



# The Appraisal of Belief

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The Appraisal of Belief

A dissertation presented

by

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to

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## The Appraisal of Belief

### **Abstract**

Many contemporary epistemologists take their discipline to be a *normative* enterprise, much like ethics. According to this view, while ethics studies *practical* norms, normative epistemology studies *epistemic* norms: facts about what makes a belief epistemically justified, epistemically rational, supported by epistemic reasons, or what we epistemically ought to believe. In this dissertation, I argue against this general view of the subject matter of epistemology, with a particular focus on *metaphysical* accounts of what the epistemic domain itself could be. In Chapter One, I argue against two metaphysical accounts of what the epistemic domain is: what I call the *institutional* and *valuative*. In Chapter Two, I argue against the view that the epistemic domain is defined by the *constitutive* features of belief. In Chapter Three, having rejected the existence of a distinctively epistemic domain, I go on to argue for a substantive claim about what we ought to believe: namely, that we ought to believe charitably of others when the evidence regarding their attitudes is inconclusive.

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Many of the ideas in this dissertation originated from my second-year paper on Kant's account of practical reasons for belief, which was advised by Christine Korsgaard. Her insistence that I read William James and Blaise Pascal as a preliminary study of Kant's ethics of belief was instrumental in helping me see the through line connecting pragmatist thought in the history of Western philosophy.

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Thanks are also owed to my parents, who had the good grace to patiently see their son pursue a project for years that, to this day, is something of a mystery to them. Neither of them batted an eyelash as, in the course of his post-secondary education, I wandered from chemical

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Thanks finally, and most of all, to Avalon Owens, my partner and best friend. She was there for all the peaks and all the valleys — and was often the one to lead me out the valleys herself.

*To PJ,*

*Who, though gone, always will have been.*

## Chapter One: Epistemic Domains

### 1. Introduction

If you ask an epistemologist what epistemology is about, you are unlikely to get ‘knowledge’ as an answer. At least, you won’t get *just* that. The same goes for ‘evidence’, or ‘understanding’, or ‘truth’, or even a conjunction of these things. Many epistemologists take those answers to be too narrow. Instead, you are likely to be told that, just like ethics or moral theory, epistemology also concerns a particular *normative domain*.<sup>1</sup> In epistemology’s case, it is the realm of epistemic justification, rationality, reasons, virtue, value, and even justice. Epistemology, for many, is the study of a certain way in which things can be appraised, or the normative features referred to when we so-appraise them.

A natural next question for this kind of epistemologist, then, is how to characterize that normative domain. When we debate about epistemic values and reasons and virtues, what are we debating? It would be helpful to have some independent way of describing what this domain is, and how it differs from, say, the objects of moral inquiry.

This sort of question has recently received some attention. Antti Kaupinnen raises it for epistemic *norms*:

[...] the issue of what exactly makes a norm epistemic has received less attention than it requires. It cannot be merely the fact that that the norm pertains to the epistemic standing of the speaker or agent. The norm against lying tells us, roughly, not to say what we believe to be false when important choices of others hang on our word, but for all that, it is not an epistemic norm, but a moral one, justified in terms of respect or welfare. We need some principled way of telling when something is subject to an epistemic norm, a diagnostic for epistemic norms. (Kaupinnen 2018, 1–2)

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<sup>1</sup> One finds explicit talk of the “epistemic domain” in Booth 2007, Broncano and Vega 2011, Christensen 2001, Engel 2013a, Fricker 2008, Goldberg 2013, Kappel 2011, Malmgren 2011, McHugh 2012, Nolfi forthcoming, Rysiew 2001, Schroeder 2008, Stroud 2006, Sylvan forthcoming, and Wenar 2003. As one can see, the terminology is a fairly recent development in philosophical theorizing.

Stewart Cohen has also raised a similar question for epistemic *justification*:

Typically, in setting up the discussion, justification theorists will claim that beliefs can be justified in different ways — they can be prudentially justified, e.g. as in Pascal’s Wager, and perhaps even morally justified. Justification theorists tell us they are not talking about these kinds of justification. They are talking about epistemic justification. However, they cannot explain what they are talking about simply by introducing an undefined technical term. We need to know what they mean by ‘epistemic’ in this context. (Cohen 2016, 2)<sup>2</sup>

Both of these thinkers are trying to figure what, if anything, distinguishes (instances of) a particular epistemic normative term from another. Now, it might be that answers to their two questions will and should be completely independent of one another. It might be that there is nothing interesting in common between *epistemic justification* and *epistemic norms*, aside from the fact that we happen to use the word ‘epistemic’ to pick them out in each case. But I think many epistemologists would claim otherwise. Both epistemic norms and epistemic justification, the thought goes, are members of a single normative *domain*. If we can give an account what distinguishes this domain from others, we thereby have a way of distinguishing each of its members from its non-epistemic cousins. What we really should be asking, then, is what distinguishes the epistemic domain from other normative domains.

## 2. An Historical Motivation for Asking the Demarcation Question

As a matter of historical fact, talk of distinctively epistemic norms is a relatively recent development. The term ‘epistemic’, prior to the “normative turn,” was used mostly as a modifier

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<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, Cohen is looking for an answer to a slightly different kind of question than Kaupinnen. While Kaupinnen wants to know how we can distinguish epistemic norms from non-epistemic norms, Cohen wants to know what epistemologists mean by ‘epistemic’ when they use the phrase ‘epistemic justification’. Cohen formulates his question as a linguistic one because he does not, in the end, think that ‘epistemic justification’ successfully refers to any single phenomenon of interest that is not already picked out by other normative language (like ‘rational’). Kaupinnen, by contrast, thinks that there *is* a unique class of epistemic norms, and wants to provide a “diagnostic” for telling when a norm is a member of the class. Bracketing this difference, however, we can see both theorists as asking the same sort of question: for some normative entity or property X, what, *if anything*, distinguishes epistemic from non-epistemic X?

for normative terms.<sup>3</sup> In almost all cases, it simply meant ‘of or pertaining to knowledge’. Many early uses of the term are often contrasted with ‘ontological’ or ‘objective’, to distinguish between properties of our knowledge of the world and properties of the world as it is in itself.<sup>4</sup> A certain logical tradition, beginning with L. Susan Stebbing (1930, 214–216), distinguished between “epistemic” and “constitutive” elements of inference, where the former concerned a proposition’s relation to a knowledge base, while the latter concerned logical relations between propositions. The term ‘epistemic’ was not used as a modifier for any of the stock normative categories — justification, reason, value, etc. — until 1948, when Louis White Beck used the term ‘epistemic justification’ exactly once in his “Self-Justification in Epistemology” (253).

It was not until Roderick Chisholm’s work in the 1950s that an explicitly normative conception of epistemology came into clear view. Chisholm’s central thought was that epistemic terms like ‘know’, ‘see’, and ‘evidence’ are all definable in terms of what it is reasonable to believe (1956, 722). He draws a parallel between ethics and epistemology:

“Adequate evidence”—like “acceptable,” “unreasonable,” “indifferent,” “certain,” “probable,” and “improbable”—is a term we use in appraising the epistemic, or cognitive, worth of propositions, hypotheses, and beliefs. The statements in which we express such appraisal—for example, “We do not have adequate evidence for believing that acquired characteristics are inherited,” “The astronomy of Ptolemy is unreasonable,” and “In all probability, the accused is innocent”—are similar in significant respects to “Stealing is wicked,” “We ought to forgive our enemies” and other statements expressing our ethical or moral appraisals. Many of the characteristics which philosophers and others have thought peculiar to ethical statements also hold of epistemic statements. And when we consider the application of “evident” and our other epistemic terms, we meet with

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<sup>3</sup> A warning: in the historical discussion that follows, I will be switching back and forth between talk of epistemic terms, concepts, and language and talk of epistemic properties without much care. In part, this is for ease of exposition. But it is also meant to reflect a systematic ambiguity in philosophical works from this time. It is unclear, for example, whether G.E. Moore uses the word ‘predicate’ consistently throughout the *Principia Ethica*. In some contexts, it refers to a linguistic item (1903/1993, 174); in other contexts, it refers to something expressed by a linguistic item (3, 8); and in the second case, the expressed thing is a sometimes mental property, like a concept (36), and sometimes a “worldly” property (89, 93).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dewey 1927 (449, 451, 453); Ducasse 1940 (708); Spaulding 1933 (166-169; 175-176); and even Reichenbach (1940, 99), in which Reichenbach uses ‘epistemic’, not to specify the kind of justification of induction he offers, but to distinguish between two kinds of possibility, the other being ‘objective’.

problems very much like those traditionally associated with “right,” “good” and “duty.”  
(1957, 4)

Like ‘right’ and ‘good’ as they feature in ethical discourse, ‘reasonable’ as it features in accounts of epistemic language cannot be defined. ‘Reasonable’ picks out an irreducible normative feature of knowledge, evidence, and other epistemic terms. However, the epistemologist can still search for criteria—non-epistemic conditions under which an epistemic term is instantiated—that would allow us to formulate generalizations about which beliefs count as knowledge, what counts as evidence, and when someone count as seeing and not merely perceiving. Chisholm’s interlocutor, Roderick Firth (1959, 498–499), notes the striking similarity between this conception of epistemic terms and G.E. Moore’s conception of the terms and properties of ethics. Moore’s discussion of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ is supposed to show that any purported definition of ‘good’ in natural (or even supernatural) terms was bound to fail. The primary job of ethics is instead to specify the extension of predicates like ‘good’. Likewise, says Chisholm, according to Firth, for ‘reasonable to believe’.

Firth was also the first to point out an important disanalogy between Chisholm’s and Moore’s projects. The term ‘good’, according to Moore, was a fundamentally normative property. Not only could it not be defined in terms of some natural (or supernatural) property; it couldn’t be defined in terms of any other normative property, either.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, goodness is not a species of some more generic normative property, or a more determinate form of a determinable normative property (except, perhaps, for the trivial normative property having a

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<sup>5</sup> In the preface to the second edition to PE, Moore (1903/1993, 5) suggests that he might have been wrong about the absolute irreducibility of goodness, and that it could possibly be understood in terms of some other normative property like rightness. But this version of Moore still maintained an irreducibility claim for goodness, albeit one relativized to a certain class of properties, the “natural” and “metaphysical” or “supersensible.”

normative property<sup>6</sup>). Goodness, according to Moore, is not a species of virtue or rightness or anything else; nor is it a more determinate version of these other normative properties.<sup>7</sup>

The situation with reasonable or justified, Firth argues, is not quite like the situation with good:

Thus if I say that it would be unreasonable for S to accept h, I may mean, in a purely epistemic sense, that non-h is, let us say, more probable than h on the basis of the evidence available to S. But I may intend this sentence, on the other hand, to express an ethical judgment. I may mean that it would be ethically unreasonable for S to accept h. And if I mean this I am not restricted, when I defend my judgment, to arguments concerning the weight of the evidence for h; I am free, logically, to appeal to any ethical principle I wish, even a principle which puts “faith” above “reason” and demands that we accept an improbable hypothesis. (Firth 1959, 498; italic emphasis in original; bold emphasis mine)

The point here concerns the non-fundamentality of reasonable and unreasonable, as Chisholm employs them in his definitions of ‘knows’, ‘sees’, and ‘evidence’. Firth’s claim is that the term ‘reasonable’ admits of at least two senses: a “purely epistemic” sense and “ethical” sense. Corresponding to these two senses of ‘reasonable’ are two species of the genus reasonable: epistemic and ethical. The epistemic species is related to notions like probability, and is the sense that might feature in an account of knowledge and evidence. The ethical species,

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<sup>6</sup> Even this rather boring property seems unfit to be a genus or determinable for goodness. The property having a normative property is second-order: it’s the property of having another kind of property. Goodness, at least for Moore, is not a second-order property. It may always depend, metaphysically speaking, on some other intrinsic property of its object (1903/1993, 22). But goodness is not a property of this intrinsic property. So it’s hard to see how goodness could be a species or determination of having a normative property. A more reasonable suggestion is that good, along with bad and perhaps indifferent, are determinations of the determinable normatively valent. This fits with Moore’s claim that badness, the ‘converse’ of goodness, is the only other “simple” normative property (1903/1993, 57), and wouldn’t contravene the main point of the current discussion. We could simply take the analogy between Chisholm’s conception of reasonable and Moore’s conception of normatively valent to be the analogous notions: both irreducible, and both fundamental.

<sup>7</sup> It’s important to note that these two purported features of the term ‘good’—irreducibility and fundamentality—are distinct, and can come apart. It might be, as Anton Ford has suggested, that certain species cannot be defined in terms of their genus and some independently specifiable “differentia.” Ford, for one, thinks that animal species are like this. We can’t informatively say that that to be a horse is to be an animal and have some additional properties  $\Gamma$ , since each candidate member of  $\Gamma$  is a property unique to horses (having not just any old hooves, but horses’ hooves; having not just any old teeth, but horse’s teeth, etc.) and cannot be understood without a prior grasp of what it is to be a horse (2011, 83-90). This is all so, even though horses are indeed a species of animal: it’s a case of irreducibility without fundamentality.

while just as difficult to characterize, is in the very least sensitive to a broader range of properties than the probability of the proposition believed. Whether a belief is ethically reasonable might depend, for example, upon whether the possession of that belief is the product of a charitable disposition, or would benefit humanity, or express reverence for God. This sense is wholly irrelevant to the definitions of epistemic terms that Chisholm seeks. Firth's lesson is supposed to be that there is a special epistemic sense of reasonable tied up with notions of evidence and knowledge.

So Firth denies that the sense of term 'reasonable' relevant to epistemic terms is fundamental. Chisholm failed to see that it is reasonable to believe in accordance with the evidence, if it is, only in the special epistemic sense of 'reasonable'. And since Firth's time, it's become standard practice in epistemology to distinguish between distinctively epistemic species of various normative categories. For an instructive example, here is William Alston (1978, 277), describing the normative component of the 'JTB' (i.e., justified true belief) conception of knowledge:

To say that someone is justified in believing that p is to say that in believing that p he is proceeding as he ought, that he has every right to suppose that p, that it is reasonable of him to do so, that he is conducting himself in an acceptable manner. Furthermore this dimension of evaluation is a distinctively epistemic one. What counts towards S's knowing that p is not that he is morally, prudentially, or legally justified in believing that p, but rather that his belief that p satisfies some specifically epistemic standards, standards that have to do with a kind of excellence that is appropriate to the quest for knowledge.

Since the time Alston wrote those words, a very large literature has arisen about the nature of this "distinctively epistemic" dimension of evaluation. And arguably, the whole tradition began as a result of the exchange between our two Rodericks, Chisholm and Firth.

Of course, the fact that a question of current philosophical interest has its historical origins in a debate between two people who shared a fair number of philosophical assumptions is not *ipso facto* an objection to the question's cogency. Nearly every philosophical question has its historical origins in some debate or other. It's possible that Chisholm and Firth were simply the first to make the question of epistemic norms really explicit, or to put a previously acknowledged question in those particular terms. If so, then we have little reason to doubt the cogency of the question. I mention these historical facts at this stage not as an argument against the cogency of the epistemic domain, but as a motivation for asking in what it consists.

### **3. Ways of Answering the Demarcation Question**

There are different ways we could answer the question of what demarcates the epistemic domain. It is important to understand that our question is not, at the outset, a *metaphysical* one. What we seek is a way on getting a grip on a subject matter—the subject matter of normative epistemology. We want to know what epistemologists are talking about when they debate about epistemic justification, reasons, rationality, virtue, and norms. We do not need to know the essence or nature of this domain to do so. It may turn out that the best way to get a grip on their subject matter is *not* by citing some essential or even necessary feature of the domain in question. At the outset of an inquiry into a subject, one can often get by using paradigm cases (the sort of feature things have when they ...), offering a theoretical or functional characterization (the property responsible for the following effects ...), ostension (*that* thing!), or some combination of these methods. Indeed, epistemologists have used these sorts of methods to get a grip on *particular* epistemic notions. It is often said that epistemic justification is, for

example, the sort of justification that belief needs to have to be knowledge.<sup>8</sup> It might be no part of the nature or essence of epistemic justification that it is necessary for knowledge. Having that feature might be *entailed* by the nature of epistemic justification, or it might be a part of the nature or essence of *knowledge*. But being necessary for knowledge need not be what makes epistemic justification what it is.<sup>9</sup>

Answering our demarcation question does not require a metaphysical account of the nature of the epistemic domain. Nonetheless, I propose doing exactly that. Although our demarcation question does not require it, one way to get a grip on the epistemic domain is to think about how normative domains might be metaphysically differentiated from one another: what sorts of features define a normative domain, and the corresponding ways the domains might differ. In this chapter, I will consider two answers of this sort. The next chapter will examine a third and final answer.

The main reason for engaging in this bit of normative metaphysics is that, should it turn out that there is *no* plausible candidate for what could metaphysically differentiate the epistemic domain from other domains, all non-metaphysical answers to our question are moot. If there is no species of normative domain to which our talk of epistemic value and reasons and rationality might refer, then there is *ipso facto* no domain that might be picked out through more indirect descriptions, either.

Of course, even a metaphysical investigation of this sort requires *some* kind of preliminary description of the prospective subject matter for epistemology. After all, we need

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<sup>8</sup> This sort of view is closely bound up with the literature on the analysis of knowledge that followed Gettier 1963, which often took knowledge to be (epistemically) justified true belief that was subject to some additional condition.

<sup>9</sup> Compare: if I ask you what you mean by ‘just’, you might say that you’re talking about the kind of thing your actions need to be for you to enter the gates of heaven (without foul play). Saying this might be enough for me to know what you are talking about, even if it is no part of the essence of justice. An account of what makes actions just need not cite anything about heaven, even if what you say is true.

some reason for calling a particular domain ‘epistemic’, or the one that is the proper subject of epistemology. I will therefore be making a few uncontroversial assumptions about what kind of normative domain we are looking for:

- (1) The epistemic domain has a special explanatory relation to “epistemic” notions studied by epistemologists: knowledge, understanding, evidence, and truth.
- (2) Epistemic norms are one kind, but not the only kind, of norm that can be applied to belief.
- (3) The epistemic domain is a domain worthy of study.

The nature of the ‘special relation’ in (1) is kept intentionally vague. Some theorists think the epistemic domain is defined by these sorts of notions. Others think the epistemic domain can explain them, instead. I remain neutral about this issue. Nearly all epistemologists agree that, if there is an epistemic domain, it is going stand in some explanatory relation to the other notions studied in epistemology; that is why the epistemic domain is part of the subject matter of epistemology.

Condition (2) also requires some explanation. There are some philosophers who take ‘epistemic reason’ just to mean ‘reason for belief’, and ‘epistemic rationality’ just to mean ‘the rationality of belief’.<sup>10</sup> This *doxastic* conception of the epistemic domain, in my opinion, is perfectly innocuous. According to that conception, it is a genuine question whether practical considerations, like whether a belief will make you happy, can be epistemic reasons. However, many epistemologists would take this statement to be nonsense, perhaps by definition. It is

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<sup>10</sup> This sort of conception of the epistemic domain is not always explicitly stated. And explicit statement can be found in Berker 2013. This sort of way of understanding ‘epistemic reason’ is more common in the literature that studies issues at the intersection between reasons for action and reasons for belief: see, for example, Cuneo 2007, Skorupski 2010,

primarily the latter view that is the subject of the first two chapters of this dissertation: one that takes there to be different ways of evaluating belief, ways which might conflict with one another, and only one of which is the epistemic way of evaluating belief.

Condition (3) is a bit more difficult to state precisely, but it will play a role in what it is come. Suppose our account of the epistemic domain what something like this: “the set of facts about what is permissible or obligatory according to the rules of Frederic’s hopscotch, which is a special game that Frederick invented yesterday.” This is a clear example of a domain of appraisal that, if identified with the epistemic domain, would make it utterly without interest to epistemologists, philosophers, and human beings generally. What the cutoff for being of worthy of study will is, of course, is not fixed. I can only rely on the reader’s shared judgment that certain conceptions of the epistemic domain will render it an unworthy topic of investigation.

The next section will be comprised of preliminary remarks about just what I mean by a normative domain. It will also address some methodological worries that one might have at the outset about this sort of framework. In the follow sections of this chapter, I will then consider and dismiss what I will call an **institutional** conception of the epistemic domain. The bulk of the chapter will then be directed at what I will call a **valuative** conception, because this conception of the epistemic domain is widespread. I will conclude with the positive suggestion that, if there is something in the neighborhood of an “epistemic domain,” it is what I will call a **constitutive** domain—one that pertains to the norms and standards grounded in the nature of, for example, belief or our cognitive system. However, there is nothing in the concept of these sorts of domain that precludes practical considerations from being essential to it.

#### 4. Domains and Points of View

Talk of normative domains is somewhat abstruse. It is not the sort of phrase you are likely to hear outside of academic philosophy. One might doubt that it answers to any important category that we ought to investigate. This is a fair point, but I think the doubt can be dispelled.

Everyone can admit that there are *ways* in which we evaluate, appraise, prescribe, prohibit, and judge things. I might judge a jewelry theft to be at once illegal, foolish, skillful, immoral, and maybe even beautiful. Each of these judgments is made in accordance with a different set of standards, or from a different normative point of view—the point of view of law, prudence, performance, morality, and aesthetics, respectively.

A point of view is a distinction in thought and language. It marks a difference in the way things can be judged. As such, it is a conceptual or linguistic distinction. My talk of normative *domains* is meant to pick out whatever normative properties or features might be picked out by such talk. If there is a way of correctly judging things from the moral point of view, then the moral domain is whatever set of normative properties and entities such talk refers to when it is correct.

It might seem like this characterization of our subject matter is unduly realist. If we do not believe that there are genuinely normative facts and properties, then there is no such thing as *any* sort of normative domain. An inquiry into the subject matter of epistemology should not have to assume that there are such facts and properties. So we should not assume that the subject matter of epistemology is the epistemic domain, so-construed.

I think that is right, and that we should not have to assume that there are normative facts and properties for our present inquiry to make sense. But even an anti-realist can grant that things can be appraised and prescribed in different ways, or from different perspectives. So if

you have anti-realist inclinations, I propose you read talk of “normative domains” to refer to their respective *point of view*—the distinctions in normative language and thought. The success of my arguments will not depend on normative realism.

## 5. The Epistemic Domain Is Not Institutional

Consider that collection of appraisals we levied on the theft:

- *Illegal*
- *Foolish*
- *Skillful*
- *Immoral*
- *Beautiful*

Let us assume that each of these appraisals picks out a member of a different normative domain.

What sorts of domains are these? And what makes one domain the domain that it is?

Consider the first and most obvious appraisal—*illegal*. The thief’s act violated some law. It is illegal in virtue of violating that law. ‘The law’ here refers to the particular prohibitions, requirements, and recommendations of a particular institution—an institution of law, comprised of legislators, judges, administrators, and the like. As such, *illegal* is a member of an *institutional* domain. That is, it is a normative property of a domain whose standards get their content from the prescriptions, prohibitions, and recommendations of an institution.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This might seem to preclude *anti-positivism* about the law—see Dworkin 1978 and 1986—but it does not. Even if a law depends for its existence on certain moral facts, that does not mean the domain of law is not institutional. Consider a club for the moral indoctrination of children. One of the rules of the club might be “Members should always strive to be as virtuous as possible.” The sense of ‘virtue’ here might not itself be institutional: it might refer to the moral or ethical property of being virtuous instead. But the rule in question is still a rule of the institution, and the sense of ‘should’ in the rule is institutional as well.

There are as many institutional domains as there are institutions. And what makes a particular institutional domain what it is—its essence—is determined by the particular institution that defines it. Law was our first example. Of course, there is no singular legal domain, since there are myriad legal institutions. Corresponding to each of these institutions is a legal domain. But there are plenty of other non-legal institutional domains, too. Religions, clubs, and cultures are all forms of social organization that possess systems of rules, both implicit and explicit. *Etiquette*, as it is commonly understood, is an institutional domain if ‘institution’ is understood in this sufficiently broad way: whether something counts as *rude* in a particular time and place, for a particular group of people, is determined by the rules and expectations of that group.<sup>12</sup> And if a certain stripe of moral skeptic is right, then *morality*, too, is a kind of institutional domain—one whose instances vary across time, space, and culture, just like etiquette.

That last claim about morality flies in the face of a lot of thinking about it. It seems like whether an act is morally *right* or *wrong*, or *cruel*, or *fair*—all normative properties that fall within the moral domain—is not determined by what any group of human beings believes or expects, nor by the rules of any institution comprised by them. The same seems to be true for the

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, one can ask of any institutional domain whether its norms and prescriptions are *really normative*, or whether we have any reason to obey them. We can also ask whether what is valuable from the perspective of a particular institution is *really valuable*. But the fairness of this kind of question does not imply that institutional domains are not *bona fide* normative domains. Plausibly, the “really” in the above claims is a way of pointing to some more generic normative domain. When we ask whether what is legally forbidden is thereby really forbidden, or whether what is justified from the perspective of etiquette is thereby really justified, we are asking about the relationship between members of two normative domains. The first is institutional. The second can be understood in a couple of different ways. One might be asking the age-old question of whether what is, say, forbidden by a system of laws is thereby *morally* forbidden. One might also be asking whether what is legally forbidden is thereby forbidden in a fully generic sense. The domain in question here would be something like the domain of action itself—the set of normative features that pertain to the object of evaluation (in this case, action), independently of any other institutions, values, or other sources of rules. It is an open question whether there is this fully generic sense of ‘ought’ that might adjudicate between, more specific kinds of obligations. According to Richard Feldman (2000), for example, there is no generic or “just plain” sense of ‘ought’ with which we could ask whether we ought to believe what we morally or epistemically ought to believe. I remain agnostic in this paper over the answer to this difficult question. The important point is that doubts about whether the normative claims of an institutional domain are *genuine* should not be construed as a question about their *existence*, but as a question about their relationship to some more generic normative domain.

epistemic domain as well. Many epistemologists take this to be an obvious feature of epistemic notions like *epistemic justification* and *epistemic rationality*.<sup>13</sup> Whether someone's belief in a heliocentric universe is epistemically justified is not *just* a matter of whether it accords with standards of some institution, practice, or culture. This is true even if facts about these institutions or cultures partly explain why your belief is epistemically justified or unjustified. It might be generally true that widely shared beliefs held by your community, or beliefs passed on to you from sources deemed credible by this community, enjoy some degree of epistemic justification, absent evidence that those sources are not credible, or that the widespread belief is false. But we can acknowledge this point while still thinking that what it *is* for a belief to be epistemically justified is not, itself, a matter of conforming to the rules and standards of those communities. They could be wrong, after all.

