...believe p only if one knows p (Williamson 2000:11)

belief aims or ought to aim at knowledge (Bird 2007:93)

(NK) For any p , believe that p only if, for all you know, p (Engel 2004:90)

Engel's principle doesn't immediately fit with the others but in its context I don't know how to understand it except as a version of the left-to-right conditional. Engel is asserting that knowledge sets the standard for belief and so Engel intends this to be a knowledge norm of belief. Furthermore, he says 'given that knowledge entails truth, truth is still...the aim of belief' (Engel 2004:90). So it is knowing what you believe, rather than knowing something else (as his speaking of 'for all you know' makes it sound like), that does the work.

Right to left

if one knows that P , then one can hardly be wrong to believe that P
(Williamson 2005:108)

it may be arguable that knowledge suffices for epistemic correctness
(Hawthorne 2004:23 fn. 58)

Both

One may believe that p if and only if one knows that p . (Whiting 2013a:184)

it is correct to believe...a proposition if and only if one is in a position to know it (Smithies 2012:266)

We can also give an argument from the knowledge norm of assertion.

If one is entitled to judge that p one should be entitled to assert that p to oneself. Since the latter entitlement entails knowledge, so then does the former. At the same time, what one is entitled to assert to others one is entitled to judge. ...knowledge is the norm for judgment if and only if it is the norm for assertion'. Bird 2007:95

So given that one ought to assert iff one knows (defended, for example, by Brown 2010), we have

Knowledge Norm: a proposition ought to be believed iff it is known.

We should perhaps also note the intuitive plausibility of this norm. That one's belief is knowledge seems to suffice for one's belief being as it ought to be. How could it be wrong, what could the defect be that makes it other than as it ought to be, if you know it? On necessity, false beliefs are in some sense not as they ought to be (that is the intuition underlying the direction of the truth norm that has faced fewer objections). Furthermore, even if justification doesn't suffice for a belief being as it ought, if we reject the truth norm because we find truth alone insufficient then we may have in mind another relation between things being as they ought to be and justification: that justification is a requirement. Finally, deontic intuitions about 'ought', for example, analogous to those at play in the thought that it is not enough merely to do good but necessary do it non-accidentally, for the right reasons, with suitably sensitivity to the circumstances, and so on, could lead to the anti-Gettier conditions on belief such as being non-accidentally true.

The earlier remarks I made about controversiality, defensibility, the relation of justification and ought facts, the family of related norms, the generality of the term 'ought' and the scope of the 'ought' apply here as well. Once again, the paradox presented here is an entirely independent problem for the norm that will stand even if other problems are resolved.

The paradoxical proposition

- Nought Belief: This proposition ought not to be believed⁶

Contradiction for the Truth Norm

Nought belief is true iff it isn't true.

If Nought Belief is true then it ought not to be believed (because that is what it says) so is not true (by the Truth Norm). If Nought Belief is not true then it ought not to be believed (by the Truth Norm) so it is true (since that is what it says).

This contradiction seems to be a straightforward threat to the Truth Norm.

Contradiction for the Knowledge Norm

I know Nought Belief iff I don't know it.

Left-to-right: If I know Nought Belief then it is true (factivity) so I ought not to believe it (because that is what it says) so I don't know it (by the Knowledge Norm)

Right-to-left: Suppose I don't know Nought Belief. I can now come to know NB on that supposition by reasoning "If I don't know Nought Belief then it ought not to be believed (by the Knowledge Norm), so it is true (because that is what it says)." ⁷

Spelling that out:

1. Suppose I don't know Nought Belief
2. I know I don't know it (I can know this, for example, by the proof just given of left-to-right).
3. I know that if it is not known then it ought not to be believed (we can suppose I know the Knowledge Norm).
4. So I know it ought not to be believed (2, 3, by single premiss closure for knowledge).
5. I know if it ought not to be believed then it is true (because that is what it says).

⁶ This paradox was provoked by Pelling's (Pelling 2011) paradox for the truth account of assertion. See also Pelling 2012.

⁷ Such competent deduction retaining knowledge throughout fits Hawthorne's Single-Premise Closure principle, see Hawthorne 2004:34.

6. So I know it is true (4, 5, by single premiss closure for knowledge).

7. So if I don't know Nought Belief then I know it (1, 6, conditional proof).

If it is thought that knowing that I don't know remains as an objectionably undischarged assumption of the proof of right-to-left, we can prove that assumption.

Either I know Nought Belief or I don't. From the proof of left-to-right, if I know it then I don't know it. If I don't know it then I don't know it. So by disjunctive syllogism I don't know it. Since I know the premisses of this argument I know its conclusion by multi-premiss closure.⁸ Therefore I know that I don't know Nought Belief.

Furthermore, we can use what we have just proved to give a proof for a second contradiction. Suppose that I know I don't know Nought Belief. Using lines 3 to 6 of the proof of right-to-left, we can conclude I know Nought Belief and then by conditional proof conclude that if I know I don't know Nought Belief then I know it. Now, by factivity, if I know I don't know Nought belief then I don't know it. Having proved in the last paragraph the common antecedent of these two conditionals, applying modus ponens twice and conjunction introduction once gives us that I know Nought Belief and I don't know Nought Belief.⁹

These contradictions don't directly threaten the Knowledge Norm because of the assumption that I know the Knowledge Norm. So we could take it as a refutation of my knowing the Knowledge Norm, which refutation makes it now unknowable for me. Since you have followed my reasoning the upshot seems to be that because you have read this far, the knowledge norm is now unknowable for you too.

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⁸ By my counting there are 4 undischarged premisses: two logical truths, factivity for knowledge and the knowledge norm. For discussion of multi-premiss closure see Hawthorne 2004:46 ff.

⁹ Note that we have two separate proofs for two separate contradictions, which proofs happen to have parts in common. It is, of course, also true that from each of these contradictions we can derive the other.

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