That, anyway, is how things appear. Of course, appearances can sometimes deceive. Even if morality seems to be more than the standards of a particular human institution, the best account of it might imply that it is. The same might be true of the epistemic domain, too. Whether the moral domain is institutional is a question than cannot be settled here. But thankfully, we do not need to, because there is a much more serious problem with the idea that the epistemic domain is somehow institutional: there is no institution that could ground the epistemic domain in the way that legal institutions ground the legal domain.

Consider again the belief that the universe is heliocentric. Suppose I hold this belief, here and now, with all the informational resources and stores of human knowledge currently available to me. Most epistemologists will say that my belief is epistemically unjustified. What sort of institutional standards could make this true? There are no doubt institutions whose members

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<sup>13</sup> For a forceful defense of these claims, though, see Boghossian 2006.

would judge my belief to be unjustified, even according to their own standards. If I made my belief sufficiently public, and was sufficiently heard, The American Astrological Society might issue a public condemnation. Insofar as current members of the scientific enterprise might be considered an “epistemic community,” perhaps I would fall afoul of their standards more generally. But surely the existence of these sorts of communities, and the standards they might bring to bear on my belief, does not demarcate the subject matter of epistemological theorizing, nor make my belief epistemically unjustified.

One might object that ‘institution’ is not being understood as broadly as it should be. Earlier, I claimed that *etiquette* was an institutional domain. But surely the existence of an institution of etiquette faces the same sort of problem as the one just discussed. Just what is the institution underwriting claims about what makes a particular gesture rude, or a particular manner of dress polite? If it does exist, it is something that supervenes on the expectations and beliefs of an entire community or culture, rather than a formal organization or easily demarcated population within it. But if some sufficiently shared expectations about public behavior are sufficient for the existence of an institution of etiquette, then sufficiently shared expectations among a culture should be sufficient for the existence of an epistemic institution, too.

Suppose we grant this point: in a broad sense of ‘institution’, a culture or community is an institution whose standards can define a normative domain.<sup>14</sup> The analogy between etiquette and the epistemic, then raises an obvious question: what makes these two institutional domains

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<sup>14</sup> We need not. One way to respond to this observation about institutions and etiquette is to deny etiquette is an institutional domain in any important sense. This is not implausible. It is easy to view judgments of etiquette as judgments about what, from the perspective of “society” or “societal expectations,” is appropriate; this is because many stock examples of rules of etiquette (holding one’s fork properly) are rules that we no longer endorse. But judgments of what is, for example, *courteous* or *rude* do not seem to even implicitly concern what society expects. Rather, they seem to concern how one ought to behave in relation to others. Viewed in this way, etiquette is not so much an institutional domain as it is a subset of morality—one concerned with the more quotidian aspects of dealing with others, rather than the momentous choices between life and death often discussed in ethical theory.

*distinct* from one another? How is an “epistemic community” different from whatever community defines the standards of etiquette?

This might seem like a strange question. After all, it is the *very same* community that seems to possess collective views about what public behavior counts as rude and what beliefs count as ill-founded. So the difference between the domain of etiquette and the epistemic domain seems to be, not in the community that defines the domain, but the respective *targets* of assessment for the community’s standards: in the case of etiquette, it is public behavior. In the fact of the epistemic domain, it is beliefs, and perhaps the ways we go about forming and maintaining them. This suggests the following picture: there is a *general* institutional domain that is defined by the shared expectations of a culture or community, which has two further components: the standards applied to public behavior, and the standards applied to beliefs and their formation and maintenance. The latter defines what we might call the epistemic domain.

Set aside for a moment the fact that very few epistemologists think that the epistemic domain is institutional in the way just described. Also set aside that some epistemologists think that the standards of a community pertaining to belief and its formation (as well as the formation and transmission of knowledge) can themselves be subject to epistemic evaluation.<sup>15</sup> There is still a major problem with this proposal: the standards that communities and cultures bring to bear on belief and inquiry are not exclusively “epistemic.” Cultures and communities can and do praise beliefs that are charitable, conducive to the public good, or display proper deference to figures of authority. None of these features are the sorts of features that epistemologists take to

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Anderson (2012), for example, argues that social institutions are subject to appraisals of epistemic justice and injustice, based on how well their structure conduces to the fair distribution of knowledge.

be relevant to epistemic domain. Insofar as there is anything like the ‘etiquette of belief’, is it not the same as the epistemic domain as epistemologists construe it.

## 6. Valuative Domains

In the last section, we encountered some reasons for doubting that the epistemic domain is institutional. The final problem was that institutional accounts could not distinguish between the ways in which a community might appraise belief. Some of these ways—for example, judging a belief to be charitable or kind or respectful—are not part of the epistemic domain as epistemologists think of it.

A natural response to this problem is to stipulate that the standards relevant to the epistemic domain concern a particular kind of *value* or *values*. That is what was tripping up the institutional account. It did not distinguish between the values relevant to epistemic appraisal—truth, knowledge, understanding, and the like—and other kinds of “social” values like kindness or charity.

This suggests a different approach to demarcating the epistemic domain. When we judge things as epistemically justified, rational, or virtuous, it is from the “point of view” of some value like truth, knowledge, or understanding—just the sorts cognates of ‘epistemic’ you would expect to show up in an answer to our central question. And though few epistemologists *explicitly* accept this way of understanding the epistemic domain, it lies in the background of much epistemological thinking. Many epistemologists endorse *substantive* accounts of epistemic justification and rationality that appeal to a central epistemic value or values.<sup>16</sup> It is not implausible to think that some of these theorists would also say that these values *define* the kind

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<sup>16</sup> The recent work in “epistemic utility theory,” which is too vast to cite here to any degree of adequacy, is one such example. For an overview of the research program, see Pettigrew 2013.

of justification and rationality at issue, or the normative domain of which they are a part. Any such connection, though, is at best implicit in recent epistemological work. One exception is William Alston, who explicitly endorses the idea that the epistemic domain is defined by a kind of value:

Beliefs can be evaluated in different ways. One may be more or less prudent, fortunate, or faithful in holding a certain belief. Epistemic justification is different from all that. Epistemic evaluation is undertaken from what we might call the “epistemic point of view.” That point of view is defined by the aim at maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs. (Alston 1985, 59)

Alston here cites a particular *aim* that defines the epistemic domain—the aim of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs. For our purposes, I think we can understand the talk of “aims” here as basically equivalent to talk of values. It is true that there are some ways of understanding “aims” that make them very different from values. One might hold that something can be an aim only if there is something corresponding to it that *aims*. On this way of understanding aims, there is no aim of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of belief unless there exists something—a person, a cognitive system, a belief—that actually aims at that so-maximizing and so-minimizing. Value, by contrast, does not require the existence of a valuer in the same direct way. A relic of great historical value might gather dust in an unexplored tomb. Its historical value at a time does not depend on anyone’s actually valuing the relic at that time. I think we can read Alston’s talk of “aim” here in this latter sense; epistemic appraisal is defined by this aim, regardless of whether the person or cognitive system or belief in question *has* this aim.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> There is another normative reading of “aim” that takes the word to refer to standard for correctness for the thing that possesses the aim. This sort of view is examined in Chapter Two.

The general idea, then, is that there is some particular value, like truth, knowledge, or understanding, that defines the epistemic domain. In other words, the epistemic domain is a **valuative** domain. Notions like epistemic justification, rationality, reasons, and virtue are to be explained in terms of this value, and whether beliefs and the like stand in the *right relationship* to it.

It is important to see just how wide a net this conception of the epistemic domain casts. Accounts of what the “right relation” to the defining epistemic value is can take many different forms. For some member of the epistemic domain like *epistemic rationality*, one might offer an *instrumental* account of this right relation; one might claim that a belief is epistemically justified if it an effective means of achieving whatever is the defining epistemic value.<sup>18</sup> One might offer a *consequentialist* account of epistemic justification according to which a belief is justified if and only if it maximizes the amount of the epistemic value in question, or is formed in accordance with rules that maximize the value when followed.<sup>19</sup> One might also take the relation between the defining epistemic value and *derivative* or *non-definitive* epistemic values to be neither instrumental nor promotional; perhaps, as Kurt Sylvan (2018) has recently argued, these derivative values (like knowledge) are valuable in virtue of being a *way of respecting* the epistemic value of truth. These accounts of the various members of the epistemic domain are all compatible with the general idea that the domain is defined by some central epistemic value. (They are even compatible with each other: one might wish to prove a consequentialist account of epistemic justification, for example, while providing a non-consequentialist account of derivative epistemic value.)

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<sup>18</sup> See Foley 1987 for a defense of this instrumentalist account of epistemic rationality.

<sup>19</sup> See Berker 2013 for a systematic taxonomy of these sorts of consequentialist views.

The valuative conception of the epistemic domain seems compelling, especially in comparison to the institutional alternative. But I think there are some insuperable problems for this way of understanding the subject matter of epistemology.

### **6.1. Are There Valuative Domains?**

The first problem for the valuative conception of the epistemic domain is that, at first glance, there is no such thing as a valuative domain. More precisely: there do not seem to be valuative domains that are reflected in thought or speech—whether ordinary or technical. It is unlikely that such a general category of normative domains should not be recognized in ordinary thought and speech. That is, it is unlikely that there should be such a domain, given that it is not recognized in ordinary thought and speech. So it is unlikely that there are valuative domains.

This is not a point very often noticed or pointed out in epistemological discussions. Nonetheless, it is worth attending to. In the ordinary course of conversation, we might give advice to a friend about what she ought to do about some dilemma she is facing. We might ask her what we ought to do in some more specific sense—morally, say. We might ask if she knows a good place to eat, or whether she noticed the terrible news making the rounds on the internet, or whether she thought the latest blockbuster film is worth seeing. It is not very plausible that, in any of these cases, the normative language being employed is making reference to some normative domain defined by some particular value. It is even more implausible that ordinary users of these normative terms explicitly understand these terms to refer to a valuative domain; if a non-philosopher says that an act would be morally wrong, it is unlikely that, if you asked them what they mean by ‘morally wrong’, they would say ‘wrong from the perspective of the value of life’, or whatever substantive value one might think characterizes the moral domain.

Of course, many philosophers have invoked central values like happiness or suffering in their substantive accounts of what makes an act morally right or wrong, or right or wrong *sans phrase*. But we should not confuse a substantive account of an element of a normative domain that happens to invoke values with a valuative account of what that domain *is*. I might claim, as many have, that what makes an act *what I ought to do* is that it promotes happiness and the reduction of suffering in the right way. But that does not mean that I take *the right thing to do* to be a member of a normative domain *defined* by a particular value. Most likely, *what I ought to do* is a member of some more generic domain that is defined by the *bearer* of the normative properties included in it—the domain of action, rather than the domain of happiness or suffering. Or, to take another example: I might judge whether an investor is doing a good job or not based on whether the investor maximizes financial returns on investments. But that does not mean that *being an investor* is a member of a “financial” valuative domain, defined by the value of money. Rather, *being a good investor* is plausibly a member of an *institutional* domain, *role*, or *performative* domain—a domain pertaining to the standards of a particular kinds of institutions, roles, or performances.<sup>20</sup> The standards of some roles or performances, might, as a matter of fact, make reference to some kind of value. Investors are supposed to maximize monetary returns on investments. Nonetheless, *being a good investor* is *ultimately* a matter of fulfilling the standards of an investor; it is a member of an institutional, role, performance domain. It just so happens that what makes an investor meet the standards of being an investor is a matter of promoting a certain “value”—money.

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<sup>20</sup> I distinguish these sorts of domains to make room for the possibility that some kinds of performances (like hunting) or roles (being a friend) are not, in the end, ways of satisfying institutional standards.

There are examples that are philosophically closer to home. Utilitarians since Mill have appealed to a central organizing value, like happiness or pleasure, in their accounts of what we ought to do. But this value is not what *defines* the normative domain they want to give an account of. Rather, the utilitarian wants to give an account of the *practical* domain—the domain of action, which is individuated by the object that the elements of the domain assess. It just so happens that what makes something the right thing to do, or what we ought to do, is determined by facts about this central value.<sup>21</sup> Now, we can nonetheless imagine a close variant of utilitarianism that *is* a genuine (purported) valuative domain, whose defining value is happiness or pleasure. There is nothing in the idea of that domain that takes *action* as its locus of evaluation. It thereby evaluates other sorts of things—institutions, desires, beliefs, technology—in terms of it. But it is important to see the difference between this sort of domain and the one with which many actual utilitarians concern themselves. It also important to see that there is no marker for this sort of valuative domain in ordinary thought and speech. We do not speak of what is “hedonically” rational or what we have “hedonic” reason to do or believe or what is “hedonically” good. The same goes for anything that we take to be, in fact, valuable. These valuable things do not comprise domains of their own, but enter into facts about other domains.

This is a subtle distinction, but it will matter greatly for what follows. Ultimately, I want to argue that epistemologists have conflated valuative and non-valuative domains in their conception of the epistemic domain *precisely* because there is an “epistemic” domain that has a

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<sup>21</sup> Actually, there is some reason to think that Mill had what I will later call a *constitutive* conception of the practical domain, since he thought that happiness what the “sole end” of human action (Mill 2003, 213). If Mill thought this end was *essential* to action, and grounds facts about what ought to do in terms of this end, then he has a constitutive conception of the domain to which facts about what we ought to do belong.

structure analogous to the structure of the investor’s domain—it features values, but is not defined by them.

## 6.2. The Plurality of Valuative Worlds

Even if valuative domains are not registered by ordinary evaluations, we might still insist that they exist. It seems perfectly cogent to posit a domain of norms and standards that are grounded in some defining value. There seems nothing amiss judging acts and institutions according to whether they promote pleasure in the right way, and calling them “hedonically justified” if they do. So what is wrong in saying that the epistemic domain is just one of those domains? Why not just say that it is the domain defined by the value of, say, true belief?

In a way, there is nothing wrong with this suggestion. We are free to stipulate that, by ‘epistemic domain’, we mean ‘the valuative normative domain defined by the value of truth’. As a matter of fact, I think few epistemologists would be willing to say this, and many epistemologists would also say that there should be some *explanation* for why truth is the fundamental epistemic value. There are debates, after all, about whether truth, knowledge, or understanding are epistemic values, or whether some of them can explain the epistemic value of others.<sup>22</sup> Epistemologists who take these to be real debates cannot think it is simply a matter of stipulation that, for example, truth is the defining epistemic value, rather than knowledge. And if it is not just a matter of stipulation, the best explanation for that fact is that the epistemic domain is *not*, itself, valuative, but rather like the “investor” domain discussed above: one that features some central value (as money was for the investor) that might explain other elements of the

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<sup>22</sup> Take, for example, the contributors to Haddock, Millar, and Pritchard (2008).

normative domain (the goodness of an investment), but which is not definitive of the domain itself.

Some epistemologists will not be moved by this observation, however. One might simply deny that the debate about epistemic value is cogent, and insist that, by ‘epistemically rational’, one means to refer to the kind of rationality that belongs to the valuative domain of truth or accuracy. Suppose I am a formal epistemologist who believes that conformity with certain principles like conditionalization is epistemically rational because it minimizes expected inaccuracy. I do not think accuracy is genuinely valuable, nor do I think inaccuracy is genuinely disvaluable. I simply stipulate that, by ‘epistemically rational’, I mean to refer to the kind of normative status that is grounded in the value of accuracy and disvalue of inaccuracy.<sup>23</sup> We might also think of Quine’s view here: “[...] normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking...it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth” (1986, 664–665).

If this is how we are conceiving of the subject matter of epistemology, then we ought to have an explanation for why this is a particularly *interesting* or *important* normative domain to investigate. After all, one can stipulate a valuative domain for *anything*. I might use ‘crimsonically rational’ to refer to the kind of rationality that belongs to the domain defined by the value of *things being crimson*. I take it that, absent some further explanation, this is not an interesting normative domain. In what follows, I will present some variations on this basic

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<sup>23</sup> I thank Susanna Rinard for this suggestion. It is worth noting that some formal epistemologists do not share this attitude. Richard Pettigrew (2016) and Michael Titelbaum (2013), for example, both seem to endorse the stronger claim that the norms of partial belief they argue for are part of what makes a belief rational *tout court*, rather than relative to some stipulated goal of maximizing accuracy and minimizing inaccuracy.

challenge: given the plurality of valuative worlds, there is reason to be skeptical that there is a single, interesting valuative domain that deserves the title ‘epistemic’.

### 6.3. The Explanatory Symmetry between Truth, Knowledge, and Understanding

If the epistemic domain is valuative, the first question to ask is what value defines it. This might not seem like a very difficult question. Many epistemologists think that *truth* or *accuracy* is the central value relevant to epistemology, and the one that explains all other normative statuses within the epistemic domain.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, philosophers have also said that states like *knowledge* and *understanding* are valuable, and that this value cannot be explained in terms of the value of truth alone.<sup>25</sup> So we can ask a more specific version of the question: if the epistemic domain is valuative, why should we take its definitive value to be truth, or knowledge, or understanding?

A first-pass answer to this question might invoke an important distinction we have yet to make within valuative domains. It seems like some things are genuinely valuable, while others are not. Pleasure, beauty, and friendships are perennial candidates for the former. Malaise, grammatical errors, and third-degree burns are not. So we can distinguish between a *weak* and *strong* conception of valuative domains. The weak conception allows anything to serve as a defining value for a domain. According to this conception, there are as many evaluative domains as there are things, and so there is a valuative domain defined by the value of third-degree burns. According to the *strong* conception, only things that are genuinely valuable can define a valuative domain. So friendship is in, and burns are out.

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<sup>24</sup> Here, for example, is Alvin Goldman: “The central epistemological concepts of appraisal, I argue, invoke true belief as their ultimate aim. So the evaluation of epistemic procedures, methods, processes, or arrangements must appeal to truth-conduciveness, an objective standard of assessment” (1986, 3).

<sup>25</sup> On the distinctive epistemic value of knowledge, see Gaultier 2017. On the distinctive epistemic value of understanding, see Gardiner 2012.

We should understand ‘genuinely’ here in a particular way. After all, your malaise might be indicative of a coming disease. Its occurrence, and your coming to be aware of it, might be instrumental in you coming to believe that you are getting sick, and taking preventative measures. In that sense, malaise can be valuable. But that is not the sense of ‘genuinely valuable’ at work in the above distinction. To define a domain in the strong sense, a thing must be valuable, but not in virtue of the value of something else—in the current case, the value of being healthy.<sup>26</sup> Let us call anything that is valuable in this way *non-derivatively* valuable.

Once we have this distinction in mind, one obvious response to the question of how to identify the value that defines the epistemic domain is to identify the one that is non-derivatively valuable. Some have argued, for example, that an instance of knowledge is valuable in virtue of being a proper response to the value of true belief.<sup>27</sup> If so, then we have reason to think that truth is non-derivatively valuable, and knowledge and understanding are not. There are other arguments in the literature for the same conclusion: that the value of knowledge can be explained in terms of the value of true belief.<sup>28</sup> So perhaps that is why we should study the valuative domain of truth, and not the weaker domain of knowledge.

The problem with this sort of argument is that there is an explanatory symmetry between the values of truth, knowledge, and understanding. Just as we can explain the value of instances of knowledge in terms of their relations to truth, we can explain the value of instances of truth in

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<sup>26</sup> One might want to identify this property—being valuable, but not in virtue of the value of something else—with either *intrinsic* or *final* value. But I think this would be a mistake. It might be that what explains the value of something are things extrinsic to it, even if the *value* of those extrinsic things does not do the explanatory work. The value of friendship might be grounded in broader facts about human nature, even if human nature itself is not valuable. And if ‘final value’ is meant to be synonymous with ‘non-instrumental’, then something might be non-instrumentally valuable while still being valuable in virtue of the value of something else: the value of artworks might be grounded in the value of aesthetic experience, or vice versa, even if artworks or aesthetic experiences are not instrumental or a means to each other.

<sup>27</sup> See Sylvan 2018.

<sup>28</sup> See Goldman and Olson 2009.

terms of their relation to knowledge. Assume that knowledge is non-derivatively valuable. A belief cannot be known unless it is true. Even more strongly, a belief's being true partly explains why it is known, when it is. So plausibly, a belief's being true is something like a *constitutive means* to its being knowledge.<sup>29</sup> So true belief is instrumentally valuable with respect to knowledge. If the reason we take truth to be non-derivatively valuable is because it can explain the value of other epistemic values, then we are at an impasse, for knowledge can do the same thing.

Even if we reject this sort of explanation of truth's value, however, there is a much more general way of explaining its value available to us. So far, we have been implicitly assuming that the value of the knowledge of a proposition must explain the value of true belief *in that very proposition*. This is not necessary. There are other connections between knowledge and truth than can explain why truth is valuable. For example, it is plausible that only true beliefs (and not false beliefs) can serve as *bases* for knowledge when that knowledge is based on inference.<sup>30</sup> If I have a true belief, I can go on to make an inference on its basis to arrive at new knowledge. So from the perspective of knowledge, it is valuable to have true belief.

As it happens, this form of explanation can secure an explanatory symmetry between every candidate epistemic value we have so far considered: truth, knowledge, and understanding. Just as truth can serve as the basis for knowledge, so can understanding: I can come to new knowledge of some chemical facts on the basis of understanding of chemistry, or my understanding why a certain chemical fact obtains. So understanding is valuable from the

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<sup>29</sup> I say 'something like' a constitutive means because some might deny that beliefs themselves can ever be means to anything, because they are not things we can choose. I remain neutral in this chapter about what it takes for something to be a means and whether belief can satisfy those requirements.

<sup>30</sup> This is not to endorse the "no false lemmas" response to the Gettier problem, as proposed by Clark 1963. It is just to say that not being based on a false belief is a *necessary* condition on knowledge. This is consistent with the existence of Gettier cases that do not involve knowledge being based on an inference from a false belief.

perspective of knowledge. Both true belief and knowledge can serve as the basis for understanding as well: if I truly believe some propositions about chemicals, those propositions can serve as the basis of my understanding of other propositions about chemicals, or serve as the basis of my general understanding of chemistry, or why some chemical facts obtain. Knowledge of those propositions will also serve the same role. So true belief and knowledge are valuable from the perspective of understanding.<sup>31</sup>

And if *truth* is the non-derivative epistemic value, a similar story can even be told about knowledge and understanding. The story is not exactly the same, because true belief can be based on all kinds of states that are neither knowledge nor understanding. A false belief can serve as the basis of a true belief—this is one way in which our beliefs can be “accidentally” true. So the value of knowledge and understanding cannot be explained by the mere fact that these states can play a special role in serving as bases for true belief. Nonetheless, there is a looser sense of ‘basis’ according to which both knowledge and understanding can be bases for true belief in a way that false belief, in general, does not. If I know or understanding some proposition, I am more likely to make inferences on the basis of that knowledge or understanding that are true than if I made inferences on the basis of a false belief. Arguably, this fact is partly constitutive of what it is to have certain kinds of understanding. If I understand chemistry, then I am in a position to make inferences on the basis of my understanding that are likely to be true. If I understand why a certain chemical law obtains, then I am in a position to make inferences on the basis of it—say, about a particular instantiation of that law—that are likely to be true. And in

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<sup>31</sup> There is a combination of views about the nature of basing and the nature of knowledge and understanding that imply that knowledge and understanding can never be the basis of any other cognitive state: namely, that (1) knowledge and understanding are not kinds of beliefs and (2) that states of belief, knowledge, and understanding can only be based on beliefs or perceptual states. While I do not endorse (2) and want to remain neutral on (1), the argument above can still go through if they are true. One can simply replace the strict sense of ‘basing’ above with the looser talk of ‘basis’ that follows in the discussion of truth and the derivative value of knowledge and understanding.

general, if I know a proposition, I am more likely to make inferences on the basis of that knowledge because necessarily, that proposition is true; and, in general, inferences made on the basis of true propositions are more likely to be true than inferences made on the basis of false propositions: if I am deluded about the world around me, the inferences I make on the basis of those delusion are more likely than not to be delusional themselves.

One might object there that the kind of explanation of value being offered here is not sufficiently general. Suppose we grant that many instances of true belief, knowledge, and understanding can serve as bases for each other in a way that explains their value. This does not mean that *all* instances of true belief, knowledge, or understanding are valuable in this way. After all, there might be certain propositions such that true belief, knowledge, or understanding of them makes them ill-suited to serve as bases. The proposition <I am incapable of making inferences with true conclusions>, if truly believed, understood, or known, could not serve as the basis for other true belief, knowledge, or understanding. This is entailed by the truth of its content. And yet (so the objection goes), true belief, knowledge, or understanding of this proposition is still epistemically valuable. So this strategy cannot explain every instance of epistemic value.<sup>32</sup>

It is true that the above strategy for explaining each candidate epistemic value in terms of the others cannot vindicate the idea that *every* instance of the valuable state in question is valuable. This is a problem if every instance of knowledge, truth, and understanding *is*, in fact,

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<sup>32</sup> Here is the same objection from a different set of cases: it is a contingent fact that it is more likely for beliefs formed on the basis of knowledge or understanding to be true than those formed on the basis of false beliefs. We can imagine a world where conspiratorial forces make all evidence about states of the world misleading, and those with true beliefs about the evidence go on to form more false beliefs than those with false belief about it. We can also imagine these forces playing a more direct psychological role, making all inferences made on the basis of true beliefs false. And this might seem to be the seed of an objection: surely, the way in which the value of some epistemic states explains others must not be so-contingent, because it is not contingent that truth, knowledge, or understanding are epistemically valuable.

valuable. And this is often assumed in the literature on epistemic value: discussions of the “swamping problem” for reliabilism, for example, assume that any instance of knowledge is valuable, and that this must be explained by the reliabilist’s axiology. But I think we should pause at this point and ask why this is. After all, it does not seem obvious that *every* instance of, say, true belief is genuinely valuable. Many truths, if believed, are positively terrible for the person who holds them—take <I am incapable of making inferences with true conclusions>, or more generally, beliefs concerning our own defects that we can do nothing about. And as many have pointed out,<sup>33</sup> some truths seem too trivial to be valuable when believed, even if belief in them is not positively disvaluable: in almost all circumstances, a belief about the exact number of hairs on one’s head has no value whatsoever.

The standard response to these sorts of objections is to point out that, while a true belief about something utterly trivial or utterly devastating might not be *all things considered valuable* or *genuinely valuable*, a belief of this sort is still *epistemically valuable*.<sup>34</sup> But this response is problematic in the current dialectic. We are working under the assumption that whatever value demarcates the epistemic is *genuinely* (and non-derivatively) *valuable*—that is what allows us select one of our candidate epistemic values over the others. To be told that trivial or devastating truths are valuable from the epistemic point of view but not genuinely valuable does not allow us to demarcate the epistemic using this strategy.

So, as things stand, there is a complete explanatory symmetry between the values of truth, knowledge, and understanding—insofar as we restrict our attention to their genuinely valuable instances. If we assume that one of these values is non-derivative and definitive of the

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Greenberg (forthcoming).

<sup>34</sup> See Lynch (2004, 55).

epistemic domain, it can explain the value of the others, to the extent to which they are, in fact, valuable. So we have no reason to prefer one of these candidates over the others.

But maybe we should give up this strategy, and appeal to value in demarcating the epistemic in a slightly different way. Suppose we simply took it as a given that, no matter what the epistemic domain is, it is one according to which *every* instance of true belief, knowledge, and understanding is (epistemically) valuable. We need not say which of these is derivative from the others in order to successfully demarcate the domain. All we need to show is that there is one valuative domain that takes all of (and, perhaps, only) these things to be valuable, in whatever order of priority, if any.

If we go this route, we forego the idea that the epistemic domain concerns things of genuine value, or that the epistemic domain is a *strong* domain. It is simply implausible that every instance of these states is, in fact, valuable. But without some special explanation for why we should nonetheless study this particular weak domain, this leaves us little motivation for our continued interest in it. Now, this might not trouble everybody. Those who are skeptical of the distinction between genuine and non-genuine value might not care that the epistemic domain does not reach illusory heights. But even if we deny the distinction between genuine and non-genuine value, there still seems to be little reason to care about a domain according to which every instance of knowledge, understanding, and truth is valuable. After all, it is implausible any human being actually does care about every instance of knowledge, understanding, and truth. If what we actually care about is supposed to guide those who deny the distinction between genuine and non-genuine value—and it is difficult to see what else could—then the valuative domain defined by these things will not be of much interest.

#### 6.4. On the Plurality of (Pluralist)Valuative Worlds

If the epistemic domain is worth studying, and it is valuative, then it should concern things that are genuinely valuable. But if we assume that the epistemic domain is defined by a single domain, there is no reason to prefer one candidate over the others. Those are the conclusions of the previous section. I now want to consider a different proposal—namely, that the epistemic domain is valuative, and concerns things that are actually valuable, but does not have a *single* defining value. In particular, the epistemic domain is the one defined by the values of truth, knowledge, and understanding. It is a *pluralist* domain.

This suggestion is not entirely new. Some epistemologists take epistemic rationality to be instrumental in character: to be epistemic rational is to be instrumentally rational with respect to a certain goal.<sup>35</sup> Some have challenged the idea that epistemic rationality can really be instrumental. But even if it is, there is the further question of what goal actually characterizes epistemic rationality. Is it some sort of truth-goal, like now believing true propositions and not now believing false propositions, as Richard Foley claims? Or is it a matter of understanding, as Philip Kitcher (2012, 59–64) claims?

Recently, Matthew Kopec has argued that there is no single answer to this question. Instead, there are a number of distinct epistemic goals, and there are a number of distinct epistemic goals that people actually possess. Each of these epistemic goals can ground their own form of epistemic assessment: what Kopec calls “idealistic” and “liberalistic”, respectively. Here is Kopec:

I see no reason, in principle, to limit our epistemic assessments of agents by fixing only on the “purely epistemic” goals of having an accurate and comprehensive belief system. In particular, when making liberalist assessments of rationality, we ought to include

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<sup>35</sup> See Foley 1987, which offers an explicit and influential instrumentalist account of epistemic rationality along these lines.

whichever cognitive or epistemic goals an agent happens to hold. For example, say an agent's dominant epistemic goal is to have as coherent a system of beliefs as possible. Fine. Or, instead, say her dominant goal is to believe in accord with the evidence, while caring little about the truth of the propositions she would be led to believe in pursuit of this goal. Also fine. And when she does have the goals of having an accurate and complete belief system, let us let her be as risk averse, or risk seeking, as she likes. If epistemologists take little interest in the resulting norms of such assessments, so be it. (After all, it is already common for epistemologists to ignore the assessments that their rivals make.) And I would also take an ecumenical approach to idealistic assessments. Sometimes we might be interested in whether an agent's cognitive behavior promotes her understanding of nature and, at others, whether it is truth, accuracy, or coherence promoting, and perhaps even whether it accords with the evidence. These are all ideals that hold some epistemic value, and, I feel, there is no need to choose. (2018, 3581–3582)

Kopec's account is pluralistic along a number of dimensions, but the important aspect for us is its pluralism about epistemic goals—both idealistic and liberal. Kopec denies that there is a single epistemic goal that can characterize the wide array of assessments we make from the “epistemic point of view.” This is not to deny, however, that there is something that unifies all of these goals, and makes them all forms of *epistemic* rationality, or kinds of “cognitive” goals. In fact, Kopec thinks that other kinds of goals—for example, being healthy—are excluded from this form of assessment (2018, 3575).

However, Kopec does not provide an explicit account of what makes a goal epistemic or cognitive in character. And given the wide range of different goals that Kopec thinks are epistemic, one might wonder why it is so important to maintain the epistemic–practical distinction with respect to the rationality of belief. Why not plump for a full-blown pluralism, according to which we can evaluate an agent's acts with respect to *any* ideal goal or actual goal that the agent possesses?<sup>36</sup> Without an account of what makes a goal epistemic, there is no

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<sup>36</sup> Kopec provides one reason for not collapsing the epistemic–practical distinction with respect to the rationality of belief: it would preclude certain kinds of explanations of cases of apparent irrationality. Psychology reports that we systematically ignore evidence that contradicts our political beliefs, judge ourselves to be more capable of performing a task than we actually are, and believe that we are less likely of getting ill than the average person. Kopec claims that one “promising explanation” of these phenomena is that we are “caught in the grip” of conflicting norms of rationality: we are doing what is practically rational, but epistemically irrational. Now, it is unclear what exactly Kopec thinks

reason to maintain that the goals of now believing truths and not falsehoods, understanding the world, or having an accurate set of credences jointly define an interesting and genuine species of rationality—or, for our purposes, a strong valuative epistemic domain.

### 6.5. Cognitive Successes and Achievements

It might seem like there is an obvious account available. There seems to be something about true belief, accurate credences, understanding, and knowledge that makes them belong to a common kind that excludes, say, happiness or health: they are all cognitive *achievements* or *successes* of some kind or other. The epistemic domain, then, is the one that is defined by the value of these various cognitive achievements and successes. Even if none of these values is the sole fundamental epistemic value, they all jointly define a normative domain of interest.

The notion of cognitive achievement and success seems to provide just the sort of unity needed to define the epistemic domain, but this appearance is misleading. We can see the problem by asking what it is for something to be a cognitive achievement or success. Of course, this is not always a fair question. We might have a good-enough grip on a notion to invoke it in the explanation of others, even if we cannot give an explicit definition. But as we will see, I think the notion of a cognitive achievement or success is *not* this sort of notion—at least, the sense in which it can be readily understood does not allow it to demarcate the epistemic domain. In the

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amounts to an “explanation” in this context. If the kind of explanation Kopec intends is supposed to be a *rationalizing* explanation, or one that appeals to *motivating* rather than merely causal reasons, then the intention is misplaced: it seems implausible that the motivating reason (if there is one) for believing that one is less likely to get sick than the average person is that one wants to or ought to conform with the standards of either epistemic or practical rationality—nobody would cite such a reason if asked, and it does not seem to be the hidden and unconscious basis for those beliefs, either. The most charitable understanding of Kopec’s claim is that the best *description* of the normative aspects of these cases invokes a conflict between different kinds of rationality, but this begs the question. One just could describe the normative aspect of these cases without appealing to a conflict between different kinds of rationality. If one is a pragmatist, for example, one might describe the cases as instances of genuine rationality: the subjects are doing what is best for them, even if the kind of response to their evidence they exhibit would be irrational in other circumstances. Or one might claim that these are cases of irrational behavior, but a kind of irrational behavior that is good for the person who does it.

following, I will focus on the notion of a cognitive success, rather than the notion of a cognitive achievement. But the argument easily generalizes to cognitive achievements, for ‘success’ and ‘achievement’ share the same logical features relevant to the argument.

Here is one way of understanding the notion of a cognitive success: X is a cognitive achievement iff (a) X is a part of the cognitive system and (b) X is a success. As a first pass, we can say the cognitive system encompasses belief (full and partial) and the psychological processes that give rise to it. This, at the minimum, includes perception, memory, inference, and introspection.<sup>37</sup> So any element of this system, be it belief, or the processes that give rise to it, can potentially be a cognitive success. It does so when it itself is a success.

It is difficult to understand, in the abstract, what makes something a success. The most natural way of understanding success is as a species of *attempt*. But it strains language to say that the psychological attitudes involved in the cognitive system are attempts at anything, given that attempts seem to be themselves species of intention action, and belief, knowledge, and understanding are not intentional actions. The most straightforward way of understanding the ways in which things like beliefs or knowledge can be successes is by taking them to be *outcomes* of attempts, rather than attempts themselves. We can call a completed building a success because it is the intended outcome of the attempt to build it. So we might say that true belief, knowledge, and understanding are all the result of intentions to believe truly, to know, and

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<sup>37</sup> Most epistemologists would leave it at that. But of course, there are other psychological goings-on that influence our beliefs. Our beliefs can be colored by our emotions, desires, and wishes. We can trace a potential causal path from nearly any attitude to belief. Should we include these influences as part of an agent’s cognitive system? Some might be inclined to say ‘no’, on the grounds that these sorts of psychological attitudes and processes should *not* influence belief-formation and maintenance; they are foreign incursions into the cognitive system, rather than components of the system itself. But this response prejudges the normative facts we are trying to fix by talk of cognitive achievements and successes. It thus falls prey to the same objection that will be detailed in the subsequent main text.

to understand. And it is a truism that human beings generally do attempt to know the truth when they can, and to understand the world around them.

Now, this sort of view raises some important questions. Are these attempts *intentional actions* of some sort, or some other state of the agent? Does every person have them, or every person subject to epistemic appraisal? What is their exact content—to know, have true beliefs, and understand? Many of the questions that dogged the instrumentalist about epistemic normativity arise here in a similar form. But I would like to focus on only one of them: the question of what *content* the attempts have.

For all that has been said, cognitive successes are members of the cognitive system that are the successful result of attempts—where we understand attempts as something like intentional actions with a particular intended result. But if that is all it takes for something to be a cognitive success, then there will be many more cognitive successes than true belief, knowledge, and understanding. I can intend for members of my cognitive system to have any number of features. I might intend for my beliefs to be false, and do what I can to impair my faculties. I might intend my beliefs to mirror as closely as possible the beliefs of James Dean, regardless of their truth value. I might intend to believe whatever makes me happy (or sad!). And in the sense of ‘cognitive success’ we are concerned with here, if I *did* end up believing in these intended ways, these beliefs would count as cognitive successes. So if we interpret ‘cognitive success’ in this way, we cannot demarcate the epistemic domain by appealing to a bundle of cognitive successes.

There is another way of understanding the notion of a cognitive success, however—one that might help us winnow our bundle of cognitive successes and separate the properly epistemic successes from the others. The problem with the earlier conception was that what made a

member of the cognitive system a success was independent of the cognitive system itself—namely, intentions and intentional actions directed at the cognitive system. But it is unlikely that epistemologies have such an external conception in mind. Rather, the sense in which true belief is a cognitive success is that it is a success *of* the cognitive system, rather than a success that happens to be a member of the cognitive system.

In this second way of understanding ‘cognitive success’, we must construe the cognitive system as something capable of *activity*, in a sufficiently broad way of understanding ‘activity’—one that allows things that are not intentional actions to be capable of success. There is some linguistic precedent for this. We can say that a heart’s pumping blood is a cardiovascular success, because it is a success of the cardiovascular system. We can say that a bacterium’s fission is a reproductive success, because it is a success of the bacterium’s reproductive system. Similarly, we might categorize knowledge, true belief, and understanding as successes of the cognitive system. And in so-doing, we allow for a principled distinction between the “non-epistemic” successes of intended false beliefs and intended James-Dean-approximating beliefs and the genuine epistemic successes whose value characterizes the epistemic domain.<sup>38</sup>

## 7. From Valuative to Constitutive Domains

So far, then, we have established the following. If the epistemic domain is a valuative domain, there needs to be some explanation for what value characterizes it rather than others, and why the domain defined by that value is interesting. We cannot do this if the epistemic domain is defined by a single value, because there are (at least) three candidate values—truth,

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<sup>38</sup> If we also wanted to categorize knowledge or understanding as cognitive *achievements*, we would also have to show that there is a suitably broad sense of ‘achievement’ that we can predicate of things that are not intentional actions or people who perform them. This task appears to be more difficult than the previous one, but we need not concern ourselves with it here. For as I argue in the conclusion, the central problem with this suggestion has nothing to do with whether true belief, knowledge, or understanding can be really be achievements.

knowledge, and understanding, that are “on a par,” because they can explain the value of each other. The best way of understanding the epistemic domain as a valuative domain, then, takes it to be a *pluralist* domain in which (at least) all three of these candidate values defines it. But if we stipulate such a domain, we need to explain what unifies its defining values—why true belief, knowledge, and understanding jointly define an interesting domain, but true belief, knowledge, and happiness do not. The best way of doing this was to think of each of these states as *cognitive successes* or *cognitive achievements*, construed as successes and achievements of the cognitive system. The current suggestion, then, is that the epistemic domain is the valuative domain defined by the value of cognitive successes and achievements.

It should now be clear that the epistemic domain, as we have defined it, presupposes the existence of, and is grounded in, another distinct normative domain: the one that includes the notions of cognitive success and achievement. But what sort of domain is this? It is certainly not institutional: the psychological attitudes and processes that we describe as ‘cognitive’ are not, barring a rather steadfast social constructivism about the mental, themselves institutional entities. Nor do the notions of cognitive success and achievement themselves seem to be valuative. If true belief is a cognitive success, it is not because it bears the right relationship to some value. In fact, the explanation in our current case is going the other way around: true belief is valuable, and partly definitive of a valuative domain, *because* it is a cognitive success.

A much more plausible suggestion is that what makes something a cognitive success or achievement is determined by some sort of aim, function, or norm of the cognitive system itself. That is, the normative properties invoked by talk of ‘cognitive success’ and ‘cognitive achievements’ are properties that are determined by some standard that is “proprietary” in some

way to the nature of the cognitive system. As such, it is an instance of what I will call a **constitutive** domain.

By ‘constitutive domain’, I mean to pick out a pretty wide range of modes of assessment and their corresponding normative properties, objects, and facts. It includes any domain that is involved when we assess something based on standards derived from or constitutive of the kind of thing that it is. Attributive uses of evaluative language—as in ‘good car’, ‘terrible movie’, ‘middling recital’, or ‘bad job’—are one of the most common instances in which we refer to members of constitutive domains. As the examples suggest, we extend this sort of evaluation to artifacts, performances, and attempts. But the idea extends to other kinds of normative properties beyond the evaluative and other kinds of entities beyond artifacts and performances. I can not only assess whether a performance was *good*, but *correct*. And I can assess not only artifacts and performances, but instances of biological kinds—as in ‘abnormal heartrate’ or ‘malfunctioning thyroid’. These sorts of assessments, too, make reference to some standard that is grounded in or grounds the nature of the thing being assessed.

There is much more to be said about these sorts of domains. That will come in the next chapter. The crucial point for now is that cognitive successes and cognitive achievements belong squarely in the camp of constitutive domains. If they amount to anything at all, they are normative objects that are grounded in some standard that is proprietary to the cognitive system: that is what makes them successes and achievements *of* the system. And so if the epistemic domain is defined by the value of these elements of a constitutive domain, it had better be the case that truth, knowledge, and understanding *are*, in fact, (the only) successes or achievements of the cognitive system. After all, it is at least conceivable that the constitutive domain defined by the internal standards of the cognitive system does *not* categorize (only) truth and knowledge

as cognitive successes—at least as such. To take just one example: if cognitive systems are instances of a *biological* kind, and the standards of such kinds necessarily make reference to reproductive fitness, then it is possible that some cognitive success and achievement will involve, say, arriving at beliefs with certain content, irrespective of their truth value, because beliefs with that content will promote reproductive fitness.

So if the epistemic domain is valuative, and is defined by cognitive successes and achievements, it is important to show that cognitive successes and achievements themselves are sufficiently “epistemic” in flavor—that they really do involve things like truth, knowledge, and understanding in a way that can ground a distinctively epistemic set of norms. That is the *first* reason that the cogency of the epistemic domain depends upon an inquiry into the purported constitutive domain defined by the cognitive system. We need to know whether there is such a domain, and whether its standards really do imply that only things like truth, knowledge, and understanding are cognitive successes.

But there is a second, and possibly more important reason, to inquire into the constitutive domain of the cognitive system. So far, we have been operating under the assumption that the epistemic domain is valuative, and defined by the values of a certain kind of success or achievement—one which belongs to a normative domain distinct from the valuative domain itself. We have not yet considered the possibility that the epistemic domain is *itself* this constitutive domain. There are two *prima facie* reasons to think that the epistemic domain is constitutive, rather than valuative. The first was discussed in §4.1: there is some reason to doubt that there are *any* valuative domains as we have conceived them. They are not recognized in ordinary thought about what to do, what is right or wrong, or what is good, in any sense. Values are either grounded in domains (as when the goals of an institution defines what counts as a

valuable contribution to it), or play a substantive role in answers to question in those domains (as when the consequentialist argues that what makes something practically or morally required is a matter of promoting valuable states affairs in the right way).

The second *prima facie* reason to think that the epistemic domain is constitutive, rather than valuative, concerns what epistemologists take to be the proper *objects* of epistemic assessment. Epistemology has typically focused on the normative status of our doxastic attitudes, and the ways in which we come to arrive at them through inference and perception. That is, epistemologists have typically taken the object of epistemic assessment to be the cognitive system. The valuative conception of the epistemic domain takes its defining values to be cognitive successes—that is, successes of the cognitive system. It should strike the reader as an amazing coincidence that, according the valuative conception of the epistemic domain, the proper *objects* of epistemic assessment should be the very same states and processes that are themselves the *values* according to which we assess these objects. If pleasure is valuable, and defines its own valuative domain, it would be a strange view of this domain that is only assesses the normative status of pleasure itself. The hedonic domain, if it existed, would plausibly ground assessments of our *actions*, in the very least. The same goes for any other candidate value: friendship, justice, beauty, if they ground valuative domains, do not assess themselves. So if the epistemic domain is the valuative domain defined by the value of cognitive success, we should expect it assessment to reach beyond the assessment of belief itself and extend to a wide range of other objects: why not actions, or emotions, or government policies?

Some epistemologists have, in fact, argued for this sort of conception of the epistemic domain. Alvin Goldman (1999), for example, takes social epistemology to at least partially concern the ways in which our institutions and policies promote epistemic value, construed as

something like cognitive success or achievements. In a way, there is nothing objectionable about this sort of project. Many kinds of true beliefs, knowledge, and understanding *are* valuable. They are important to almost any society, culture, or human life. And it is worth thinking about how to ensure that they are valued in the way that they should at these different levels of generality. But this conception of the epistemic domain does not really capture the sense in which epistemologists have thought about the distinction between the practical and epistemic, and the way in which the cognitive system is a particularly *special* or *primary* object of epistemic assessment. If the epistemic domain is valuative, we cannot maintain this conception, in the same way that we cannot (and should not) maintain that pleasure is the primary object of assessment from the point of view of the value of pleasure.

A constitutive conception of the epistemic domain does not face this problem. If true belief, knowledge, and understanding are cognitive achievements or successes, or otherwise feature in the aim, function, or constitutive standards of the cognitive system, we can explain *both* why these are epistemic values and why belief, inference, and the like are the primary objects of epistemic assessment. We can explain the former by positing a connection between what is valuable in a constitutive domain and the constitutive standards that define it. And we can explain the latter by noting that belief and inference are themselves part of the cognitive system, and it is simply a feature of constitutive domains that the objects of assessment are the same as the objects whose standards define the domain. There is no mystery, according to this view, about why epistemic assessment bears a special connection to doxastic attitudes: those attitudes, and their standards, define the domain itself.

## 8. Conclusion

If the preceding arguments are correct, then there is little reason to think that value plays a definitive role in demarcating the epistemic domain. There are a plurality of candidate “epistemic values”—that is, values that are themselves “epistemic” states like true belief, knowledge, or understanding. Each of these values can ground its own domain, insofar as there can be valuative domains. And there is no reason for taking one of them to be the properly epistemic domain over the others, or more worthy of study over the others. The best way of construing the epistemic domain in valuative terms takes them *all* to be defining epistemic values. But the best way of doing *this*—by making the epistemic domain the domain defined by the value of cognitive successes and achievements—leaves a crucial normative question open: what is a cognitive success or achievement? If we want to hang onto the idea that the epistemic domain is valuative, then we need to address this prior question about the constitutive domain defined by the standards of the cognitive system. But in a way, this need is overdetermined: it is also just more plausible that the epistemic domain itself is this constitutive domain rather than the “derivative” valuative domain defined by it.

The next questions we must answer, then, are about this purported constitutive domain. We need to know whether there is a way of understanding ‘cognitive system’ according to which the cognitive system has its own internal standards, and that these standards can ground a constitutive domain. More importantly, we need to know whether the standards of this system are sufficiently “epistemic” to carve out a distinctive normative subject-matter for epistemology.

## Chapter Two: Belief's Own Standards

### 1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, we concluded that the epistemic domain, if it is a genuine and interesting normative domain, is not valuative. It is unlikely that there are *any* valuative domains; and if there are, there is no unique domain that terms like ‘epistemic reasons,’ ‘epistemic ought’, and the like might inhabit. We also saw a promising path forward. The notion of a *cognitive achievement* pointed us in the direction of a different kind of account of the epistemic. That account is *constitutive*. It takes epistemic standards to be standards of the cognitive system itself, or of belief itself.

As an answer to the *demarcation* question, the idea that belief has its own set of standards is a new one. But the idea the belief, or the cognitive system of which it is a part, has these standards—that is quite old. In fact, it is almost as old as Western philosophy itself. Aristotle’s distinction between practical and theoretical reason is a thread that runs through much of its fabric: the scholastics, Kant, and in the more recent centuries, Elizabeth Anscombe, have all taken it up in some capacity.<sup>39</sup> According to members of that philosophical tradition, there is a fundamental difference between reasoning about what to do and reasoning about what is the case. The former concludes in action or intention; the latter concludes in belief (or, when all goes well, knowledge). What is more, the standards that apply to these two kinds of reasoning, as well as their products, are grounded in their own nature, rather than any attitude we might take towards them, or any external value that might be promoted by their employment.

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Anscombe 1978.

Contemporary analytic philosophy has warmed to this idea, in its own way. Although not always cloaked in the language of practical and theoretical reason, the idea that there is a *standard of correctness* that applies to belief, and that this standard is part of the nature of belief itself, has made its way into epistemology and ethics alike. Some think, for example, that belief is subject to a norm of truth: a belief is correct if (and only if) it is true, and being subject to this norm is partly what *makes* an attitude a belief.<sup>40</sup> Others have endorsed the idea that belief, or the cognitive system of which it is a part, has a certain *function* that grounds a certain kind of internal assessment of it. Some think, for example, that the cognitive system has the function of producing true beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

What is more, almost all of those who endorse these ideas think that the internal standard or function that applies to belief can explain the truth of some normative claims made by epistemologists. Based on the standard or function of belief, we might be able to explain why, say, only evidence for a proposition can be an *epistemic reason* to believe the proposition; or what makes a belief *epistemically warranted*.<sup>42</sup> But we might do something more ambitious. We might identify the epistemic domain in its totality with the constitutive domain of belief. This more ambitious proposal takes the function and standards of belief to explain what *all* epistemic assessments are about; they are the assessments that are grounded in the standards which are proprietary to belief.

Strictly speaking, the constitutivist accounts of epistemic norms have not been marshalled to answer the demarcation question. Often, constitutivism is invoked to explain the “normative authority” of an already-demarcated class of norms. The constitutivist project in ethics is one

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<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Engel 2013b, Lynch 2009, Shah 2003, and Whiting 2013.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Plantinga 1986.

<sup>42</sup> See Nolfi 2018 and Plantinga 1986, respectively.

such enterprise.<sup>43</sup> In the epistemological literature, versions of constitutivism are employed to explain why, say, certain kinds of considerations are reasons for belief, and not others; or why particularly epistemic reasons for belief have a certain kind of character. This chapter aims to show that, insofar as belief *does* ground some constitutive mode of assessment, it is plausibly *not* what epistemologists take to be the object of their inquiry. Whatever epistemic standards are, they are not the standards of belief.

I will begin by considering the what I will call *normative constitutivist* approaches to demarcating epistemic norms. After showing that these approaches cannot satisfactorily address the demarcation question, I will move on to consider *descriptive constitutivist* approaches. I conclude the chapter by offering a positive (and pragmatist) proposal for what kinds of norms fall out from the nature of belief.

## 2. Varieties of Normative Constitutivism

Earlier, I mentioned two recent conceptions of belief that might be used to demarcate the epistemic domain. The first was that belief is subject to a standard of correctness, and that it is part of the nature of belief that it is subjected to this standard. The second was that belief has a certain function, and that it is part of the nature of belief that it has this function. Both of these approaches can be used to demarcate the epistemic in the following way: we can say that every

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<sup>43</sup> Christine Korsgaard (1996, 2009) and David Velleman (2000) are two of the most prominent advocates of this approach in the ethical domain. It should be noted that both versions of constitutivism are not *just* answers to the question of the normative authority of some already-demarcated class of norms, like morality. They are also accounts of the particular substance of those norms. (This is why constitutivism is not easily classed into the familiar division between ethics and metaethics.)

epistemic-normative property or fact is a normative property or fact that is explained by this standard of correctness or function.<sup>44</sup>

It is important to see that these two ways of demarcating the epistemic domain are actually specific instances of two more general approaches. I will call these *normative* and *descriptive* constitutive approaches to demarcating the epistemic. This and the following two sections will consider normative constitutivism.

Normative approaches to demarcating the epistemic take there to be some normative fact or facts about an attitude that partly explains why that attitude is a belief, and take these norms and those that are explained by them to be the epistemic domain. The previous example of such a defining normative fact was [For all beliefs, a belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true]. According to some philosophers, it is part of the nature of belief that it is correct if and only if it is true—if that were not true of an attitude, it would be not be a belief. But not all philosophers who think that some normative facts characterize belief think that this particular normative fact is part of the nature of belief. There are three different dimensions according to which a constitutive normative fact that characterizes belief might vary.

The first is the normative property that features in the normative fact. One common view is that the fundamental norm that applies to belief is one of *correctness*. There are different ways of understanding correctness, but at least some of them imply that a state, attitude, or act being correct is not a deontic property, like the properties of being permitted, or required, or what may, should, or ought to be (done).<sup>45</sup> Most ways of understanding correctness also imply that it is not

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<sup>44</sup> One might also add that the standard of correctness that explains the other epistemic normative properties is itself an epistemic normative property or fact. Importantly, as the subsequent discussion will show, the same cannot be said for a function that explains epistemic norms, since a function is not a normative property.

<sup>45</sup> For an account of correctness that *does* have this implication, see Whiting 2013.

an evaluative notion like *good*, or *valuable*. Some claim instead that correctness is an instance of the category of the ‘fitting’: the kind of normative status that includes being *proper* in certain ways.<sup>46</sup> If these theorists are right, and there is an important difference between being correct, good, or permissible or obligatory, then the normativist about belief has an important choice to make about what kind of normative status features in the normative fact (or facts) that makes belief what it is.

Above and beyond the particular normative status that features in a constitutive norm, there is the question of what truth-functional relationship holds between the normative property of belief. There are debates about whether belief is correct if and only if it is true, or whether that ‘if and only if’ should be an ‘only if’. Intuitions can pull us in different directions here. A belief in a proposition I have no evidence for, but which happens to be true, seems defective in some sense. You might describe it as incorrect—it is not a proper way to believe. On the other hand, there seems to be a sense in which the belief *is* correct, just accidentally. Depending on which intuition we honor, truth will either be a necessary or jointly necessary and sufficient condition for belief.

Now consider a case where I believe a proposition after carefully considering the evidence, but it happens to be false, because that evidence was misleading. Here, my belief seems to be correct in just the same sense in which my true belief based on evidence was correct: it was a proper way of believing. So we might deny that truth is even a necessary condition on correct belief. We might put a different standard in its place, such as *justification* or *being supported by evidence*. Considering a different batch of cases, we might conclude that *knowledge*

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<sup>46</sup> See, for example, Whiting 2014.

is what is necessary for a belief to be *really* correct.<sup>47</sup> These are all examples of the third dimension along there is disagreement about the constitutive norm of belief: the particular conditions under which belief has the constitutive normative status that it has.

I should also mention that there is a *fourth*, less commonly discussed choice-point for the normative constitutivist approach to demarcating epistemic norms. This fourth choice-point does not concern the form or content of the norms themselves, but their number. So far, we have assumed on behalf of our constitutivist that there is a single constitutive norm of belief, and that the epistemic domain is comprised of this norm and any other norm that is explained by it. For example, the norm [For all propositions  $p$ , a belief that  $p$  is justified if and only if  $p$  is supported by sufficient evidence] might be explained by the fundamental correctness-norm [For all propositions  $p$ , a belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true.] But the normative constitutivist might deny that all norms that apply to belief in virtue of some constitutive norm apply in virtue of the *same* norm. There might be more than one norm that applies to belief, and virtue of doing so, makes belief the attitude that it is. Perhaps, as some have suggested, there is an ineliminable tension between a belief's coherence with our other beliefs and its being supported by the evidence.<sup>48</sup> If we further suppose that the rational requirement to be coherent and the reasons to believe in accordance with the evidence are not themselves explained by the same norm—either because they themselves are fundamental constitutive norms of belief, or because they are explained by distinct fundamental constitutive norms—and that these norms are or are explained by constitutive norms of belief, we might conclude that there are at least two (conflicting) constitutive norms of belief. Another possibility is that there is, at least in some cases, an

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<sup>47</sup> For a defense of a knowledge-norm like this, see Smithies 2012.

<sup>48</sup> See Worsnip 2018.

ineliminable conflict between what is supported by our evidence and what is true. Consider the following two norms: [For all agents  $A$  and beliefs that  $p$ ,  $A$  ought to believe that  $p$  if  $p$  is true] and [For all agents  $A$  and beliefs that  $p$ ,  $A$  ought to believe that  $p$  if  $p$  is supported by sufficient evidence.]<sup>49</sup> These two norms can come into conflict whenever the evidence is misleading and supports a proposition that is false: the first norm will tell  $A$  to believe one thing, and the second norm will tell  $A$  to believe its negation. Now suppose that we nonetheless maintain that both norms are genuine norms of belief, that their application to belief makes belief the attitude that it is, and that neither norm explains the other. Then we would have to conclude that there are at least two constitutive (and conflicting) norms of belief.<sup>50</sup>

For our purposes, it will not matter too much what particular norm the constitutivist appeals to in demarcating the epistemic domain. In particular, the question of the exact normative status or its truth-functional relationship to belief will not matter for the purposes of

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<sup>49</sup> These two norms, and their conflict, are similar to the norms discussed in John Gibbon's (2013) *The Norm of Belief*. There are three important differences between Gibbons's discussion of the purported norm of belief and the ones discussed here. First, Gibbons contrasts the truth norm with a norm of *justification*, rather than evidential support. In the current dialectical context, it is more helpful to discuss norms that do not relate two different normative statuses, since we can perfectly well ask whether the sense of 'justified' in this purported norm of belief is epistemic or not—and if so, what that consists in. Second, I have opted for an 'if' interpretation of the norm rather than an 'if and only if' interpretation, so that the truth of the norms is not straightforwardly inconsistent. Third, while Gibbons argues that only one of these two norms is genuine, the current discussion assumes that both of them are genuine constitutive norms of belief, and that they conflict (that is, that there can be situations in which one ought to believe  $p$  and ought to believe  $\sim p$ ). If one is not convinced by this sort of example, because one thinks that there cannot be a conflict between 'oughts' of the same category (in this case, the oughts that hold in virtue of belief), then consider these analogous norms:

[For all agents  $A$  and beliefs that  $p$ ,  $A$  has a reason to believe that  $p$  if  $p$  is true.]

[For all agents  $A$  and beliefs that  $p$ ,  $A$  has a reason to believe  $p$  if  $p$  is supported by sufficient evidence.]

Again, if it is the case that neither of these norms can explain the other, and they are both genuine, and that that are both norms whose application to an attitude makes that attitude belief, then there is more than one constitutive norm of belief.

<sup>50</sup> It is worth pointing out that, if there are two or more fundamental norms of belief, they need not necessarily conflict. Consider our two norms [A belief  $B$  that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true] and [A belief  $B$  that  $p$  is justified if and only if  $p$  is supported by sufficient evidence]. Earlier, we considered the possibility of explaining the justification norm in terms of the correctness norm. We might equally consider the possibility that the correctness norm cannot explain the justification norm,

this chapter's argument. Whether the normative status is that of being correct, or permitted, or obligatory, or good, or what ought to be (believed), or whether the conditions for this status specified in the norm are necessary, sufficient, or both, will be immaterial to the central criticism.

What *does* matter, to some extent, is the content of the particular conditions under which belief is supposed to have the normative status it has. If, for example, the constitutive norm of belief were [A belief that p is correct if and only if believing p would bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number], I think we would hesitate to call this the fundamental “epistemic” norm, the one that grounds all other epistemic norms. This is because of the other constraints we put on an answer to the question of what demarcates the epistemic: in particular, that it is the kind of normative domain that has something to do with truth or knowledge and is the proper object of study by epistemologists. The normative facts that follow from this kind of constitutive norm would not satisfy these further constraints. The norms constitutive of belief would not be a plausible candidate for the object of normative epistemology.

### **3. The Metaphysics of Constitutive Norms**

Before we address the prospects of normative constitutivism for answering our demarcation question, a metaethical point is in order. Some writers sympathetic to normative constitutivism have, at points, espoused certain *anti-realist* versions of that view. David Velleman and Nishi Shah (2005) claim that belief is subject to a constitutive truth-norm: that a belief is correct if and only if its content is true. Being subject to this norm is part of what makes a belief a belief and distinguishes it from other psychological attitudes that bear a similar dispositional and behavior profile to belief. What is more, they hold that there is no mind-independent fact of the matter about whether an attitude is correct if and only if its content is

true. What makes it subject to that norm is a fact about our mind: the fact that we *apply* that norm to that attitude. Shah and Velleman explain this point with an example:

Suppose one recognizes that one has long regarded a fellow philosopher as an adversary, and that this view of him has survived at least some opportunities for disconfirmation, thus potentially qualifying as having been regulated for truth. Is this view of one's colleague a belief or just a useful fantasy that serves to spur one's intellectual activity? It doesn't seem to us that there is a fact of the matter that could settle this question; rather, one must decide whether or not to treat it as a fantasy or a belief. That is, one must decide whether or not to apply the norm of truth to this attitude and thus dispose oneself to regulate it accordingly. (2005, 511)

According to this sort of view, there is a more basic psychological attitude shared between attitudes like fantasies and attitudes like beliefs. In this passage, Velleman and Shah refer to it as a "view," and in other places call it "acceptance." Acceptance is a generic attitude of assenting to a proposition that admits of different species, of which fantasy and belief are examples.

Importantly, what makes an attitude of acceptance a belief, rather than a fantasy, is *not* exhausted by dispositions or functional properties of the attitude. Over and above (and, as we will see later, *partly explanatory of*) these descriptive properties is a normative one: being subject to a norm.

But for Shah and Velleman, what it is to be subject to this norm is to be subject to a certain attitude: a "conative" state that disposes one to follow the norm, and to regulate the attitude in question in accordance with it (Shah and Velleman 510).

There are many questions about the details of this kind of anti-realism about constitutive norms, but those details are as important for the demarcation question as the more basic fact that, according to such anti-realism, whether an attitude counts as a belief, and therefore subject to the constitutive norms of belief, is whether a person does, in fact, apply those norms to the attitude. This makes the combination of anti-realism about constitutive norms and a constitutive approach to demarcating the epistemic domain an unpromising combination.

Why? Because there is no limit on the form or content of the norms we might apply to an attitude of acceptance. All one has to do is apply a different norm to an attitude of acceptance in order to make it a different attitude with a different set of standards. Let us stipulate that ‘belief’ refers to an attitude of acceptance that is guided by the norm ‘this attitude is correct if and only if its content is true’. We can imagine a whole host of other attitudes of acceptance that are subject to and thus defined by different standards:

‘K-belief’: this attitude is correct if and only if it amounts to knowledge.

‘E-belief’: this attitude is correct if and only if it is supported by the evidence.

‘U-belief’: this attitude is correct if and only if it maximizes expected utility.

‘G-belief’: this attitude is correct if and only if it is permitted by God.

These attitudes can be populated to infinity: the only limits to the number of belief-like attitudes is our normative imagination. Moreover, there is nothing about this kind of constitutive account of belief that requires the normative properties in question to be norms of *correctness*: the norm in question could just as easily concern the conditions under which the attitude is permissible, or obligatory, or rational. In theory, a constitutive norm could even concern conditions under which there is *a reason* to have the attitude: the normative property might operate at the “contributory level.” We face an analogous situation to the “plurality of valuative worlds” from the previous chapter.

One important consequence of this is that it renders debates between pragmatists and evidentialists about belief, or between evidentialists and coherentists, or pretty much any substantive normative disagreement about belief, trivial. If a pragmatist applies a different norm to an attitude of acceptance than an evidentialist, those attitudes are thereby different attitudes; they no longer disagree about what standards characterize a single attitude about which they are

both speaking. In order to have a substantive disagreement about the standards of an attitude, two parties would have to be in agreement about the constitutive norms that characterize it. Given that there is disagreement about this even among those whose believe there *are* constitutive norms of belief and that these standards are broadly “epistemic” in character, this would imply that almost all existing debates about the norms of belief are not genuine disagreements. So if we take these sorts of debates to be genuine, then we are committed to rejecting this kind of anti-realism about constitutive norms.

One might be tempted to reply here that, while there is a potentially infinite number of attitudes of assent, there is a perfectly good *empirical question* of what kinds of norms we *do* apply to the attitude of that English speakers refer to with the word ‘belief’, or that the concept *belief* picks out. One version of anti-realism about constitutive norms might maintain, for example, that it is a simple biological fact, perhaps to be explained by evolutionary considerations, that we apply the norm of correctness to our attitudes of acceptance rather than a norm of utility-maximization. Why not just say that the epistemic domain is the one that corresponds to the norms of this attitude, which we all share?

We will come back to a version of this proposal, but for now, it is worth noting that the very existence of an apparent disagreement between pragmatists and evidentialists about belief appears to falsify its central contention. It appears that persons do *not* exclusively apply the same norm to what they refer to as ‘belief’. Moreover, not all of the proposed norms for belief are “epistemic” in character: they do not all concern things like knowledge, truth, or evidence. So if we are anti-realists about the constitutive domain of belief, there is little reason to think purported normative domain studied by epistemologists is the constitutive domain of belief.

## 4. Rationales for Normative Constitutivism about Belief

### 4.1. Intuitive plausibility

Suppose that we were able to establish that belief *was* constituted by a norm of the form [For all propositions  $p$ , a belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true]. That is, part of what it is for an attitude to be a belief is to be subject to this norm. Furthermore, suppose that this norm was the ground of other facts. From it, facts about what we have reason to believe, or what beliefs were justified or unjustified, or what belief were rational, followed, and that they bore a close resemblance to the kinds of norms proposed by epistemologists (in that they concerned things like evidence, coherence, truth, and the like). If all of this were true, then we would have very good reason for identifying the epistemic domain with this constitutive norm and those that followed from it.

The first and most basic question, then, is whether belief is subject to a constitutive norm like [For all propositions  $p$ , a belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true]. What evidence do we have to believe this claim? One possible answer to this question is that it is simply intuitively plausible that beliefs are correct if and only if they are true, and incorrect if and only if they are false.<sup>51</sup> There is something very compelling in the idea that beliefs are defective when they are false. It seems to be a default assumption about belief, one that it is the pragmatist's responsibility to explain away.

We can point to a host of linguistic data to support the intuitive plausibility of beliefs being correct if and only if they are true, and incorrect otherwise:

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<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that the correctness norm does not, on its own, imply that false beliefs are *incorrect*. The status of a false belief might be indeterminate. I mention this only as a conceptual possibility, however: almost all defenders of the truth-norm take false belief to be incorrect.

- (A) Jean's belief that the storm would subside was incorrect—the snow is piling up as we speak.
- (B) I am afraid that our belief in the prognosis was correct. The disease will only get worse.
- (C) Respectfully, your belief is *mistaken*. Cats are not more intelligent than dogs.
- (D) I used to believe that that the right to property was pre-political. I now realize that was an *error*.

These sorts of commonplace statements seem perfectly acceptable. They seem to point to the conclusion that false beliefs are incorrect, as evidenced by (A), and that true beliefs are correct, as evidenced by (B). This is further supposed by statements like (C), which concern the normative status of a belief being “mistaken.” While a distinct term, there is arguably very little room between calling a belief incorrect and calling it mistaken. The same point applies to statements like (D), which concern whether a belief is an “error.” Again, the semantic daylight between a belief being an error and being incorrect seems slim.

However, there are couple of issues with moving from these linguistic observations to the conclusion that a norm like [This attitude is correct if and only if its content is true] is a constitutive norm of belief. For one, there is *other* linguistic evidence to suggest that a belief can be correct even if it false. Consider:

- (E) Even though your belief was false, it was the correct thing to believe. You couldn't have known any better.
- (F) Even though your belief in about the election results ended up being true, it was not the correct thing to believe at the time: all the polls suggested that the other candidate was going to win.

(G) In spite of the evidence, the father believed that his daughter was innocent, out of love. And for a father, that was the correct thing to believe (even though, in the end, his daughter was guilty).

These claims are cogent and familiar. They indicate two ways in which we are willing to categorize false beliefs as correct. In (E), it is implied that the addressee believed what the evidence suggested, even though the evidence was misleading, and the proposition it supported was false. In such a case, it seems perfectly appropriate to say that that was the correct thing to believe. In (F), it is implied that the addressee did not believe that the evidence suggested, but and that this was responsible for the belief being incorrect, even though it turned out to be true. And in (G), we see the ascription of correctness *in spite of* the evidence, and independently of the truth or falsity of the proposition believed: a father simply believes his daughter his innocent out of love. So it is far from clear that intuition, or at least linguistic practice, support the idea that beliefs are correct if and only if they are true.

A proponent of this particular correctness-norm might observe at this point that there is an important difference between the sentences (A) – (D) and (E) – (G). In (A) – (D), it is the beliefs themselves that are judged correct, incorrect, mistaken, and erroneous. In (E) – (G), however, what is strictly being predicated correct or incorrect is the *thing to believe*. In the former type of case, the *state of believing* is the target of evaluation. In the latter type of case, it is believing construed as a *deliberative option*. By ‘deliberative option’, I mean to pick out the same sort of thing that is picked out by the phrase ‘thing to do’ in a statement like ‘Catching and releasing the mouse in the house is the thing to do’: the emphasis here is on the status of the belief as something that one might adopt among other possibilities. Calling an option like that ‘correct’, then, is closer to calling it *what you ought to do or believe* — a deontic fact that is

explanatorily downstream from the more basic facts about the correctness or incorrectness of belief-states themselves, which are features in (A) – (D).

Of course, examples like (G), where the option in question seems to be correct for a reason totally independent of the truth or falsity of the proposition, are not plausibly downstream consequences of a truth-correctness norm. But even setting this aside, the idea that the epistemic domain is defined by these constitutive norms of the *state* of believing, rather than the *option* of believing, is tenuous, for two additional reasons. First, the distinction between the *state* of believing and the *option* of believing are not as clearly distinct as the proposal requires. While there is a distinction between *coming to believe* a proposition and the state of believing it that results from this, it is not clear that the options referred to in statements like ‘Even though your belief was false, it was the correct thing to believe. You couldn’t have known any better’ are options concerning what to *come to believe*: they seem straightforwardly to refer to the state of believing a proposition, conceived as one option among others. The linguistic observation cannot do the necessary work in clearly separating two types of correctness for the objection to get off the ground.

More importantly, there is a better explanation available for why correctness in statements like (A) – (D) pertain to truth and falsity. We do not need to maintain that there is a constitutive norm that applies to belief: a less committal view is available. For in situations in which (A) – (D) can be plausibly imagined to have a place, the speaker almost certainly has an *interest* in the question of the truth of the proposition involved. Consider statement (A): ‘Jean’s belief that the storm would subside was incorrect—the snow is piling up as we speak.’ We can imagine this being uttered over the phone to a spouse as the snow accumulates outside the window. Perhaps the speaker is expressing annoyance that their neighbor, Jean, told the speaking

something false. Statement (C) — ‘Respectfully, your belief is mistaken. Cats are not more intelligent than dogs.’ — is most easily imagined as part of an argument between two persons over whether cats or dogs are more intelligent. Presumably, both parties to the disagreement are interested in getting to the truth of the matter, or of persuading the other party of the truth. The primary concern here is not with the normative status of the belief, but with the truth or falsity of its content. It seems plausible that, in these kinds of cases, ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ are nearly intersubstitutable with ‘true’ and ‘false’, given the context. The speakers do not need to be committed to truth being the constitutive standard of belief in order to make these kinds of statements: all it takes is caring about whether a proposition is true, or assuming that the believer being spoken of or the audience of the statement is so-interested.

A more general problem arises for this kind of intuitions-based approach to vindicating constitutive norms of belief, one that does not simply concern the truth norm. The linguistic data concerning when we are inclined to judge a belief correct, permissible, or supported by reason are simply neutral on the metaphysical status of the norms they support. Even if we found no exceptions to the generalization [For all propositions  $p$ , a belief that  $p$  is correct if and only if  $p$  is true] in our intuitions about particular cases, this would not help us decide whether the explanation for this universal normative truth was to be found in the nature of belief itself. It therefore seems that the intuitive or linguistic data do not lend much support to the idea that belief is partly constituted by an “epistemic” norm. We need to look elsewhere for that support.

#### **4.2. Explaining Other Normative Facts about Belief**

The first approach to supporting the idea that belief was constituted by an epistemic norm was to appeal to intuitions and linguistic evidence that we do, in fact, apply that norm to belief. However, this is not the most robust approach: after all, even if we could show that it is intuitive

that, say, true beliefs are correct and false beliefs are incorrect, this would in no way support the idea that a norm of correctness is *constitutive* of belief. A stronger argument is needed for that metaphysical conclusion.

Ralph Wedgwood (2002) has employed a different strategy, which will be the focus of this section. The argument is an inference to the best explanation, one that explains the purported universality and necessity of *other* norms that apply to belief — for example, the norms that state under what conditions a belief is *rational* — in terms of a constitutive norm of belief.

This requires some unpacking. According to Wedgwood, there are some normative facts of the form *for all beliefs B, if B has property F, then B has normative status N*. These are *universal* normative facts. Wedgwood does not specify a fact of this form, but assumes that such facts exist. So, for example, he assumes there is some F such that, for all beliefs B, if B has F, then B is rational. Furthermore, at least some of these universal normative facts are *necessarily true*. So, for example: it might be a necessary truth that, if a belief is supported by the evidence, then the belief is rational. The first step of Wedgwood's argument is to assert the existence of these kinds of normative facts.

The second step in the argument is to note that, if these necessary universal normative facts are (at least partly) explained in terms of some *other* normative fact about belief, and this other normative fact about belief is not itself (partly) explained by any other normative fact, then this latter normative fact is part of the essence or nature of belief. Furthermore, if this fundamental normative fact can explain *all* necessary universal normative facts about belief, then it is a “standard of correctness” of belief: that is what it is for belief to have a standard of correctness, and what distinguishes the normative property *correct* from other normative properties.

The third step in the argument is to show that the norm *a belief is correct if and only if it is true* does, in fact, explain some necessary universal norms of belief. Wedgwood goes on to explain two such kinds of norms: norms of rationality and norms of knowledge. What makes a belief rational, for example, is explained in *instrumental* terms. A belief counts as rational when it is, or would be, arrived at on the basis of a rule that, if followed, is a reliable means of satisfying the truth-norm.<sup>52</sup> This is why, say, facts about what makes a belief rational concern the evidence in favor of the proposition believed: believing in accordance with the evidence is a reliable way of believing a proposition if and only if the proposition is true.

This is only the barest sketch of Wedgwood's argument for the truth-norm, but it is all we need to put ourselves in a position to evaluate it as part of an answer to the demarcation question. Can a normative constitutivist account like this establish the existence of a distinctive epistemic domain?

Let us assume, with Wedgwood, that there *are* universal norms of belief: that is, there are at least some normative facts of the form *for all beliefs B, if B has property F, then B has normative status N*.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, suppose that at least some of these normative facts are *necessary*: they are not true because, for example, all human beings, as a matter of contingent fact, desire that all beliefs have some property. In order to show that there are constitutive norms of belief, one would have to show that each of these necessary and universal norms are best explained by some further norm or norms for belief that are also universal and necessary. What is more, in order to be part of an "epistemic" domain, the necessary and universal norms that are

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<sup>52</sup> The actual account is that belief is rational just in case it's formed on the basis of a rule that it is *rational* to believe is a reliable means to satisfying the fundamental epistemic norm (276). I have omitted this aspect of the view in order to avoid raising issues of circularity or regress, which are inessential for the purposes of the current argument.

<sup>53</sup> This is a meaningful assumption. It rules out *particularism* about certain normative statuses for belief. See Gert 2008 for an defense of particularism about reasons for belief.

explained by this more fundamental norm would have to be sufficiently “epistemic” in character: they would have to pertain to things like evidence, knowledge, and truth.

However, it is far from clear that any necessary and universal norm of belief is “epistemic” in this way. Consider the following norms:

(Charity) Necessarily, for all beliefs, if a belief is charitable towards another person, and the evidence for the proposition is inconclusive, there is reason to have that belief.

(Pleasure) Necessarily, for all beliefs, if a belief would cause pleasure, there is reason to have that belief.

(Trust) Necessarily, for all beliefs, if a belief is necessary for facilitating social trust, there is reason to have that belief.

We do not have to endorse all three of these norms in order to see the basic *dialectical* problem here. These sorts of norms for belief are the kinds that are endorsed by various stripes of pragmatists. They have some prima facie plausibility. And they do not seem at all connected to or derivable from a truth-norm, or any sort of ‘epistemic’ norm. By attempting to show that the truth-norm is constitutive of belief, and therefore capable of defining an epistemic constitutive domain, we have had to appeal to a select subset of norms of belief that it might explain.

The constitutivist reply to the demarcation question would therefore have to show why *all* purported pragmatist norms for belief are not genuine universal, necessary norms, and that *all* universal, necessary norms for belief can be explained by a constitutive norm of belief.

Effectively, this makes the constitutivist strategy for demarcating the epistemic domain hang on the resolution of first-order normative questions about belief: a question we will address in the next chapter. For now, we can make the preliminary observation that the prospects look dim, for

all it takes for this constitutivist strategy to fail is the existence of a *single* universal and necessary norm that cannot be explained by the purported constitutive norm of belief.

A defender of the constitutivist approach to demarcating epistemic norms might remind us at this point, however, that they did not claim that *all* norms that apply to belief are derivable from the constitutive norm of belief: only those that are necessary and universal. An advocate of this approach might claim, therefore, that all universal and necessary norms of belief are derivable from the truth norm, but that “practical” norms are not, because they are contingent, and therefore do not follow from the nature of belief. According to this kind of approach, the following “practical” norms might still be genuine norms of belief:

(Contingent Charity) For all beliefs, if a belief is charitable towards another person, and the evidence for the proposition is inconclusive, there is reason to have that belief.

(Contingent Pleasure) For all beliefs, if a belief would cause pleasure, there is reason to have that belief.

(Contingent Trust) For all beliefs, if a belief is necessary for facilitating social trust, there is reason to have that belief.

These norms are contingent, so the argument goes, and only apply to belief in virtue of some conative attitudes that persons happen to hold: wanting to be the subject of charitable interpretation, or valuing pleasure, or desiring the things that social trust makes possible, for example. In the absence of these contingent conative states, the norms have no purchase on belief. There is thus still an important difference between epistemic and practical norms of belief: the former are grounded in the constitutive norms of belief, such as the truth norm, while practical norms are not.

There are two problems with this proposal. The first is that, even granting that the above contingent norms depends for their legitimacy on the existence of certain conative states, we can make them necessary by building in these conative states into the norms themselves:

(Conative Charity) Necessarily, if a person wants to be charitably interpreted, then if a belief is charitable towards that person, and the evidence for the proposition is inconclusive, there is reason to have that belief.

(Conative Pleasure) Necessarily, for all beliefs, if a person values pleasure, then if a belief would make that person happy, there is reason for that person to have that belief.

(Conative Trust) Necessarily, for all beliefs, if a person desires social trust, then if a belief is necessary for facilitating social trust, there is reason to have that belief.

These norms have the same form as those purportedly explained by the norm of correctness. As such, if they are genuine norms on belief, then they are equally good candidates for being the kinds of norms that ought to be explained by the nature of belief. This parity brings us back to the same dialectical position as before: in order to show that the epistemic domain is the domain of belief's own standards, it has to be shown that these "practical" norms are not genuine norms of belief.

One might object to this characterization of the dialectic, however. After all, the above necessary normative claims all advert to some conative states. While they concern belief, and are both necessary and universal, it seems we can explain them by appealing to more fundamental normative facts about these *conative states*, rather than belief. It is because there is (defeasible) reason to pursue what we desire that (Conative Trust) is true, for example; this more fundamental norm of *desire* explains why (Conative Trust) is what explains it, not a fundamental norm of belief. We can still distinguish, therefore, between belief's own epistemic standards and the

practical standards that apply from “the outside,” in virtue of the norms of desire, or intention, or some other non-doxastic state.

The second reason for doubting the separatist proposal is also a reply to this objection. Upon further reflection, there is little reason to suppose that the “practical” norms that might apply to belief are any more dependent on conative states like desire than the norms that seem more straightforwardly derivable from the truth-norm. The suggestion so far has been that there can be a reason to, say, believe charitably of another person only if there is some standing desire, want, or wish to be charitably interpreted. The second half of this suggestion is that norms derivable from the truth-norm are *not* like this: they are necessary and universal, and in no way require that, for example, the believer desire to satisfy the truth-norm, or any norm explained by it. But there seems to be little reason to believe in this asymmetry.

Consider (Conative Trust), which is the claim that, necessarily, if a person desires social trust, then if a belief is necessary for facilitating social trust, there is reason to have that belief. Why should the existence of this reason for belief require the *desire* for social trust? Why are the goodness of social trust and the ways certain kinds of beliefs are necessary for it, not themselves sufficient for the existence of the reason? One might suggest that a good like social trust is only good because it is desired, but the very same thought can be applied to the goodness of true belief, as well. Skepticism about the desire-independence of the goodness of social trust is no more or less warranted than skepticism about the desire-independence of the goodness of truth. We cannot drive a wedge between them in order to show that some “epistemic” norms are grounded in the nature of belief, and others are not.

To sum up: we cannot establish that an “epistemic” norm like the truth-norm is constitutive of belief by appealing to its ability to explain other necessary and universal

normative facts about belief. That strategy fails, because it presupposes that the less fundamental “epistemic” norms of belief — that is, the ones most apparently derivable from the truth-norm — are genuine, necessary, universal norms of belief, while “practical” norms are not. Any way of defending this presupposition falls into one two problems: it either erases the very distinction between epistemic and practical domains for belief that we were attempting to understand, or posits an implausible asymmetry between the grounds of such “epistemic” and “practical” norms for belief. And if we cannot establish that an epistemic norm like the truth-norm is constitutive of belief, we cannot use it define a distinctive epistemic domain.

### **4.3. Explaining Psychological Facts about Belief**

We cannot establish that belief is subject to an epistemic norm by considering what other norms it might explain. However, this sort of inference to the best explanation is not the only one that normative constitutivists about belief have offered. Some have also attempted to show that certain *psychological* phenomena can be explained by the fact that belief is subject to a constitutive epistemic norm. This strategy has an advantage over the previous one, especially with respect to answering the demarcation question. Explaining other normative facts about belief in terms of a constitutive norm turned out to be question-begging in a certain way: it illicitly assumed that all necessary and universal norms of belief were “epistemic” in character. A psychological approach makes no such assumption.

So, what psychological aspects of belief can be explained by a constative norm? The primary phenomenon discussed by advocates of this kind of constitutivism is *transparency*,

which is a feature of deliberation about what to believe.<sup>54</sup> Here is how Nishi Shah describes the phenomenon:

[...] the deliberative question whether to believe that *p* inevitably gives way to the factual question whether *p*, because the answer to the latter question will determine the answer to the former. In the sense I have in mind, deliberating whether to believe that *p* entails intending to arrive at belief as to whether *p*. If my answering a question is going to count as deliberating whether to believe that *p*, then I must intend to arrive at belief as to whether *p* just by answering that question. I can arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether *p*; however, I cannot arrive at the belief just by answering the question whether it is in my interest to hold it. (Shah 2006, 482)

There are three separable elements to transparency as Shah has described it here. The first is a *phenomenal* component: when consciously deliberating about whether to believe a proposition,<sup>55</sup> the question of whether to believe a proposition “gives way” to the question of whether the proposition is true; deliberating about the first question leads to deliberating about the second.

The second element of transparency is *motivational*: when deliberating about whether or not to believe a proposition, one necessarily intends to *only* arrive at belief about whether the proposition by answering the question whether the proposition is true or false. This intention excludes arriving at a deliberative conclusion on any other basis than answering whether the proposition is true or not. As a corollary, practical considerations, such as the consequences or goodness of having the belief, cannot play a motivational role in conscious deliberation about whether to believe a proposition. This does not preclude those considerations from having any

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<sup>54</sup> There are different phenomena that fall under the heading of ‘transparency’. The transparency of the deliberative normative question of what *to believe* should be distinguished from the transparency of the deliberative question of what *one believes*. Most of the discussion of transparency has focused on the self-knowledge variant: see, for example, Barnett 2016, Evans 1982 (225), Gertler 2011, Moran 2001, and Setiya 2012. For discussion of the normative variant: see Sullivan-Basset 2018.

<sup>55</sup> This is arguably not the best interpretation of the question we typically ask in doxastic deliberation, because it seems to imply that the choice is binary, between believing a proposition or believing its negation, or between believing a proposition or not believing it, when in fact, the decision is between believing the proposition, suspending judgment about it, and believing its negation.

effect on belief whatsoever. A desire for a proposition to be true might subconsciously make a person more susceptible to evidence in its favor, or motivate a person to make the proposition more likely to be true through intervention in the world. But because conscious deliberation about whether to believe a proposition is necessarily accompanied by the intention to deliberate in a certain way — by deliberating about whether the proposition is true — a person cannot take considerations that do not bear on the proposition's truth or falsity to be relevant to whether to believe that proposition.

How can a constitutive norm of belief explain this psychological phenomenon? Shah's argument appeals to the *concept* of belief. In consciously deliberating about whether to believe a proposition, I apply the concept *belief* in thought. Now suppose that it is a conceptual truth about belief that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. If this truth-norm is part of the concept of belief, and I apply the concept of belief in deliberating about whether to believe a proposition, then, so the argument goes, I can only take certain kinds of considerations to be relevant to whether to believe that proposition. If I were to take the fact that believing the proposition would make me happy as a reason to believe it, then I could not take myself to be deliberating about whether to have an attitude that is correct if and only if it is true, because the happiness caused by having the belief is independent of its truth. Therefore, were I to take this consideration to be relevant, I could not take myself to be deliberating about what to *believe*. It follows that, whenever we deliberate about what to believe, we can only employ considerations that we take to be relevant to a proposition's truth or falsity. Doxastic deliberation thus requires an intention to only settle deliberating by deliberating about whether the proposition is true or false. And in the absence of an alternative explanation for transparency, we should conclude that it *is* part of the concept of belief that it is correct if and only if its content is true. Assuming that anything

that is conceptually true of *belief* is also constitutive of belief, this means that there is a constitutive norm of belief, one that can be used to demarcate the epistemic domain.

Shah uses this argument, with some additional premises about the relationship between deliberation, motivational reasons, and normative reasons, to conclude that only evidence for or against a proposition can be a normative reason for belief. This substantive thesis about reasons is not the focus of this inquiry, however. One could argue for this evidentialist conclusion simply on the basis of transparency and a view about the relationship between what considerations can be used in deliberation and what can be a reason for belief; one need not say *anything* about the constitutive norm of belief in order to do this. The central question, instead, is whether the epistemic domain can be defined in terms of a constitutive norm of belief, and whether transparency gives us good reason for thinking that belief has such a norm.

Let us take it for granted that transparency, as Shah has described it, is a genuine psychological phenomenon. In particular, grant that the *motivational* aspect of transparency is genuine: the only considerations that can play an efficacious role in deliberating about whether to believe a proposition — that is, the only ones that can contribute to actually arriving at a doxastic conclusion as a result of the deliberation — are considerations that a deliberator takes as relevant to whether the proposition is true. The key move in Shah's argument is that we apply the concept of belief when deliberating about what to believe, and that the normative content of this concept can explain this motivational fact. How does it do so? Well, if a belief being correct if and only if it is true is part of the concept of belief, and we apply this concept whenever we deliberate about what to believe, then anyone who engages in doxastic deliberation therefore *accepts* that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. And if one accepts that a belief is correct if and only if it is true, then the only considerations that can be efficacious in reasoning about whether to have a belief

will have to be those that the subject takes to be relevant to the belief's truth. If other considerations could be deliberatively efficacious, then you would not count as really accepting the truth-norm, and you therefore would not count as deliberating about what to believe, since it is constituted by that norm. That is why deliberating about what to believe precludes those kinds of non-truth-related considerations.

Built into this explanation is a specific conception of the relationship between accepting a norm and deliberation. The explanation appeals to the idea that, if I accept a norm for an attitude, then necessarily, if I deliberate about whether to have that attitude, the only considerations that can be efficacious — that can actually get me to arriving at the attitude as a result of deliberation — must be taken by me to bear on the question of whether the attitude satisfies the norm.<sup>56</sup>

However, it is unclear that this principle provides a full explanation for the motivational phenomenon of transparency. The problem is that it appears that one can accept *conflicting* norms of belief.

Suppose that I have just finished reading through some self-help books, and I become tragically convinced that correct beliefs about myself are those that make myself more likely to succeed in my goals and contribute to my self-realization. I then being to deliberate about what to believe about myself. It now appears that I will apply two different norms to my deliberation: the norm provided by the concept of belief, and the norm provided by my sojourn into the literature of self-help. Despite accepting the norm of self-help, however, the only considerations

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<sup>56</sup> This requirement is *not* equivalent to what Shah calls the “deliberative constraint” on reasons, which is that “R is a reason for X to believe that p only if R is capable of disposing X towards believing that p in the way characteristic of R functioning as a premise in doxastic deliberation” (2006, 487). The view under consideration is about the relationship between reasons and dispositions for considerations to function as a premise in reasoning, but between accepting a norm and those dispositions. While Shah provides an explicit argument for the deliberative constraint, he does not provide one for the principle being discussed here.

that are efficacious when deliberating about myself pertain to the truth about me; the practical considerations cannot get a grip.

Does the fact that the concept of belief partly includes a truth-norm explain this? No, it does not. Employing the concept of belief implies that I accept this norm, but it implies nothing about what kind of priority this norm has over other norms I might accept about beliefs that are *not* grounded in the concept of belief. The current explanation of transparency assumes that norms that follow from the concept of belief have a kind of special status among other norms, because they are purportedly applied in every instance in which I deliberate about what to believe. But there seems to be no explanation for why, when *other* norms of belief are applied in deliberation, the one that follows from the concept of belief “wins out.”

A defender of this constitutivist explanation of transparency might reply at this point that, because the truth-norm is a *conceptual* truth about belief, it is impossible to accept any norm concerning belief that conflicts with it. I cannot really accept the norm suggested by the self-help literature because that norm employs the concept of belief, and that concept comes with normative consequences that are inconsistent with the self-help norm. If it is part of the concept of belief that a belief is correct if and only if it is true, then accepting the self-help norm would amount to accepting a norm that says “a belief about oneself, which is correct if and only if it is true, is correct if and only if it makes oneself more likely to succeed in one’s goals and self-realization.” That articulation of the norm is inconsistent, because there are true beliefs about oneself that do not make one more likely to succeed, and there are false beliefs that do. One cannot accept a norm that is inconsistent in this way. So norms that are part of the concept of belief *do* have a privileged role to play in doxastic deliberation; any accepted norm that is inconsistent with it will be incoherent, and therefore incapable of being efficacious in reasoning.

However, this objection makes a certain assumption about conceptual content that we have no reason to endorse. The assumption is that, by possessing the concept *belief*, any application of that concept in thought—whether it is in deliberating about what to believe or applying a norm of belief as a part of that deliberation—is also an application of the normative component of that concept. If one applies the self-help norm, one must also apply the conceptual norm of belief in that very application, because a concept that feature in the norm ‘belief’ has a norm as part of its conceptual content.

But it is not in general true that, when applying or entertaining a norm in thought, the normative content of any concepts involved in that norm are also applied or entertained. That normative conceptual content might be particularly sophisticated, or not salient to the user of the concept. This is clearest in the case of conceptual normative truths that are entailed by the other conceptual normative truths. Suppose that, as Shah suggests, the fact that belief is correct if and only if it is true implies that only evidence can be a reason for belief. This inference might not be obvious, and someone with a grasp of the concept of belief might not be in a position to see it. It therefore seems conceivable to endorse a norm that is inconsistent with this evidentialist truth. And if the reason this is possible is that a person is not in a position to see this conceptual truth, I see no reason to rule out the possibility of not being in a position to see the conceptual truth about belief that entails it: the truth-correctness norm. This is especially true if the concept *belief* is being applied as part of the application of a norm that has different and inconsistent content than the truth-norm: such a person is clearly not attending to this aspect of the belief’s concept’s content in applying the self-help norm. And if it is possible to apply this sort of norm in thought while engaged in doxastic deliberation, then the explanatory gap remains: we have no reason to

believe the status of the truth-norm as a *conceptual* normative truth has any special motivational consequences.

To recap: one reason to think there is a constitutive norm of belief that can define the epistemic domain is that such a norm could explain certain psychological phenomena: in particular, transparency. However, transparency cannot be explained by such a constitutive norm, because the status of that norm as a conceptual truth is not sufficient for explaining why conceptual norms of belief, but not other kinds of norms of belief, are solely efficacious in reasoning about what to believe.

## **5. The Function of Belief**

So far, we have considered ways of demarcating the epistemic domain that appeal to norms that are constitutive of belief. Those ways of answering the demarcation question failed, because they could not establish that there was such a norm or establish that the norm was “epistemic” in a way that renders it a suitable subject for epistemology. In this section, we will consider the other major form of constitutivism about belief. *Descriptive* constitutivism takes there to be some facts about the nature or essence of belief — a goal or function, for example — that grounds its own set of norms.

There are many varieties of view that fall under this description. In the next section, I will consider one prominent example. However, the issues raised for this view will generalize to other forms of descriptive constitutivism.

### **5.1. Proper-Functionalism**

Not all feature of the nature of belief ground a domain of evaluation. The fact that belief is essentially a mental attitude does not, on its own, ground a way of appraising beliefs, or

anything else. But other features of belief are more promising. Perhaps the most promising is the idea that belief has a *function*. Functions seem naturally associated with a way of evaluating the bearer of the function. A bearer of a function can perform that function well or poorly. Different properties of the bearer might be evaluated differently, depending on how they can and do contribute to the bearer performing its function. And so on.

The idea that *belief* has a function is not new. William James emphasized that belief was a natural phenomenon that served a specific purpose in the cognitive life of human agents.<sup>57</sup> It is an attractive idea for some because the notion of function appears reducible to other, naturalistically acceptable kinds of fact, such as causation.

Most recently, and most pertinent for our purposes, Kate Nolfi has argued for a way of understanding *all* epistemic norms in terms of the function of belief:

... simply by virtue of being the kind of mental attitude that they are, beliefs aim at being well-suited to perform their particular proper function. The norms of ideal cognitive functioning with respect to belief regulation are just those norms conformity with which most effectively results in believers like us (i.e. believers equipped with the kind of equipment that we have, operating in the kind of environment in which we operate) having beliefs that achieve this aim. (Nolfi 2018, 183)

This conception of belief is centered around the idea of a proper function: that is, a function or aim that characterizes when a possessor of that function or aim is operating properly or improperly, well or poorly, with respect to that function. But these sorts of normative statuses—proper or improper, functionally poorly or functioning well—are not the only or even primary normative properties that a proper function for belief explains. It can also purportedly explain, for one, what an *epistemic reason* for belief is. Norms of “ideal cognitive functioning” are functions (in the mathematical sense) that specify transitions from certain doxastic inputs —

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<sup>57</sup> The function of cognition is discussed extensively in James 1940/1890. As to be expected of a pragmatist, the focus is on belief’s connection to action and behavior.

perceptual states, other beliefs — to doxastic outputs — beliefs, suspensions of judgment. Norms of ideal cognitive function specify transitions that, if conformed to by an agent, will make it most likely that the proper function (in the teleological sense) of belief is promoted. An (objective) epistemic reason for a belief is just an input to a norm of ideal cognitive function that has that belief as an output.

This is just a sketch of one kind of proper-functionalism, but it will suffice. What is more important to see is how this kind of approach promises to be able to demarcate an epistemic domain, a special class of norms. An epistemic reason, on this account, is a special kind of reason that is defined in terms of its relation to the proper function of belief. While there might be other kinds of reasons for belief that are non-evidential in character, those reasons are not related in the appropriate way to the ideals of cognitive functioning, conformity to which promotes the proper function of belief. Based on what the proper function of belief is, we can draw substantive conclusions about what kinds of considerations can be specifically epistemic reasons and what kinds cannot.

How does this look in practice? One way Nolfi puts this view of belief to work is by showing how only *evidential* considerations can count as epistemic reasons for belief. For Nolfi, the function of a belief is to serve as a kind of *map* for a creature capable of action, by which it can navigate its environment and successfully pursue its ends (2015, 197). While this description is metaphorical, it conveys that belief functions to *guide* action in a particular way: by providing information about the environment in a particular way, one that ensures that the agent will be successful in pursuit of the agent's ends, whatever they may be.

How does this function explain the evidential constraint on epistemic reasons? Like a map, in order for beliefs to guide an agent to their ends successfully, they have to be “tethered to

reality” (2018, 195). This does not mean that they have to be perfectly accurate or true; maps will occasionally distort certain proportions for the sake of easy navigation, and certain kinds of evidential distortion regarding, say, one’s own abilities might make for more successful action. However, a cognitive system that employs such distortions must still make them distortions of *reality*; that is what distinguishes them from outright fabrication. If beliefs are exclusively responsive to evidence as reasons, the cognitive system is prevented from being so inaccurate that the agent who relies on it will likely act in ways that undermine the agent’s ends. Therefore, the norms of ideal cognitive function must take evidence, and nothing else, as input: that is the best way to ensure that an agent acts successfully.

## **5.2. Proper Function as Biological Function**

So far, we discussed a way for defining the epistemic domain in terms of belief’s function, and how to derive substantive normative conclusions from that function. However, we have not said much about what it *is* for a belief to have a “proper function.” The implicit understanding so far is that having a proper function is not a normative property: it is not to be subject to, say, a constitutive norm of correctness. Rather, it is a non-normative property that itself explains some normative properties of the bearer of the function. But what sorts of non-normative properties does having a proper function consist in?

The most obvious suggestion here is to turn to a descriptive science that often employs the notion of function: biology. If we think of belief as a biological category, like other natural activities (respiration) or organs (the lung), we can think of its function in the same way we think of the function of these activities or organs. Just as the lung functions to exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide gasses in the animal that possesses it, the function of belief, in the very same

sense of ‘function’, is to help guide an animal around its environment by serving as an informational map that allows it to reliably pursue its ends.

There is an ongoing debate about how to precisely characterize the notion of a biological function. For the purposes of this chapter, I will assume that an *etiological* account of biological function is correct: roughly, a biological function of some organism’s trait is a potential property of a trait whose instantiation in previous token instances of that trait in ancestors of the organism explains why that organism possesses it.<sup>58</sup> Assuming the mechanism for the persistence of the trait is natural selection, the function of a trait will be whatever aspect of that trait contributed to ancestors’ survival and reproduction. There are some important consequences for thinking about the function of belief in this way. The first is that it makes the function of belief a largely empirical question. The function of belief, or the belief-forming process, will be whatever feature of it that contributed to the survival and reproduction of the organism’s ancestors who possessed it.

The second consequence, which spells trouble for the proper-functionalist about the epistemic domain, follows from the first. Return to Nolfi’s claim that the evidential constraint — a constraint on epistemic reasons endorsed by many epistemologists — follows from the function of belief. The function of belief, according to Nolfi, is to serve as a guide that allows creatures to effectively pursue their ends, whatever they may be. The *content-neutrality* of an agent’s ends is extremely important for this kind of view: it is what explains why the evidential constraint on reasons applies to *all* beliefs, regardless of their content. However, it is not plausible that the biological function of belief is to serve as a map for the pursuit of an agent’s

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<sup>58</sup> For influential etiological accounts of function, see Millikan 1984, Mitchell 1989, and Neander 1991. The arguments of this section will not depend on accepting this particular interpretation of biological function. As we will see, any account of biological function that makes a trait’s function depend on what aspects of the trait are *adaptive* or explanatory of a creature’s survival or reproduction will fall prey to the problem.

ends, *whatever those ends may be*. After all, only certain ends are relevant for the survival and reproduction of an organism. The fact that a cognitive system served as a map for furthering an agent's goal of killing itself will play no role in the explanation of why it exists in that agent's descendants; pursuing that end only makes it less likely that the agent will persist and reproduce. If the cognitive system *does* have the biological function of serving as a kind of map or guide for an agent, it will only be in the pursuit of certain ends: those that make the agent likely to reproduce and pass the inheritance of the cognitive system onto its descendants. The acquisition of food, water, shelter, mates, and the avoidance of environmental dangers are ends might belong on this list, but ends that do not contribute in this way, like suicide, will not.

One might object at this point that, even if the biological function of belief is to help the agent pursue certain ends, rather than any end whatever, the most effective way for a cognitive system to serve this function is for the rules of belief change to which it conforms to be content-neutral, and for the inputs to be restricted to evidence. After all, the truth of nearly any proposition can potentially bear on decision relevant to an agent's chances at achieving its "biological" ends — that is, those relevant to its survival and reproduction. A system that only made some propositions sensitive to evidence would therefore risk being untethered from reality in a domain where getting at the truth turns out to be crucial for survival, while a system that was content-indiscriminate would not.

This is an empirical claim that the present inquiry is not in a position to evaluate. It is an open possibility that a cognitive system that did not only take evidence as input for every type of proposition would be selected-for over one that did. However, the main problem with this suggestion is not its empirical implausibility, but with some illicit assumptions it makes about explanation.

According to Nolfi, an epistemic reason is an input to a norm of ideal cognitive functioning. A norm of ideal cognitive functioning is a norm that, if conformed to by the agent, would promote the function of belief in “typical” circumstances for the kind of agent in question. Now consider the two following norms:

(Content Neutral) If E is evidence for proposition  $p$ , then, *ceteris paribus*, become more confident in  $p$ .

(Content Restricted) If E is evidence for proposition  $p$  and whether  $p$  is true bears on your biological ends, then, *ceteris paribus*, become more confident in  $p$ .

Remember that, for Nolfi’s constitutivism, it is only the effects of *conforming* with a rule in normal conditions that are relevant to determining whether it is an ideal of cognitive functioning. Now consider a creature that conforms with (Content Neutral). Necessarily, a creature that conforms with (Content Neutral) will *also* conform to (Content Restricted). So which rule is the one that the ideal norm of cognitive functioning? Arguably, (Content Restricted) is the better candidate. Why? Because the only reason a creature that conforms to (Content Neutral) secures its biological ends is in virtue of conforms to (Content Restricted). Any instance of conforming to (Content Neutral) that is *not* an instance of conforming to (Content Restricted) plays no role in the explanation for a creature’s effectively furthering its biological ends.

However, if (Content Restricted) is the norm of ideal cognitive function, then many beliefs will simply not be assessable for epistemic support. Believing a proposition that does *not* pertain to an agent’s biological ends is not assessable by (Content Restricted): it only makes claims about the normative properties of beliefs in survival-relevant propositions. Therefore, if an agent believes a proposition that does not bear on survival, whether it is based on evidence for the proposition or not, it will not count as being supported or unsupported by epistemic reasons;

its epistemic normative status will be indeterminate, the beliefs themselves mere byproducts of a system whose function is to oversee beliefs in more “important” propositions. This does not conform with any received conception of how the epistemic domain should be: whether a belief is capable being supported by epistemic reasons at all does not seem like the kind of thing that should depend on its subject-matter, especially on its relevance to a creature’s survival.

If we take the epistemic domain to be defined not by the function of belief, but by the cognitive system more generally, these sorts of problems are exacerbated. Suppose that the cognitive system includes not only mechanisms of belief-formation and revision, but systems for belief-recall, as well. A system that was more likely to store and recall beliefs that are relevant for pursuing biological ends than beliefs that are not relevant for pursuing those ends would be more epistemically valuable than a system that stored and recalled them at a single rate that lied somewhere between the two rates in the first system. But that does not seem like a kind of cognitive difference that has anything to do with epistemic norms; few would be willing to grant the relevant of that difference to epistemic assessments. A cognitive system that had more stored and accessible beliefs about matters relevant to biological ends would be rated as epistemically better than one than one that had fewer; but again, this does not seem like an epistemically important difference.

More generally, using biology as a guiding principle in thinking about epistemic norms seems to focus on the wrong kinds of facts. It is unclear whether biological functions ground genuinely normative domains. After all, statements about biological functions are just condensed statements about certain causal-historical facts. The “norms” that follow from them are also redescriptions of certain, other, causal facts: in essence, facts about what will promote properties

of certain traits, traits whose existence is explained by a creature's ancestors having that trait with that property.

Of course, whether such facts can amount to a normative domain is entirely up to our standards for what counts as a genuine normative domain. In the very least, we can say this: the relationship this kind of biological norm has for the deliberative question of what to believe, *tout court*, is the same as the relationship that biological facts about a heart has for the question of what to believe. The fact that the biological domain happens to pertain to *belief* gives the domain no more special significance for the deliberative question about what to believe: for all that has been said, being supported by epistemic reasons has no immediate consequences for whether it is supported by reasons in a way that settles what to believe. There is no reason to think, for example, that epistemic reasons in this sense *weigh* with or against other kinds of reasons in determining what there is reason, "all-things-considered," to believe. In spite of the fact that 'reason' features in both phrases, there is nothing else unifying the notion of an epistemic reason and an all-things-considered reason. Again, few epistemologists would accept this conception of the epistemic domain.<sup>59</sup>

### **5.3. Non-Biological Descriptive Constitutivism?**

So far, we have considered one variety of descriptive constitutivism: the kind that defines the epistemic domain in terms of the proper function of belief, or the cognitive system of which belief is a part. We looked at the most common way of understanding function, which was in biological terms. That kind of constitutivism turned out to be inadequate for demarcating a

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Feldman (2000) is one of the few epistemologists who explicitly defends the idea that there is no more genetic question about what one ought to believe that could be informed by facts about what one epistemically ought to believe.

distinctively epistemic domain, because the biological facts had neither the first-order normative consequences nor the proper kind of normativity to be a plausible candidate. But are there other kinds of descriptive constitutivism we might appeal to?

Unfortunately, the answer looks bleak. There seem to be few other ways of understanding constitutivism that would allow us to define the epistemic domain.

First, we can consider other kinds of function. We make function claims of non-biological entities all the time. We speak of tools and artifacts more generally having functions. We speak of institutions and social organizations having functions, as well as their policies and rules. We speak of certain uses of language having a function. And in all of these cases, evolutionary history plays no role in fixing what the function is. Moreover, these attributions of these kinds of function imply that there are ways for the bearer of the function to perform its function well, poorly, or not at all. It looks as if these kinds of functions can define a normative domain as well. Can we think of belief's function along similar lines?

The answer is 'no'. What unifies the various function-attributions in this list is the metaphysical dependence of their bearers on human intentions. Tools, institutions, and language are all things that depend for their existence on the existence of certain intentions. The precise mode of dependence is different in each case, of course: the way an object's being a tool requires intentions to be used in certain ways is not the same as the way an institution requires the collective intentions of a group of human beings. But in the absence of certain intentions towards the objects, none of these things exist.<sup>60</sup> The same cannot be said for belief. A belief does not exist, nor have a function, in virtue of, say, human beings intending to "use" beliefs in certain

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<sup>60</sup> A less committal claim is that the *function* of the objects depends upon the existence of certain intentions towards the objects, rather than the objects themselves. This has the same consequences for the prospect of defining the epistemic domain in terms of a non-biological function, so I will give it no further consideration.

ways. As a psychological state, it is the wrong kind of entity to be subject to that kind of function. As such, we cannot define the epistemic domain in terms of a non-biological function for belief.

Similar problems arise for related notions like *aim* and *purpose*. Even if they are not identical concepts to *function*, they are certainly very closely related. In some cases, philosophers have interpreted talk of the “aim” of belief in *normative* terms: to say that belief aims at truth, on this way of understanding ‘aim’, is just to say that it is correct if and only if it is true. But if we are not interpreting ‘aim’ in normative terms, it is hard to see how it is very different from ‘function’. One salient difference is that we speak quite readily of a person’s aims, but not their function (unless we are considering them under the guise of some social role). But this is not of much help, because ‘aim’ in such contexts is a matter of a person’s intentions or plans. Beliefs do not have intentions or plans, so they cannot have aims in this sense.

It seems, then, that there are few prospects for non-biological descriptive constitutivism as a way of demarcating the epistemic domain.

## **6. Conclusion**

If we want to demarcate the epistemic domain —a genuinely normative domain that has some special relationship to truth or knowledge, rather than moral or practical concerns — we cannot think of it as bound up with the nature of belief itself, or its own standards. Normative versions of constitutivism generally fail in this task, because we cannot establish that belief has the kinds of constitutive norms that would demarcate a genuinely epistemic domain. And descriptive versions of constitutivism fail, because we can neither establish that beliefs have the kind of function that would generate a genuinely epistemic domain, and because it is unclear whether such a domain is genuinely normative.

## Chapter Three: Partiality and Charity in Belief

### 1. Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have examined three competing accounts of the epistemic domain: the valuative, institutional, and constitutive. Each of these accounts was shown to be inadequate. There is no single value to which epistemologist's talk of an epistemic point of view might correspond. There is also no institution lying behind our talk of epistemic rationality and justification. And the nature of belief itself does not furnish distinctively epistemic standards. Given that there is no other species of domain normativity to which talk of epistemic rationality, reasons, and justification might plausibly refer, we are forced to conclude that there is no distinctive epistemic domain.

What follows from this? The most important consequence is that the purported conflict between epistemic and practical points of view on our beliefs is an illusion. Belief is not subject to two warring authorities, each with its own set of contradictory decrees. There is not, on the one hand, the question of what we epistemically ought to believe, and on the other, the question of what we practically ought to believe. The same goes for questions of justification, reasons, rationality, or virtue.

Because there are not two conflicting domains that apply to belief, there is also no further question of how to *resolve* this conflict. So, for example: there is no question of how to *weigh* practical and epistemic reasons for belief against and with one another when determining what we ought, all things considered, to believe, since the two species of reasons necessary to formulate that question do not exist.

But if there is no epistemic domain, where does that leave us? How should we answer the genuine normative questions that arise for our beliefs? And what are those genuine normative questions, if not questions of epistemic rationality and the like?

In the next section, I will answer this question, and forestall the most important objection to it. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to a substantive answer to the kind of normative question that I think philosophers (and non-philosophers) should be asking about belief. I will argue that, though the rejection of the epistemic domain does not lead us down the road to an all-consuming pragmatism, non-evidential considerations can occasionally play an important role in determining what we ought to believe: in particular, when it comes to beliefs about our fellow human beings.

## **2. Is Doxastic Rationality a Kind of Practical Rationality?**

As I suggested in the conclusion to the previous chapter, there *is* still a genuine normative question (or set of questions) for belief on which philosophical reflection might bear. It is not, of course, the question of what our epistemic duties are, or what we epistemically ought to believe, if we are construing those questions in the ways that many epistemologists have construed them. That was the upshot of the previous chapters of this dissertation.

It is natural to assume that, if we deny the existence of the epistemic domain, then the only kind of normative question we can ask about belief is whether it is *practically* rational, justified, and the like. And that might seem to be a troublesome consequence. It might seem to imply that believers should only pursue the truth when it would benefit them, or that a belief's rationality hinges entirely on the psychologies, preferences, and predilections of individual believers. In other words, it seems as if denying the epistemic domain puts us squarely on the road to *pragmatism* about belief — at least if we construe that as the view that the standards for

evaluating belief concern its usefulness rather than its truth. But these are mistakes. A denial of the epistemic domain does not commit us to any of these views. One way to see this is to think about what we might mean by a calling a belief “practically rational” once we jettison the notion of an epistemic domain. On any reasonable interpretation of that phrase, we are not committed to the view that practical rationality is the normative standard for belief.

As we noted earlier, ‘practical rationality’ and ‘epistemic rationality’ are sometimes meant to refer to the rationality *of action* and the rationality *of belief*, respectively. In that sense, it is of course nonsense to say that beliefs are practically rational. Denying the existence of an epistemic domain obviously does not commit us to such a view.

If we had a valuative conception of the epistemic domain in place, then we might say that a belief’s being practically rational was a matter of its being rational with respect to the non-epistemic value or values: love, beauty, happiness, and the like. But since there is no well-defined set of epistemic values, this conception of a belief’s being practically rational is just as suspect; without an epistemic domain, it loses its meaning. Denying the existence of the epistemic domain does not commit us to that sort of view, either.

A more general idea motivates the thought that denying the existence of the epistemic domain leads to unacceptable pragmatism. If there is no distinctively epistemic standard for belief—one that ignores considerations of interest and revolves solely around questions of evidence and truth—then there seems to be nothing normatively special about belief. We should evaluate it in whatever way we evaluate other, relevantly similar targets of rational evaluation, like our desires or preferences. Susanna Rinard (2017) has defended a position like this, and given it a name: Equal Treatment. It is the view that whatever standard we bring to bear on other rationally evaluable states should extend to belief as well: if we think that the decision-theoretic

account of practical rationality given above is appropriate for states like wearing a raincoat, it should just as well be appropriate for states like believing it will rain. If we are utilitarians about the rationality of being in such states, we should be utilitarians about belief. If we think that the categorical imperative is the fundamental principle for the evaluation of intentions, we should say that belief is subject to the very same fundamental principle. And so on. So even if decision theory for belief is not forced upon us by rejecting the existence of an epistemic domain, *some* such “practical” standard — that is, a standard we apply to these other rationally evaluable states — must also apply to belief. And that might look like an unacceptable form of pragmatism, one that blankets over the ways in which these states and beliefs, and the ways we evaluate them, differ.

Equal Treatment is a difficult position to evaluate because it can be made at various levels of generality. At some levels of generality, the denial of an epistemic domain *will* entail its truth. At others, it will not. Here is Rinard’s official statement of the thesis:

However the rationality of states like [wearing a raincoat] is determined, the rationality of any other state—in particular, any belief state—is determined in precisely the same way. (2017, 123)

Assuming that the sense of ‘determine’ here is metaphysical — that we are concerned with what makes states like wearing a raincoat rational or irrational — then Equal Treatment in effect states that facts about the rationality of belief are grounded in the very same *kinds* of facts as facts about the rationality of other rationally evaluable states. But a fact can be a fact of many different kinds, at many different levels of specificity. If we reject the epistemic domain, then all of these grounding facts will be of the kind *not concerning the epistemic domain*. But this negatively defined kind does not, I take it, vindicate Equal Treatment in any substantive way, nor in a way that makes the rationality of belief a kind of “practical” rationality.

More specific versions of Equal Treatment *would* collapse the rationality of belief into a kind of practical rationality. One version of Equal Treatment might state that beliefs, like all other rationally evaluable states, are rational only when and because they maximize expected utility. However, denying the existence of the epistemic domain commits us to no such thesis. Even if there is no epistemic domain, there still might be important differences between the standards that apply to belief and those that apply to other rationally evaluable states, differences significant enough to make an interesting version of Equal Treatment false.

I make these observations to make it clear that denying the epistemic domain does not open the gates to an “anything goes” version of pragmatism, one that makes the rationality of belief, or what we ought to believe, a matter of whatever best satisfies our desires. That being said, we have done little to show what sorts of standards do apply to belief, and in what ways they do differ from the rationality of action and other states, if they differ at all. In the remainder of this chapter, I hope to provide a partial answer to this question. In particular, I will examine whether *non-evidential* considerations can, in some circumstances, play a role in determining what one ought to believe, or what it is rational to believe, full stop.

Some recent discussions of this question have centered on whether *friendships* can license us to be partial in our beliefs about our friends in ways that outstrip the evidence. In the next section, I will review this discussion. In the following section, I will try to show why doxastic partiality is an illusion, but for reasons that show why there are plausibly *non-partial* or *universal* reasons to have beliefs about other people that are partly grounded in practical considerations.

### 3. Doxastic Partiality and Friendship

Friendships appear to generate demands on action, in the form of preferential treatment. This treatment is not limited to spending more time in the company of one's friends than of other people, though that might be considered a rather weak instance of it. We are also more likely to help our friends than strangers who are in similar circumstances. When forced to choose between harming a friend and a stranger, we are inclined to harm the stranger. In general, we are likely to give our friends more time, work, and resources than others. And many regard at least *some* of these inclinations as apt responses to genuine demands generated by friendships.

Some have extended this thought about partiality in friendship to the realm of belief. Sarah Stroud (2006) has recently pointed out a kind of bias in the habits and patterns of thought that give rise to beliefs about our friends. This bias operates at many steps in the path to forming beliefs about one's friends. First, you are more likely to question the truth of propositions about your friends' actions that, if true, would reflect poorly on your friend.

Suppose you receive a report that your friend interjected during a comedian's standup routine. You are much more likely to scrutinize this report's veracity than you would for a similar report on a total stranger. Maybe you think the person who told you was drumming up conflict between you and your friend, and so you start asking others whether you can trust the testifier and the testimony. You also might search for evidence that might potentially weigh against the possibility by asking your friend, who might deny the accusations. In more general terms, one will search for defeaters for the evidence that supports the potentially damning proposition.

Even if you take this report about your friend's behavior to be true, however, you might search for some alternate *interpretation* of this friend's behavior. The same set of bodily

movements can fall under different descriptions, depending on the intentions of the agent and conditions external to the agent. Perhaps the comedian *requested* an interjection into the routine, and your friend was just playing along. Her behavior would fall under a different concept: *requested participation* rather than *unwanted heckling*. In more general terms: we are inclined to consider more charitable interpretations of our friends' behavior than we otherwise would be.<sup>61</sup>

But biased doxastic practices do not stop there. For even if you interpret the interjection as a genuine heckle, you might still take it to be the result of a different *character trait* than if it came from someone else. Maybe you view it as an expression of playful spontaneity — in the same spirit as the kind of harmless jeering between some kinds of close friends — rather than as a manifestation of a longstanding desire to be the center of attention.

And even if you view the act as the manifestation of a desire to get attention, you might engage in a *fourth* kind of doxastic bias: you might view this character trait as part of, or an expression of, some more general (and desirable) trait. This will be easier in some cases more than others. In this particular case, you might view the desire for attention to be part of a gregarious, extroverted nature — one that ends up bringing joy to others, even if it occasionally misfires. This sort of contextualizing fits naturally with the *fifth* form of bias, which involves simply viewing the character trait that brought the act about as a minor, rather than major, feature of your friend's character.

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<sup>61</sup> Stroud leaves it somewhat open whether “interpretations” are explanatorily downstream or upstream from mere behavior, if either. In all likelihood, they can be either. Stroud once refers to these responses as “explanations,” which suggests that interpretations are really beliefs about the (mental) grounds of the behavior (Stroud 2006, 506). It is worth noting, however, that biased interpretations of our friends' behavior might not be limited to the causes or grounds of observed behavior. We might view a friend's actions as part of some larger (and exonerating) course of action, one that it itself grounds or constitutes. One might be tempted to categorize this second kind of interpretation in terms of pre-existing intentions, making it reducible to the first kind of interpretation. I leave it open whether such a reduction is possible. (See Thompson 2008 for discussion.) I also leave it open whether interpretations might be simply be redescriptions of the behavior that neither explain nor are explained by it.

We can add to Stroud's list. Rather than view an act as the result of a character trait, we might view it as a *deviation* from that character. That deviation might be attributed to environmental factors (he has been through a lot recently) or psychological features of the friend over which they have no or little control (he lashes out when he is depressed). This is a very common method for preserving an essentially positive conception of our friend's character when they act wrongly, something we are much more likely to do for them than for others.

We can also exhibit doxastic bias in the *beliefs, intentions, and emotions* we ascribe to our friends. So far, we have focused on the actions of our friends and the character traits that give rise to them. But there is more to a person than their deeds, of course. And these other aspects of a person are no less suitable for moral evaluation: a racist belief, a malicious intention, jealousy of another person's success. Because these attitudes are subject to moral evaluation, we seem just as willing to exhibit bias in our beliefs about those held by our friends. A friend's offensive assertion might be seen as a slip of the tongue, or a bit of pretense, rather than a sincere expression of some repugnant belief. We might not ascribe intentions to harm or self-aggrandize on the basis of a friend's behavior that would otherwise invite the ascription.

What is more, almost all of the "stages" of doxastic bias that Stroud identifies with respect to a friend's *behavior* generalize to our friend's *attitudes*. When given evidence that a friend believes, intends, or feels a certain way, you can search for defeaters for that evidence. You might take testimony that your friend resents all members of some rival political faction to be based on an emotional misperception. Even if you accept that a friend has a certain belief, intention, or feeling, you can take to be the result of a more innocuous, or even virtuous, character trait; you might attribute your friend's resentment to be an expression of his earnest commitment to his ideals, rather than a mere tendency to see the worst in those who disagree

with him. But even if you cannot view the aspect of their character that gave rise to the attitude in a more charitable light, you can still see it as part of a more general virtue.

These are all descriptive claims about how friendships can affect the ways we form and maintain our beliefs. But what should we make of these observations? Do we have reason to think that friends *should* be this way? Stroud thinks the answer is ‘yes’: when we reflect on the phenomenon of friendship, it is not only evident that we are inclined to treat friends with charitable belief-forming practices, but that these are features of good friendships. What might explain this? Stroud appeals to the nature of friendship itself: because friendships are a kind of commitment, and because they are in some sense based on the character of the persons involved, good friends are more willing to get themselves to believe that their friends have the kind of character on which friendships are based, and to let those beliefs be a little more insensitive to evidence.<sup>62</sup> But that is not the only sort of explanation one might offer. Simon Keller has explained the goodness of similar belief-forming practices in terms of the *goods* secured by them:

It’s encouraging, motivating, and reassuring to have friends who are inclined to believe that things for you are improving, that your business venture will work out, that you will surely get published eventually, that you look good in your new outfit, and so on, even as you realize that their beliefs are less than fully reliable. It’s one of the good things about being friends. (2004, 340)

Another possibility worth mentioning, however, is that there is no substantive explanation for why good friends exhibit doxastic bias. We might simply take this to be justified on the basis of intuition, or what seems to be true about these particular human relations.

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<sup>62</sup> This is a very crude summary of Stroud’s full view, but it does not matter much in the current context. The key point is that Stroud appeals to the nature of friendship to show that her observations are not merely descriptive of, but prescriptive for friends.

Whatever the case may be, if good friendships *do* involve some kind of doxastic partiality, then we have identified an aspect of belief-formation and regulation that is determined by non-evidential considerations. If all of the above ways in which we are charitable to our friends are genuine, then our doxastic life is positively suffused with moments of extending beyond what the evidence would normally support, at nearly all stages of belief-formation: whether it be the ways we gather evidence, the propositions we consider on the basis of that evidence, the beliefs we draw on the basis of that evidence, the subsequent inferences we make on the basis of those beliefs, and the sensitivity of maintained beliefs to subsequent changes in our evidence. We can summarize these myriad claims about doxastic bias as the following thesis:

*Doxastic Bias*: Friendship commits friends to preferential beliefs and preferential practices of belief-formation that would not otherwise be permissible in the absence of the friendship, and not merely in virtue of their evidential situation.

#### **4. The First Case Against *Doxastic Bias***

The last clause in *Doxastic Bias* is important, because one natural response to the purported cases of bias is that they are ultimately grounded in the evidence one has about one's friends. Many would be willing to agree that they are likely to believe better things of their friends than of strangers. This is because we often take our friends to be better, in the relevant way, than the average person; that is why they are our friends, and the stranger is a stranger. We are more likely to scrutinize evidence against our friends' characters because we are much more confident that their character is good compared to the average person. This kind of evidential behavior is no different in kind than scrutinizing purported evidence against other proposition for which we are highly confident: we would likely dismiss or reexamine purported evidence that the earth was not round, for example. We are more likely to interpret the behavior of our friends

in a positive light because the evidence given by our shared history justifies the more charitable interpretation. We are more likely to take their acts and attitudes to issue from positive character traits for the same reason: presumably, we already had evidence and believed that our friend had the more positive character trait. And so on. So it is important for the defender of *Doxastic Bias* to specify that the partiality involved here is really *extra-evidential*, and to provide an argument for that version of their claim.

Whether our preferential doxastic practices towards our friends can be explained in wholly evidential terms is one sort of challenge to *Doxastic Bias*, but not the only one. One might claim that truly extra-evidential bias towards our friends is not a feature of *all* good friendships (and, therefore, not a *constitutive* feature of friendship). Nomy Arpaly and Anna Brinkerhoff (2018) have recently argued this, by offering cases of friendships in which it would be positively *bad* for a friend to treat her friend differently than a stranger, doxastically:

Consider Meredith and her friend Ying. Meredith is deliberating about whether or not to open up a bakery, and asks Ying for her insight on the matter. We can imagine Meredith thinking like this: “This is a big life decision, and I know Ying wants what is best for me. I want to know what Ying really thinks—does she honestly believe I have what it takes to run a successful small business?” (43)

If Ying is inclined to believe that Meredith is more likely to succeed than is warranted by the evidence, this could set Meredith up for financial ruin (assuming that Meredith takes Ying’s beliefs about her seriously). Here, Meredith is not thinking of her friendship with Ying along the lines of an inspirational coach, but as a sober co-deliberator, one for whom doxastic bias or charity would be a vice. Sometimes we value our friends because they can see most clearly who we are, rather than who we ought or want to be. So how could it be constitutive of friendship that its members skew the truth in these various ways? So goes the objection.

These are legitimate concerns, and they successfully show that there are *some* forms of friendship that preclude doxastic charity. This should come as no surprise. We should not expect there to be a single set of standards universal to all friendships. One obvious but seldom-mentioned fact about friendship is that it is a social category with many variations, both within and without particular cultures and times — something recognized in writing at least since Aristotle.<sup>63</sup> It is unlikely that all friendships are supposed to serve the purpose that Keller says they do, that of motivating us through the specific mechanism of optimistic portraits of their members. And plausibly, there is no single end that characterizes all friendships. Of those friendships that can be said to be characterized by some end, some might be best served by the kind of “cheerleading” or “coaching” role highlighted by Keller; but for others, it might not.

So much for the idea that doxastic bias is *constitutive* of friendship, and universal to its instances. We can still ask, however, whether there are *some* instances of friendship that can generate this kind of bias. I now hope to show that the class of friendships that would license doxastic bias is actually quite small, because it would require that friendships be *self-effacing* in ways that few would be willing to endorse.

To see this, let us imagine that *Doxastic Bias* is true. Remember what this means. It is not merely that friends should believe better of their friends’ actions and attitudes than those of strangers. Crucially, this appropriate bias is not based on a difference in the evidence friends possess about their friends; it is not because they have more information about their friends’ character than that of a stranger. It is appropriate simply in virtue of being friends, and the commitments that entails, or the goals or goods served by that friendship. Now imagine that you are a friend, and you are self-conscious to this extent: you know that *Doxastic Bias* is true, and

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<sup>63</sup> Aristotle discusses the varieties of friendship in §8 of *Nicomachean Ethics*.

you know that your friend endorses and follows *Doxastic Bias*. You ask your friend whether your strongly worded response to a mutual acquaintance's slight was too harsh, or an appropriate response to an insult. Your friend tells you that the response was appropriate, and your responses to social situations like this are generally tactful.

How should you respond to your friend's assurance? Because you know both that *Doxastic Bias* is true and that your friend endorses and follows it, you are in a position to know that as long as your friend's assertion is a sincere expression of belief, his or her belief that your response in this case was appropriate is partly grounded in the fact that you are friends, and not merely because of the evidence your friend possesses about your character. If this person were not your friend, but possessed the same evidence that your friend possesses, he or she would be less confident in the appropriateness of your response in this case. Potentially, this decreased confidence would preclude outright belief that your response was appropriate. From your own perspective, then, it seems you should *discount* your friend's testimony. You should take it to be weaker evidence for the appropriateness of your response than you otherwise would.

The first thing to note about this consequence is that we do not, on the whole, tend to discount the testimony of our friends when it comes to our own behavior, attitudes, and character. If anything, this gets the dynamic precisely the wrong way around. We often turn to our friends for frank assessments of these things. In some kinds of friendships, a friend acts as a *co-deliberator*, an extension of our own ability to scrutinize our conduct and inner life. When it seems that we know less about our own nature than the ones closest to us, we also turn to our friends in their capacity as *experts* about ourselves. In such cases, friendships provide mutual expert testimony; each friend might know more about the other in certain regards than the friend

knows about him- or herself. In neither of these cases do we correct for a presumed bias in our friends' beliefs that would skew in our favor.

Whether we take our friends to be co-deliberators or character experts, it would be foolish for the friend to adopt a policy of doxastic bias. When jointly attempting to determine what kind of person one is, or what one is capable of being or doing, it would be burdensome and pointless to have one half of the deliberating party skew the answers, only to have that skewing corrected by the other half. It would be equally pointless to have an expert on your character skew any genuine insight they have into your character with favoritism, only to have that bias corrected. If *Doxastic Bias* is correct, then friendships would be self-effacing in this way: a friendship, at least taken as a potential unit of co-deliberation or of expert testimony, would have to discount its own doxastic policies.

This is not to say that we never *expect* such a bias in our friends. We probably do think better of their friends in part because we want to see ourselves as the kinds of people who befriend those worthy of friendship.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, from a social-evolutionary perspective, we might expect groups to have beliefs about their members that are more charitable than beliefs about those out of the group, since groups with such tendencies would be more stable and likely to survive.<sup>65</sup> The important thing to note, however, is that these facts about friendships do not seem to be *good* when we take friendships to include the above deliberative roles. From that

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<sup>64</sup> This suggestion is a natural extension of the idea that we work to reduce dissonance between beliefs that contradict our positive *self-concept*, often by giving more credence to the self-concept than the contradicting belief: see Aronson 1969 and Steele 1988.

<sup>65</sup> This is, of course, an open empirical question. As is often the case with evolutionary explanations of this kind (and especially explanations at the level of group selection), one can just as easily come up with an explanation for the opposite set of behaviors or inclinations. It might be best for groups to have maximally accurate beliefs about their members in order to most easily detect free-riders, defectors, or cheaters. The important point is not about whether such tendencies exist, but that, to the extent to which they do, they are not good-making features of many kinds of friendships.

perspective, they are psychological idiosyncrasies about friendships that need to be corrected for, rather than standards of good friendships.

Of course, we must keep in mind our earlier observation that friendship is a social category with myriad variations. Not all friendships must exclude policies of doxastic bias. Rather, any friendship that is guided by such a standard will have to jettison the roles of co-deliberation or two-way expert testimony, on pain of being self-effacing. Jettisoning those roles is a perfectly cogent possibility. Some friendships might never concern themselves with the question of what is true of each them. Some might be taken up for the sake of mutual pleasure, as Aristotle suggested, or for motivational support, as Keller suggests. In neither of these cases would a policy of doxastic bias be necessarily self-effacing.

However, it should be noted that even *these* kinds of friendships might be effectively self-effacing. If I enter into a friendship for the sake of mutual pleasure — to enjoy another person’s company, to engage in activities we both enjoy, etc. — I might still desire that these ends not be pursued through certain doxastic means, like a policy of blanket bias towards me.<sup>66</sup> If competing in a game with my friend, I might not want him to tell me, after a loss, that I was closer to winning than the evidence really suggests. Nor would I want my friend to believe this. An attitude like that would come across as infantilizing. Even a friend’s role of providing “motivational support” can be undermined by a policy of doxastic bias combined with sufficient awareness of the relationship’s standards. If you know that your friend is telling you that you can

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<sup>66</sup> It goes without saying that the language of “entering into” a friendship for certain sakes is not meant to suggest that every instance of friendship is preceded by some conscious and deliberate act, mental or otherwise, as if it were a contract. Nor does it imply that most or even any friendships are adopted for a singular purpose, or, once in place, serve a single end. No doubt, most human relationships characterizable as friendships serve a motley of ends, and in almost all cases, the thought of what ends friendships serves plays almost no explicit role in their formation or continuation.

win a tournament you have entered because their beliefs about you are evidentially skewed, you are not going to get much confidence from this testimony.

I think we should conclude that, if there is such a thing as doxastic bias, then its reach is quite limited. Later in this chapter, I will argue that *no* form of doxastic partiality is plausible. But before that, I would like to consider a different way that practical considerations might affect what one ought to believe: that is, a kind of case in which one ought to believe something that is not licensed by the evidence alone.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. There Are Non-Evidential Reasons to Believe

Consider another sort of case:

*Uncertainty*: at a party of fellows, your longtime friend, Samwise, tells a deeply embarrassing, compromising, and true story about you to the other attendees. You are offended by this behavior and are unsure whether his storytelling expressed a lack of concern for you that is incompatible with genuine friendship or was a careless but forgivable lapse of judgment. The evidence does not seem to clearly favor one interpretation or another.

It should not be difficult to project ourselves into the above situation. Cases like it inevitably arise in the course of relationships with other people. In light of an apparent wrongdoing, we ask ourselves not only how to act in response, but what to believe about the person who did it. And as we noted earlier in the discussion of Stroud's view on doxastic bias, it is often unclear what a

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<sup>67</sup> We should be careful in how we understand this way of describing the normative situation. Say that the "evidence alone" supports or does not support a proposition does not imply that there is an independent normative domain defined by the evidence, or that facts about evidential support themselves ever wholly ground facts about what we ought to believe. Saying that there are cases in which one ought to believe something that is not licensed by the evidence alone is just another way of saying that some factors that do not ordinarily determine what your ought to believe — for example, the fact of being friends with somebody — do.

person's intentions are, or what kind of character gave rise to them. Properly ascribing attitudes and dispositions to a human being is much more complicated than ascribing fragility to a piece of glass. The uncertainty is exacerbated when the traits in question are "thick," because they involve a normatively-loaded description of the person's psychology.<sup>68</sup>

So let us project ourselves into the above scenario, and try to determine what we ought to believe about Samwise. The reader might be wondering what particular proposition, what *p*, is in question in this particular case. One thing worth noting about situations like this is that there often is not a single proposition at issue, but a whole nest of interrelated questions pertaining to a person's attitudes. We saw in the previous section that Stroud thinks there are different levels of interpretation at which doxastic bias operates; corresponding to these levels are different questions we can ask about a person's attitudes and character. But for now, let us focus on one particular question: whether *Samwise has the level of concern for you necessary for you to be friends*.

There are a couple of things to note about this question. The first is that it admits of different readings. On one reading, the question here is normative. According to this reading, the question is not about what attitude Samwise has, but what sort of response that attitude calls *for*: whether the Samwise's level of concern for you makes it the case that you ought not to be friends, or that friendship with him is unwarranted or inapt. To be sure, situations much like the one above can arise in which this kind of normative question is relevant. In the face of evidence that a friend's character is different, and perhaps worse, than we thought, we can ask whether the sorts of attitudes they have are compatible with an ongoing relationship. Such questions concern the standards of those relationships, or about how one ought to relate to others given one's own

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<sup>68</sup> The language of "thick" ethical concepts originates from Williams 1985.

psychological capacities for toleration and forgiveness. But that is not the sort of question at issue in the above case. The question here is a descriptive one about what kind of character Samwise expressed at the party when he told the compromising story about you—in particular, what level of concern he has for you.

The second things to note about this question is that there is not a very good way of expressing it in the English language that avoids this confusion between normative and descriptive readings. Of course, there are very rough ways of describing different levels of concern for another person. At one end, we might describe someone as callous or completely indifferent; on the other, truly devoted or loving. But these are the terms we use to describe, as it were, the extremes of this dimension of human attitudes. And we can surely enough imagine entertaining questions about whether Samwise occupies one of these extremes. (Such questions would be much easier to answer in most cases.) And there might be certain relationships that require its members to possess the very highest levels of concern for each other. But for the moment, let us assume that you are no so stringent in your standards for friendship – or at least the kind that you took yourself and Samwise to have before this incident. Your friendships, we can assume, allow their members to be fallible. The question at hand is about whether Samwise has a level of concern that lies somewhere between the peak of devotion and the valley of indifference. It is the level that would warrant you to continue your friendship with Samwise. Unfortunately, English lacks the vocabulary for describing this sort of middling attitude. The most succinct way of referring to the attitude in question is through the description ‘level of concern necessary for friendship.’ But that description makes it rather easy to think that the question is really a normative one about whether the attitude Samwise has — an attitude that is

not in question — justifies continuing to be friends. But it should be clear by now that there is another descriptive question that can arise in situations like the one above.

The third thing to note about the proposition in question concerns the way we understand ‘necessary for friendship’, once we preclude a normative interpretation. On one reading, we can take that to mean that the level of concern is necessary for it to be that case that you and Samwise are *actually* friends. If friendship requires that certain attitudes be in place between its members, and a certain level of concern is one of those attitudes, then we can ask whether Samwise really has that level of concern, and whether he is really our friend. But we do not need to commit ourselves to that conception of friendship in order to ask a version of our question about Samwise. We might maintain, for example, that friendships can exist in the absence of mutual concern, so long as their members still take themselves to be friends and interact in certain ways. Even on this laxer conception, we can still ask whether Samwise’s attitudes are necessary for him to be a *good* friend, or whether they are necessary for it to be the case (as on the normative reading above) that you *ought* to be friends, or that friendship is warranted. Other conceptions of friendship might not draw a clear line between the conditions for being a friend and the conditions for being a good friend.<sup>69</sup> But whatever we end up saying about the nature of friendship, there is some version of the above question we can ask. Recall that the question is about what attitude Samwise has. Depending on what conception of friendship we endorse, there will be different ways of describing this attitude: the attitude necessary for Samwise to be a friend, or for him to be a good friend, or to be a desirable friend. The important point is that, on almost any view of friendship, there will be some way of referring to the attitude in question, and

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<sup>69</sup> The similarity between calling somebody a *good* friend and calling that persona a *true* friend is some preliminary evidence that the reality and goodness of friendship are closely related.

whether Samwise possesses that attitude is the real quarry. For ease of exposition, this proposition will be referred to as (Charity).

So now that the question is clear, we can ask in earnest: in *Uncertainty*, should we believe (Charity)? One might remain agnostic about whether Samwise has the level of concern necessary for being a friend and wait until more evidence arises before believing one way or another. Given the uncertainty involved in *Uncertainty*, that might appear to be the most reasonable option.

Another option is to believe that Samwise has the level of concern necessary for friendship on the basis of your long shared personal history, which, we can assume, would provide enough evidence to outweigh this singular sleight. Undoubtedly, there are many cases like this, but *Uncertainty* is not intended to be one of them. Part of the setup of the case is that the evidence does not clearly favor (Charity). If it is difficult to imagine a single gaffe weighing just as much, evidentially, as your entire shared history with Samwise, we can stipulate that the story told was particularly egregious, or divulged a closely-kept secret, or that the gaffe comes as the latest in a recent string of similar offenses.

There is another option here, however, and that is to believe (Charity) even though the evidence is inconclusive. I take this to be the most intuitively correct option; it strikes me as the charitable and proper response. It also strikes me as the correct response upon reflection. Imagine being in the other epistemic situation described above, in which the evidence granted by my shared history with Samwise outweighs the evidence provided by the gaffe, and then imagine gradually ramping up the severity of the gaffe to the point where the evidence of our shared history does *not* outweigh it. When I do this, my intuition about what to believe about Samwise does not change. Whether the evidence strongly supports believing that Samwise has the level of

concern necessary for friendship or whether it is inconclusive, it seems that you should believe that he is; that is the decent thing to believe.

Another way of seeing this is to imagine what it would be like from Samwise's perspective to learn that, in response to your gaffe, you ceased believing that you had the level of concern necessary for being friends and that you had suspended judgement about the matter instead. If you were Samwise, it is likely you would feel that you were not treated properly, that you were not given the proper benefit of the doubt. To say this is not say that Samwise is entitled to this charitable belief under all epistemic conditions; it would be narcissistic for Samwise to think that you should think well of him regardless of his behavior. But one need not be a narcissist to want others to believe well of you when the evidential situation is uncertain.

If, on the other hand, the gaffe was *so* egregious that it made it obvious that Samwise did not have the concern necessary for friendship, it does not seem that you should believe otherwise, nor even suspend judgment. It would be a lunatic policy to believe that Samwise is caring regardless of what he says, does, thinks, and feels. Our beliefs about others are not completely evidentially insensitive. If Samwise is owed something from us, it is not a blanket policy of unwaveringly believing him good and true.

It seems that there is a reason to believe charitably of another person at work here that is "practical" in this sense: the reason holds partly in virtue of what you owe to Samwise, or how it is proper to treat Samwise, and the way it provides this reason is not through being evidence for the belief. Much more needs to be said about these kinds of reasons, but for now, we should note the following basic features that seem to characterize them.

- (1) They are *evidentially-sensitive*: in particular, when the evidence for the proposition in question is *inconclusive* – that is, the evidence does not clearly favor a proposition or its negation.
- (2) They are *subject-sensitive*: this sort of reason for belief seems to be tightly bound up with the subject-matter of the kinds of proposition it supports. In particular, the reason seems to concern the attitudes and character of other persons. The sort of explanation we gave for why the charitable belief seemed appropriate centered around what we owed to Samwise. This kind of explanation cannot extend to subject-matters that cannot be owed anything.

Much more will be said about these conditions. But before that, it is worth remarking on a few other aspects of the view.

## **6. Escaping Self-Effacement**

In *Uncertainty*, there seems to be a reason to believe that Samwise has the level of concern necessary for friendship, even in the face of inconclusive evidence for that proposition. There are some very important differences between this sort of reason and the kind of doxastic bias argued for by thinkers like Stroud and Keller. Recall our main objection to *Doxastic Bias* in §4: for almost all desirable friendships, a policy of *Doxastic Bias* would be self-effacing. We often want our friends to “tell it to us straight,” in their capacity as co-deliberators or experts of our own character. That implies that we want their beliefs to be “straight,” too: we would not want them to be systematically biased against us. If we admit that the apparent reason to believe well of Samwise in the above case is genuine, do we endorse this kind of objectionable bias? No, we do not. The conditions for the existence of such reasons are partially circumscribed by the believer’s epistemic situation: believing that Samwise has a certain level of concern for you

requires that the evidence for that proposition be inconclusive. Admitting the existence of such reasons does not imply that, in any evidential situation whatever, one should believe more charitably of Samwise than you would if he were not your friend. As a result, neither you nor Samwise need apply a blanket “correction” to each other’s testimony. If the evidence is clear, you do not owe it to your friends to slant the truth.

One obvious objection at this point is that a version of objection from self-effacement applies to this sort of doxastic policy, too. If you can know what kind of evidential situation your friend is in with respect to your own attitudes, then you can know when their evidence about your attitudes is inconclusive, and when it is not. If they assert something about you that seems charitable, and you know that their evidential situation regarding that proposition is really inconclusive, then it seems you should discount their assertion. As long as you take your friendship to be at least partly constituted by the roles of co-deliberator or character expert, then in situations where you *do* know that your friend’s evidence about you is inconclusive, you should prefer that your friend suspend judgment, and tell you that they are genuinely uncertain about the matter. Applying those standards to yourself in *Uncertainty*, that also would mean suspending judgment about whether Samwise has the relevant level of concern, and letting him know that you are genuinely uncertain if he asks about it afterwards.

But this objection is a bit too hasty. In particular, it ignores a pervasive feature of our epistemic situation regarding others, one that precludes the above corrective policy. Part of the setup of the above objection was that you know that your friend’s evidence regarding your own attitudes or character is inconclusive. There are two problems with this. The first is that we almost never, as a matter of fact, know the exact evidential situation that others have to us, on almost any way of construing a person’s “evidential situation.” If the person’s evidence is

limited to that person's accessible mental states, or what they know, for example, then we certainly do not. Although human beings can of course know the what attitudes others have, it would take a particularly deep relationship for one person to know *all* of another's attitudes, or to know what everything they know, and that he knows it. But even if we adopt a more "public" conception of a subject's evidence, the problem remains. If, for example, we take a subject's evidence to be whatever facts are accessible to anyone similarly situated in the subject's circumstances, there is little reason to think we would be any better off. Unless we spend every waking moment with someone, we simply will not know all the facts that are available to him. (This is true even if we restrict the body of evidence to that which is relevant to the question of our own attitudes.)

Our objector might reply here that we need not know a friend's entire evidential base, or even the subset relevant to the question of our attitudes, in order to justifiably discount their testimony. All we have to know is that their evidence, on the whole, would *support* suspending judgment if they were not our friend. If we know this, then we are in a position to know that their positive testimony is not entirely informed by the evidence, and that we should discount it if we are interested in knowing the truth about our own attitudes or character. So we do not need to know every aspect of our friend's evidential situation. All we need to know is its "cash value": what propositions are supported by it, in order for the problem of self-effacement to arise for the proposed view.

In order for this objection to work, we need to grant that knowing what a body of evidence E supports does not requiring knowing, for every element of E, that it is an element of E, or else the objection collapses into the failed one above. I propose granting this for the sake of argument. But we can also rework the objection to be about the conditions of justified belief

about what our friend's evidence supports, rather than knowledge; the analogous claim that justified belief about what E supports does not require having a justified belief about every element of E is more plausible. We can make a number of other concessions, as well. It is true that we often believe that our friends are getting it wrong about their evidence supports. And it is true that we can do this when the subject is our own attitudes. A friend might claim that, based on how I was acting some morning, I was grumpy. I might grant that I was grumpy, but add (perhaps partly to poke fun) that my friend had no license to conclude that on the basis of our interactions that morning: maybe my friend misconstrued my furrowed brow, which I always have when thinking about the day's tasks that lie ahead. Presumably, in many of these cases, our corrections can be expressions of knowledge or justified belief. Despite all of this, though, the objection fails. For the situations in which we know or have justified beliefs about what our friend's evidence supports are precisely *not* those situations in which we would seek their testimony. If we already know what a friend's evidence is regarding our attitudes or character, why bother asking? In such a situation, we stand instead as potential *correctors* of a friend's beliefs, as I was in the little morning scenario above. Situations in which the threat of self-effacement arise, situations in which I ask my friend about my own attitudes or character, preclude the kind of knowledge or justified belief about my friend's evidence required by the objection.

I conclude that the objection from self-effacement does not extend to the view that, in *Uncertainty*, we have reason to believe that Samwise has the relevant level of concern for us.

## **7. The Impartiality of this Reason to Believe (and the Second Argument Against *Doxastic Bias*)**

Up until now, we have been considering what we ought to believe about Samwise in *Uncertainty*. We have concluded that we reason to believe that Samwise has the relevant level of concern for us, even though the evidence for this proposition is inconclusive. But what sorts of normative generalizations can we make on the basis of this single case? Earlier, we noted two features of the case that seem to be the crucial triggers for reasons of this sort:

- (1) The evidential condition: the evidence for the proposition in question is inconclusive.
- (2) The subject-matter condition: the proposition concerns the attitudes or character of persons.

This is a threadbare description, and it might seem to be missing an extremely important element: the fact that the subject matter is the attitudes or character of *your friend*, or someone into which you stand in some “partiality”-generating relation. It might seem that this charitable belief about Samwise is something you especially owe to him in virtue of your friendship with him, something that you would not owe him in the absence of the friendship.

Recent literature on the topic of the ethics of belief about other people is pervaded by the assumption that special relationships generate special reasons to believe well of their members. Many stock examples of practical reasons for belief concern special relationships: the spouse who believes in the fidelity of their fellow spouse,<sup>70</sup> or the friend who believes in the integrity or talent of their friend. But there is little explicit defense of the thought that these kinds of reasons are restricted to such relationships, or are particularly prevalent within them.

In fact, I think the state of affairs is precisely opposite. Believing well of others in the way demonstrated in *Uncertainty* seems to extend to *all* persons, independently of their

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<sup>70</sup> This is a perennial theme in the literature on the ethics of belief. A particularly early example can be found in Price (1954, 13).

relationship to the believer. Call a doxastic policy *partial* if it licenses charitable or comparatively beneficial beliefs about a person because of some special relationship you stand in to that person, and *impartial* otherwise. Using that terminology, the kinds of kind of doxastic suggested by cases like *Uncertainty* are *impartial*. Moreover, I do not think there are any legitimate *partial* doxastic policies. In this section, I will defend these two claims in sequence.

The clearest way of seeing why *Uncertainty* supports an impartial policy of charity instead of a partial one is to imagine this variant of it:

*Stranger Uncertainty*: at a party of mostly new acquaintances, Strider, someone you have just met, says something insulting to you in the course of conversation. You are deliberating about whether to believe that Strider has a level of concern for other people necessary for being a decent person. [Call this proposition (Impartial Charity).] The evidence does not seem to clearly favor one interpretation or another.

In this situation, in which you lack any significant relationship to Strider, does the normative verdict change? It seems not: in this situation, it seems to me that you should believe (Impartial Charity). The fact that you are not friends with Strider does not seem to be a normatively relevant difference; if there is a reason at work in *Uncertainty*, there is a reason at work in *Stranger Uncertainty*. After all, why should your doxastic charity extend only to your inner circle?<sup>71</sup>

Some readers might not share the intuition in this second case. It certainly seems like a cogent response to remain agnostic about Strider's character, while believing charitably of our

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<sup>71</sup> One tempting thing to say here is that, in *Uncertainty*, you shared history with Samwise makes it more reasonable to believe that Samwise has the relevant level of concern. But remember that the evidence is inconclusive in both cases: we are supposed to be controlling for this shared history, by stipulating that Samwise's gaffe is sufficiently egregious to balance the scales. Keeping this in mind, there does not seem to be any reason to believe well of Samwise, but not of Strider.

friends. It might seem that doxastic charity is not something we owe just anyone; in some cases, we should treat questions about a person like any other inquiry, and that the question of our partygoer's character is one such case. From this perspective, believing well of another when the evidence is inconclusive is something that should only extend to those with whom we share a relationship that precludes a persistent evidentialist treatment of its members.

This is a familiar thought, and I think it underlies a lot of the thinking about doxastic partiality. It seems like a straightforward extension of partiality in the domain of action. Some relationships seem to demand a certain kind of treatment of their members, a kind of treatment that you are not demanded to extend to everyone, and which might conflict with demands that *do* extend to everyone. Why not think a similar dynamic can arise in the domain of belief? In fact, I think there is a very good reason for thinking that a similar dynamic *cannot* arise in the case of belief, one that existing discussions of doxastic partiality have not really grappled with.

The reason doxastic partiality is not possible has to do with the conditions that make partiality, in general, warranted. Consider the contrived case in which a parent must choose between saving a drowning daughter or saving a child who is a complete stranger. (To make the case even more contrived, we can imagine the second child is qualitatively identical to the daughter, but has no shared history with the parent.) The parent opts, of course, to save the daughter, and we all deem this permissible, even obligatory, even though each child stands to lose just as much — their lives — from not being saved. Or consider a more prosaic sort of case: you get friends presents for their birthdays, and they are much nicer than the presents you get for your coworkers on their birthdays, and *much* nicer than the nonexistent birthday presents you give the strangers on the bus. (You do not even bother to ask them when their birthdays are.)

What makes this kind of differential treatment appropriate? Why can we save our own child without a second thought, or spend a bit more money on a gift to our friends? The precise ground of our special obligations and permissions to other persons is, of course, beyond the scope of this chapter. But fortunately, we do not need to settle that. All we need to note is this more minimal point: in the situations in which partiality seems to kick in, an agent has some *incompatible alternatives* among which the agent must choose. Those alternatives involve benefitting or preventing harm to the person in the special relationship, on the one hand, and those who do not stand in that relationship, on the other. And for finite creatures with limited time at their disposal, this kind of choice is inevitable. If we were gods who could bestow benefits on everyone who needed them at no cost to ourselves, the question of the demands of partiality would not arise, *even if*, as gods, we liked some people more than others, and had special relationships with them.<sup>72</sup> But we are not in that position. We must choose between helping some and not helping others. The question of how partial one can be in one's actions only arises because of this restriction on our agency. No matter what the ground or extent of partiality is, or how it interacts with "impartial" morality, the fact that our finitude is a precondition for partiality is undeniable.

But in the case of belief, the situation is entirely different. The paradigm situation in which partiality has a grip is one where one must decide whether to benefit party *x* or party *y*. But we are not, in general, torn between believing charitably of *x* and believing charitably of *y*: we can do both! The alternatives at play in *Uncertainty* were not between believing that *Samwise*

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<sup>72</sup> There is a stronger claim one could make here, which is that special relationships as we know them *require* that their members are finite in this respect: they do not bestow benefits and prevent harms to satisfy everyone's needs and desires, at no cost to themselves. I do not know whether this is true or not, but the basic point stands regardless: have special obligations or permissions to benefit some and not others requires that you are not able to provide those benefits to everyone.

has the relevant level of concern and believing that *someone else* has that level of concern, but between believing that Samwise has that level of concern and suspending judgment. The same goes for *Stranger Uncertainty* and our doxastic attitude towards Strider. Although we might have to choose whether to spend time with Strider or Samwise at the party, we do not need to choose which of them gets the benefit of charitable belief. In other words, in almost all situations, believing charitably of one person is not an incompatible alternative to believing charitably of another. Since believing charitably of Samwise, our friend, and Strider, a stranger, are not incompatible alternatives, there is no basis for only believing charitably of Samwise in virtue of our friendship with him.

Some might object here that there *are* incompatible alternative at work in cases of apparent doxastic bias. Many of the cognitive activities Stroud discusses, after all — scrutinizing evidence that reflects poorly on our friend, or considering alternative explanations for a person's behavior — are *mental acts* that take time, energy, and attention to perform. If it takes effort and attention to remind oneself to entertain charitable hypotheses, or to generate such hypotheses, then it appears partiality has a place in these doxastic practices. The case could be made that, if we have to choose between dedicating our attention and mental energy to scrutinizing evidence and generating alternative hypotheses about our friend's attitudes and the attitudes of strangers (or, more generally, some other cognitive task), then we should opt for the former.

This objection is orthogonal to the question of the possibility of doxastic partiality at the level of *reasons for belief*. Whether or not our belief-forming practices or activities can be subject to partiality is a separate question, and it is worth keeping that in mind. However, the question of whether our cognitive labor should be skewed towards our friends is still important. And if we can show that friendship can legitimately demand that we scrutinize damning evidence

about our friends more than evidence about others, or spend more time and effort entertaining alternative explanations of their behavior and attitudes, then in some sense, doxastic partiality will have been vindicated.<sup>73</sup> But the sense in which it would be vindicated, I think, is not particularly interesting.

Consider a related question about partiality in our practices of *forgiveness*: in particular, whether friendships demand that we be more disposed to forgive our friends, and to do the work to cultivate those dispositions. The case can certainly be made that for at least some friendships, this kind of “partiality” is appropriate. But such “partiality” in no way implies that we should not be disposed to forgive those who are not our friends, when we can. If there is a moral demand to forgive others, then the demand to be more likely to forgive friends is something like an *amplification* of this ordinary, impartial demand, rather than something *at odds* with it. That is, whatever standing moral reasons we have to treat all persons in a certain way can be stronger when those persons are close to us, because we expect those close to us, most of all, to treat us in ways that people, in general, ought to be treated.

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<sup>73</sup> There are actually two separable elements to doxastic partiality at the level of cognitive activity as defended by Stroud and Keller. The first is that we owe certain kinds of doxastic practices to our friends that we do not owe to others. The second is that these practices are in some way non-truth-tracking, or not constrained by the evidence in the ordinary way. In this discussion, I have mostly been putting pressure on the first claim. But the second claim does not fare very well, either. I do grant that, since there is reason to believe charitably of others when the evidence is inconclusive, there is also likely a reason to try to cultivate the disposition to so-believe. But aside from this disposition, the sorts of cognitive activities regarding our friends (or persons more generally) that these thinkers discuss do not really make the beliefs formed on their basis less likely to be true. Being willing to scrutinize damning evidence about one’s friends is not, in itself, something that will make your subsequent beliefs less likely to be true, unless one is scrutinizing that evidence improperly, or in bad faith. The same goes for considering alternative explanations for a friend’s behavior or attitudes: as long as one evaluates those possibilities fairly, in accordance with the available evidence, the subsequent beliefs will be no less likely to be true. Of course, there is a lot of irrational doxastic activity that goes under the headings of “scrutinizing the evidence” and “considering alternative hypotheses”; but what makes these activities irrational are the *ways* the evidence is scrutinized (often, not very carefully) or the credence given to the alternative hypotheses (often, too much). Undoubtedly, we do engage in this kind of doxastic behavior to our friends, but Stroud and Keller do not provide explicit arguments that these kinds of practices are genuine demands of friendship, rather than doxastic vices that we ought to avoid. (If anything, the demands placed on our belief-forming practices by friendship are often to ensure that our beliefs about our friends are *more* accurate than beliefs about strangers.)

I mention the case of forgiveness because I think the same sort of normative structure is at work in the case of belief. *If* friendship generates a kind of doxastic partiality at the level of cognitive activity, it is of the same kind as the partiality at work in the case of forgiveness: an amplification of an impartial reason to engage in the same sort of cognitive activity towards persons, regardless of their relationship to us. If we have reason to scrutinize damning evidence about our friends or entertain alternative explanations for their behavior, it is only because we have a standing reason to do the same for other persons. A person need not be our friend to deserve this kind of cognitive treatment, if anyone deserves it.

It is also worth mentioning that partiality at the level of cognitive activity is not likely to be very extensive, for two reasons. The first is that, as we saw above in our critique of Stroud and Keller, many friendships demand an absence of charity, an absence incompatible with the kind of doxastic practices being discussed here. If anything, friendship tends to *defeat* the standing impartial reasons to believe charitably of others, and to cultivate dispositions to do so. (In this way, I think the normative situation is often the reverse of what advocates of doxastic partiality take it to be.)

The second reason to doubt the actual extent of this kind of partiality is that, as a matter of actual fact, the cognitive activities we engage in when forming beliefs about our friends is not going to be *at odds* with “impartial” demands. If someone wants to cultivate a disposition to believe charitably of one’s friend, or to cultivate a disposition to consider all the available explanations for a friend’s actions, or to scrutinize damning evidence against a friend, engaging in that process of cultivation is not likely to exclude any benefits that one might give to others, in the way typical of partiality in action. In fact, it is plausible that the best way of securing such a charitable disposition towards an individual is to cultivate a *general* disposition to believe

charitably of other persons. The situation here is quite unlike the exclusive choice between saving one's child and saving a stranger. One can believe well of friends and strangers alike, and the cognitive effort that leads to charitable beliefs about one's friends need not be directed at them and them alone.

Viewed in this way, cases of purported legitimate doxastic partiality — both at the level of belief and belief-forming practices — come to seem not only implausible, but unethical. If we are willing to interpret a friend's gaffe as a lapse of character rather than an expression of it, then why not extend the same policy to the stranger who yells at us for blocking their path through the street? If you are willing to believe that your friend's reading a poetry recital expresses something true about the human experience, even if you cannot put your finger on it, why not think the same of the stranger's poem that preceded it? To not extend this benefit seems cliquey, or insular.

Some readers might not share the sensibility that supports this normative judgment. The view that there is a standing reason to believe charitably of others is not widely defended in contemporary philosophy, after all. As it turns out, though, some figures in the history of Western philosophy *have* defended views similar, in varying degrees, to the one defended here. In the next two sections, we will take a historical detour to survey these views. This is not for its own sake: in addition to showing that impartial doxastic charity is not unfamiliar to the history of philosophy, the discussion will reveal some additional reasons, less tied to intuition and sensibility, to think that it is a genuine demand on our beliefs.

## **8. Some Historical Precedent: Aquinas**

The view about doxastic charity closest to the one defended above can be found Aquinas's *Summa*. We encounter it in the *Treatise on Prudence and Justice*, in the section "Of

Judgment.” This very fact is worth remarking upon. Aquinas sees the act of judging as a fit subject in an inquiry into justice. Given the etymological connection between the ‘judge’ and ‘justice’, this might not come as much of a surprise. But for Aquinas, judgment is not something only dispensed by judges, nor limited to questions of guilt or innocence. For Aquinas, judgment is a cognitive act that encompasses any “decision in any matter whether speculative or practical.” And while not every act of judgment can be evaluated as just or unjust, some can: in particular, judgments about the goodness of other persons.

And when it comes to the goodness of persons, Aquinas thinks that, “unless we have evident indications of a person’s wickedness, we ought to deem him good, by interpreting for the best whatever is doubtful about him.”<sup>74</sup> We can see here the intimations of the two conditions highlighted above: in conditions of epistemic uncertainty, we should believe charitably of other persons.<sup>75</sup> But why does Aquinas believe this? What could justify such a practice? Aquinas considers an obvious objection, which is that a judge should not be *biased*; a judge should not be disposed to judge in someone’s favor when the evidence does not clearly weigh in that direction. Here is Aquinas’s reply, which is worth quoting in full:

It is one thing to judge of things and another to judge of [human beings]. For when we judge of things, there is no question of the good or evil of the thing about which we are judging since it will take no harm no matter what kind of judgment we form about it; but there is question of the good of the person who judges, if he judge truly, and of his evil if he judge falsely because *the true is the good of the intellect, and the false is its evil*, as stated in *Ethic* vi.2, wherefore everyone should strive to make his judgment accord with things as they are. On the other hand when we judge of [human beings], the good and evil in our judgment is considered chiefly on the part of the person about whom judgment is being formed; for he is deemed worthy of honor from the very fact that he is judged to be

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<sup>74</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 60, Art. 3.

<sup>75</sup> Some distortion is necessary whenever we attempt to translate pre-Enlightenment talk of evidence into the contemporary regimentation of the notion. We could ask, for example, whether Aquinas means by having “evident indications” of a person’s wickedness that (a) we have at least some very strong individual pieces of evidence that favor a person’s wickedness; (b) we have at least some very strong individual pieces of evidence that favor a person’s wickedness, and none for a person’s goodness; or (c) the overall balance of evidence strongly favors a person’s wickedness. In all likelihood, Aquinas is not discriminating between these different possibilities in this passage.

good and deserving of contempt if he is judged to be evil. For this reason we ought, in this kind of judgment, to aim at judging a [human being] good, unless there is evident proof to the contrary. And though we may judge falsely, our judgment in thinking well of another pertains to our good feeling and not to the evil of the intellect, even as neither does it pertain to the intellect's perfection to know the truth of contingent singulars in themselves.<sup>76</sup>

Aquinas's response to his evidentialist objector invokes the distinction between human beings and things. (For our purposes, we may consider things to be whatever is incapable of being judged morally good or evil.<sup>77</sup>) When we judge of things, the chief normative consideration is the good *for the believer* of believing truly. But when the object of our judgment—in particular, a normative judgment—is a person, the chief normative consideration is the good *for the person* in being judged to be good.<sup>78</sup> When we judge someone to be good, they are deemed worthy of honor. When we judge them to be bad, they are deemed worthy of contempt. And for Aquinas, this explains why we should believe the better of people when the evidence is unclear. Unlike judgments of things, our judgments of others are tightly bound up with the justifiability of other reactive attitudes like honoring and contempt, which can benefit or harm their objects.

Unfortunately, Aquinas does not say much about how this explanation works. But something more *must* be said: for surely even the staunchest evidentialist can acknowledge that beliefs about the goodness or evil of someone licenses certain reactive attitudes. An evidentialist could even agree with Aquinas that, when the object of our judgment is another person, the locus of goodness or badness shifts from the believer to the object of belief. It could be granted, for

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<sup>76</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 60, Art. 1, Ad. 2.

<sup>77</sup> For the purposes of Aquinas's argument, the fact that the normative properties involved here are 'good' and 'evil' is inessential. We could modify the definition of 'thing' to include whatever moral or ethical attributes can be possessed by human beings but not things.

<sup>78</sup> In this way, Aquinas is offering a kind of axiological ethics of belief; what you ought to judge or believe depends on certain facts about goodness—facts about what would amount to good or bad belief, or what would be good or bad for person being judged.

example, that it is bad for a person to be judged evil *when one is not evil*, and good for a person to be judged good *when one is good*, but that this is just an application of the more general principle, that it is good to believe  $p$  when  $p$  is true and bad to believe  $p$  when  $p$  is false. Moreover, it is difficult to see how the goodness of being believed (morally) good or the badness of being believed evil says anything, on its own, about what to do when the evidence is inconclusive. An evidentialist might argue, for example, that when the evidence is inconclusive, one should withhold judgment about a persons' character because otherwise one risks wronging that person by judging her goodness incorrectly and having the incorrect reactive attitudes about her as a result. So how do we get from Aquinas's axiological remarks to the conclusion that, when the evidence is inconclusive, we should believe charitably?

There are two aspects to this explanation, one of which is not very evident from the text. Our evidentialist wonders why we should not suspend judgment in cases of uncertainty about other people's character, since doing so minimizes the risk of harming that person by having incorrect beliefs and reactive attitudes towards. Certainly, there is an element of truth to this claim. In the very least, it does seem *bad* to be believed evil when one is good. (Whether the belief itself amounts to a wrong is a stronger claim that we need not adjudicate here.) And it does seem good to be believed (morally) good when one is (morally) good. But the truth of these two normative propositions does not get us all the way to a rationale for suspension in cases like *Stranger Uncertainty*. We still need to fill in the other two cells of the following table:

	The belief is true	The belief is false
S being believed good	Good for S	
S being believed evil		Bad for S

The evidentialist's argument for suspension will hang on how these other cells are filled in. For the argument for suspension to go through, the table would presumably have to be filled in the following way:

	The belief is true	The belief is false
S being believed good	Good for S	Bad for S
S being believed evil	Good for S	Bad for S

If the above table were accurate, then it appears that in situation of epistemic uncertainty, you should suspend judgment regarding S's goodness.

But is by no means obvious that this is how the table ought to be filled. In fact, it seems more plausible that, at least when we are considering what is good for the person about whom we have a belief, the table should look like this:

	The belief is true	The belief is false
S being believed good	Good for S	Good for S
S being believed evil	Bad for S	Bad for S

That is just to say: from the perspective of what is good or bad for the person being believed, it is, *ceteris paribus*, better to be believed good than evil. And if the good of the person being believed is what determines what we ought to believe in these cases, then the charitable belief seems more appropriate than suspension.

Our evidentially-minded objector is likely to chime in at this point. First, if we grant that the goodness or badness for others in being believed good or evil can generate reasons for belief,

why should they be limited to conditions of epistemic uncertainty? Why does Aquinas only grant the existence of reasons for charitable belief in the absence of “decisive proof to the contrary”? The goodness of being believed good or the badness of being believed evil, after all, seems to be completely independent of epistemic considerations. Second, even if Aquinas can explain why reasons for charitable belief only exist in conditions of epistemic uncertainty, there is surely a *countervailing* reason to suspend judgment, one that might even outweigh this reason of charity; insofar as we are inquirers looking for the truth, there is *always* a reason to suspend judgment when the evidence is inconclusive, for that is the intellectually responsible thing to do.

The last sentence of the passage above offers a germ a reply to the second of these objections. There, Aquinas is explaining what is good-making about charitable judgments. He writes that such judgments “pertain” (*pertinent*) to our good feeling (*bonum affectum*), and not to the evil of the intellect (*malus intellectus*); nor do such judgments pertain to the intellect’s perfection to know contingent singulars.<sup>79</sup> The language is not altogether clear, but I take Aquinas to be suggesting that, when we judge someone good when the evidence is inconclusive, what *makes* that judgment good is that it expresses virtuous attitudes towards the person about whom we judge. The judgment is not made good by the fact that it gets things right, that the contingent singular that is your will or character is known by the judge. After all — and this is a point we will return to in the next section — a judgment made in such circumstances could presumably never amount to knowledge.

More importantly for the purposes of responding to the evidentialist, the goodness of judging well of another is not *counterbalanced* by the badness of believing when, from the

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<sup>79</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 60, Art. 1, Ad. 2.

perspective of the intellect, one ought to withhold judgment.<sup>80</sup> When Aquinas says that the charitable judgment does not pertain to the evil of the intellect, I think he is trying to get us to drop the idea that there are two normative forces at work here: the “practical” goodness of believing well of another and the “cognitive”, “intellectual” or “speculative” evil of judging when the evidence does not license it. Aquinas seems to be saying that, for judgments with this kind of subject matter — in his case, the goodness and badness of other persons — a different and singular standard is at work than when we judge of things, one which displaces, rather than conflicts with, the evidentialist injunction to only believe what is favored by the evidence, and to suspend judgment otherwise. And as we will see in the next section, Aquinas was not the only thinker to see this.

## **9. Some Historical Precedent, Continued: Kant, Pascal, and James**

In Aquinas, we encountered the thought that beliefs about other people had some unique normative characteristics. When it is a question of someone’s goodness, and the answer is uncertain, we should judge the person good. This is because, unlike beliefs about mere things, our judgments about the character of other persons is bound up with other attitudes like praise or condemnation. Moreover, when the epistemic situation regarding another person is uncertain, and we judge them good, we do not judge in the face of countervailing reasons to suspend judgment. It is good to believe well of others when the evidence is uncertain, and we do not violate any intellectual duties by doing so.

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<sup>80</sup> Again, the precise nature of Aquinas’s axiology and deontology is unclear, so there might be other ways of describing this sort of situation. We could say, for example, that Aquinas does not believe that the *reason* to believe charitably is counterbalanced by a *reason* to suspend judgment, a reason indirectly grounded in the goodness of believing truths and the badness of believing falsehoods.

In this way, Aquinas's views on judgments about other persons come closest to the view argued for in this chapter. But other thinkers have espoused similar views at higher levels of generality. If we abstract away from the *content* of the propositions we have been considering — those about other persons — the core of the view under consideration is that, under certain conditions of epistemic uncertainty, we have reason to have beliefs about certain subject-matters that bear some special practical importance. We see *that* sort of view not only in Aquinas, but in Kant, Pascal, and William James.

The relevant aspect of Kant's view can be found in the discussion of the postulates in the *Second Critique* and *Religion*. We need not wade too deeply into the pool of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy (and their intersection) to see the basic parallel.<sup>81</sup> For Kant, there were a select few subject matters — the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will — about which we could have belief that were subject to a unique set of standards. For Kant, this was because we needed to have these beliefs in order to be sincerely motivated moral agents, and that they concerned noumenal matters about which we could *never* have knowledge. These two facts, combined with what Kant called the “primacy of practical reason,” are supposed to imply that beliefs in the existence of immortality, God, and freedom of the will are rational.<sup>82</sup> Importantly, like Aquinas, Kant did not think that there are two different sets of standards that conflict with each other or two sets of reasons that weight against one another when it comes to beliefs like these. When we believe in the existence of these noumenal things, belief in which is

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<sup>81</sup> There is much in the following discussion that merits a more expansive discussion, and some aspects of Kant's view will be completely elided. I will not discuss, for example, the role that the highest good plays in Kant's argument for the postulates. Nor will I discuss what the postulates are necessary *for*, exactly; describing them as “necessary for being sincere moral agents” is an oversimplification. But for our purposes, the exact details of Kant's view and the argument for that view are unimportant; what matters is the structural similarity his view bears to Aquinas's view of beliefs about other people, and to the view argued for in this chapter.

<sup>82</sup> The primacy of practical reason is introduced and discussed in §3 the Dialectic of the second *Critique*.

necessary for being sincerely motivated moral agents, we are not really transgressing any intellectual standard. For ordinary empirical matters, there is normally a standard given by the “interest” of theoretical reason, which is to have complete, systematic knowledge of the world. But for these subject matters, the interest of theoretical reason gives way to practical reason, which as an interest in these beliefs, since they are necessary for proper moral motivation. The consequence is that, for certain subjects, in certain conditions of epistemic uncertainty (i.e., the knowability of the subject matter), we have some positive reasons for belief without there being some conflicting and counterweighing reasons to suspend belief.

Today, few would endorse Kant’s claim that sincerely motivated moral action requires believing in the soul’s immortality or the existence of God. And we need not to see the more basic insight in Kant’s view about the norms that govern belief: namely, that in certain epistemic situations, there is reason to have beliefs that, in the absence of certain “practical” considerations, would otherwise not exist. If we want to call such a position “pragmatism,” then it is a milder sort of pragmatism, one that does not give us license to believe whatever makes us, or those around us, happy, or to believe whatever would be useful according to any other metric.

This sort of milder pragmatism is not limited to the cloisters of Scholastic and Kantian thought. It can be found in other periods of Western philosophy, too. In fact, perhaps the most famous instance of an argument for practical reasons for belief, Pascal’s so-called “Wager,” is also an instance of this milder form of pragmatism. In the *Pensees*, Pascal does not argue that we ought to believe whatever would make us happier (or more likely to flourish in some more rarified divine sense). The Wager concerns a very specific question: namely, whether we ought to believe in the existence of God. So Pascal’s pragmatism is limited to certain subject-matters. Moreover, it is an underemphasized feature of the *Pensées* passage in which the Wager occurs

(Pascal 2005, S680/L418, 212-214) that Pascal makes explicit mention of God's essential *unknowability* in preparation for the argument. This epistemic facet of our relationship to the divine is inessential to contemporary decision-theoretic versions of the argument (so long as it is not *certain* that God does not exist, or the probability of his existence is zero), it is reasonable to assume that Pascal thought our evidential situation partly explained *why* there could be (and is) practical reason to affirm God's existence. Again, we do not have to endorse any of Pascal's claims about the rationality of belief in God in order to glean the more basic insight here: that under certain conditions of epistemic uncertainty, there can be reason to have beliefs about certain significant subject matters, beliefs that would not be licensed were the subject something more mundane.

This was the same line famously taken by William James in "The Will to Believe." James makes it an explicit condition on believing a proposition on the basis of one's "passional" nature that the matter "cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (James 1979, 20). Though it is a matter of some interpretation what this comes to — it depends on just what kind of 'can' is involved in the statement — the similarity to Kant's and Pascal's restriction of their pragmatism to matters undecidable by reason should be obvious. So, too, should the further restriction James puts on subject matters fit for pragmatic belief: for the only propositions for which our passions ought to decide belief are those that have a certain practical importance. In James's terminology, the propositional options in question had to be "momentous" (1979, 2): the stakes involved in believing a proposition or not believing must be sufficiently high, and there must be a certain *irrevocability* about the option taken.<sup>83</sup> There is *much* to be said about James's

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<sup>83</sup> James does not say much about this requirement, but we can see how some of his examples of belief settled by one's passions might have a certain irreversible character. If you believe that someone likes you, you might go on to engage in social interactions that make the proposition more likely to be true, and which would secure for you an important social good. If you do not believe that this person likes you — either by suspending judgment or believing the negation

complicated variety of pragmatism, and much has been said about it, but it suffices for our purposes to see that the same basic structure at work in Aquinas's, Pascal's, and Kant's thought is at work here: that doxastic matters of great importance can be determined by certain non-evidential considerations when the epistemic situation regarding that matter is uncertain.

Many of the pragmatists of the past take certain *religious* questions to be the primary field in which practical considerations operate. Another pattern in pragmatic thought of the past (with the exception of Aquinas) was that questions of what is good *for the believer* are the primary practical considerations relevant to determining what to believe when practical considerations are relevant. We do not have to endorse either idea to see their more basic insight. The sort of pragmatism we have canvassed in this section has seen so many echoes across the history of Western philosophy because it speaks to something fundamentally true about belief: that when a question is uncertain, we have reasons to believe that can spring from non-evidential sources. If the intuitions in the above cases are correct, then beliefs about others is an existence proof for these kinds of reasons.

### **10. What Kind of Epistemic Uncertainty Licenses Charitable Belief?**

So far, we have said very little about the kind of epistemic uncertainty that licenses charitable belief about other persons. To fully flesh out the view under consideration, more needs to be said about what kind of epistemic conditions make belief for these reasons possible and justified.

There is one particularly strong understanding of evidential uncertainty suggested by the views of Pascal and Kant that I think we should rule out. Both of these thinkers emphasize, in

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— then you might not bother pursuing the relationship any further, and lose touch with the person in a way that makes a subsequent reconnection unlikely.

varying degrees, the *unknowability* of the subject matters about which we are justified in believing for practical reasons. This is clearest in the case of Kant's pragmatism, because the entities that practical reason licenses us to believe in are *noumenal*; knowledge about them or their natures is metaphysically impossible. Pascal did not divide the world into noumena and phenomena, but he did divide the world into the comprehensible and the incomprehensible; and God, who is infinite and without "extent," falls into the latter category (2005, 153). And for Pascal, that means that we could neither know God's nature nor if God exists. For both Kant and Pascal, the essential unknowability of God's nature and existence is part of the reason there are alternative grounds for believing in them. For both of these thinkers, the dominion of practical considerations over belief seems to be limited to entities that are metaphysically impossible to know.<sup>84</sup>

Let us set aside the fraught question of whether knowledge of whether God's existence is metaphysically impossible, and address the more basic question: does belief for non-evidential reasons require the subject matter at hand to be essentially unknowable? I see no reason why belief for non-evidential reasons should be restricted in this way. If it is true that we ought to

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<sup>84</sup> It appears that James has a similar view, but as is often the case with him, it is somewhat muddled and complicated. The primary thesis James defends in "The Will to Believe" is that "our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option *that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*" (1979, 11). The last clause certainly suggests that the issues that our passions inevitably and rightfully decide are those beyond the reach of the intellect in something like the way noumenal matters are out of reach of theoretical reason for Kant. However, I do not think we should interpret the 'cannot' so strongly. Many of the topics that James discusses are philosophical theses — the reality of morality, the nature and existence of the external world — that are admittedly *difficult* to resolve through reasoning. It is unlikely that James thought these issues were *impossible* to resolve through philosophical reflection. His point is rather that we do not now have strong evidence for philosophical theses of this sort and should not expect to have such evidence anytime soon. A more obvious counterexample to the strong reading of James's requirement is his discussion of self-fulfilling *social* beliefs. James argues that beliefs of the form *X likes me* or *social group Y is made of trustworthy members* are also suitably decided by our passions when the evidence for them is inconclusive, in part because believing them makes them more likely to be true. James does not think prosaic facts about the attitudes and dispositions of others are metaphysically unknowable — his extensive psychology attests to that. What James means by 'cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds', then, must mean something considerably weaker than the metaphysical impossibility of knowledge.

believe charitably of others in cases like *Stranger Uncertainty*, then we have at least one counterexample to this strong restriction, for it is almost certain that we can, in many cases, have knowledge of the attitudes and character of others. More importantly, however, the question of whether the attitudes of others are knowable seems *independent* of the question of whether charitable belief in cases like *Stranger Uncertainty* are justified. However we eventually fall on that question, it seems appropriate to believe charitably of others. So it cannot be a requirement on belief for non-evidential reasons that the subject matter involved be unknowable in some metaphysically strong sense.

If belief for non-evidential reasons does not require the unknowability of its subject matter, though, what sort of epistemic situation *does* it require?

Interestingly, there seem to be certain kinds of epistemic uncertainty that are *incompatible* with charitable belief. Imagine a great and omniscient god descends from the heavens and tells you that the objective probability of (Impartial Charity) is precisely 0.5, or that a machine predictor with a very well-established track records assigns probability 0.5 to (Impartial Charity). In these sorts of situations, in which we know that the evidence for *Strider is a decent person* is perfectly balanced, it does not seem that we ought to believe charitably of Strider. It seems that we ought to suspend judgment. To go on and believe charitably of Strider when you know the precise odds would be delusional.

What should we make of this fact? Our conclusion will depend upon how we understand the notions of evidence and objective probability. Here are a few candidate descriptions of the epistemic situation above:

- (1) You know that the objective chance of  $\langle \text{Strider is a decent person} \rangle$  is 0.5.

- (2) The evidence strongly favors <The objective chance of <Strider is a decent person> is 0.5>.
- (3) You know that the evidence for <Strider is a decent person> is 0.5.
- (4) The evidence strongly favors <The evidence for <Strider is a decent person is 0.5>>.

Which of one of these descriptions is the appropriate one for the situation above depends on whether objective chances for propositions like <Strider is a decent person> can meaningfully be spoken of, and if so, what relationship these chances bear to relations of evidential support. Thankfully, we do not need to adjudicate between these different epistemic descriptions of the above situations, for they all share a crucial feature in common. Each is a facet of a would-be believer's *higher-order* epistemic situation: what they know, or have strong evidence for, regarding the evidence for or objective chance that *Strider is a decent person*. The kind of uncertainty that licenses doxastic charity, then, must in the very least include some higher-order component. It must preclude a kind of knowledge of or evidence about the exact balance of evidence for <Strider is a decent person>.

This should not come as too much of a surprise. While we might have knowledge of the objective chances of weather events or coin toss results, this kind of knowledge does not, on the whole, extend to our fellow human beings. No person has ever rightfully claimed to know what the exact chance is that a person on the street is affable. It would be baffling to be told from a stranger that the probability that they had some character trait was *any* particular number. In general, we lack the kind of systematic knowledge and explanatory models of human psychology and behavior that would make those sorts of quantitative judgments possible.

Of course, we can make all kinds of statistical inferences about human beings, just as we can about any other denizen of the natural world. One might be tempted here to distinguish

between different “stances” one can take on one’s fellow human beings, one of which treats persons as potential objects of statistical inference and prediction, another of which does not, and that doxastic charity belongs to the latter. I, for one, do not think the lines between our ways of apprehending and comprehending other persons is so clean. But we do not need to subscribe to that sort of dualistic Strawsonian view in order to see why the existence of quantitative social science does not undermine the idea that we do not, in general, know what the objective chances are for a person having any particular attitude or character trait.<sup>85</sup>

For one, very few of our interactions with other persons are mediated by this kind of statistical knowledge; most of us simply do not possess it. But even if one *does* possess knowledge of this sort, it is often a distant leap from the objective chance that a member of some class of humans will have a trait to the objective chance that some particular person, who belongs to that class, possesses that trait; for that person is a member of myriad other classes, members of which might have a different objective chance of possessing that trait. This is, of course, the infamous problem of the reference class, but it is one that applies particularly acutely to the sorts of questions about particular persons that we are concerned with here. For even if there is a pragmatic solution to the problem of the reference class<sup>86</sup> — by, for example, appealing to the “narrowest” class to which a particular object belongs — the application of that pragmatic solution will be far more difficult when the question is what kind of attitude or character trait a human being possesses at a particular point in time. What sort of statistics could one advert to in deciding the objective chance that (Impartial Charity) is true?

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<sup>85</sup> See Strawson 1962.

<sup>86</sup> I follow Hayek (2007) in holding that the reference class problem is not limited to frequentist interpretations of probability, and that it applies *any* non-subjective interpretation (and even some sufficiently refined subjective interpretations).

I have so far argued that the kind of epistemic uncertainty necessary for doxastic charity is, at a minimum, a lack of knowledge of or strong evidence for the exact objective chance of or evidential balance for the proposition in question. When the epistemic situation is that clear, we have no business believing well of another. But what if we know that the evidence or objective chance falls within a certain *range*? After all, it is a rare occurrence that we know exactly what the chance of a proposition's truth is; for some subject-matters, the very possibility of this might be a hopeless idealization. But what if we know that the chance that Strider is a decent person is, say, between 0.4 and 0.6? Should we believe, charitably, that Strider is a decent person? Again, there is some measure of idealization in thinking we can even find ourselves in *this* sort of situation — try to think of the last time you took yourself to know something of this sort, or to have strong evidence for it. The epistemic conditions relevant to whether or not doxastic charity is warranted do not seem to concern any particular numeric range, be it for objective chances or evidential weights or balances.

What we often *do* take ourselves to know, however, is whether the balance of the evidence or the relevant objective probabilities *favor disbelief, suspension of judgment, or belief*, in the absence of other, non-evidential considerations. This is true for propositions about other people just as it is for propositions about the weather or dice rolls: there are some situations where the evidence is obviously in favor of an attitude attribution, and we know that it justifies belief in that attitude, *even if* we do not know the precise balance of evidence or range in which that balance might fall. We sometimes just know that the evidence favors believing that Strider is a decent person. Other times, we just know that the evidence favors the opposite. And just as importantly, we sometime just know that the evidence, at the first order, favors suspending

belief. And when we know that the evidence favors suspending belief, it seems no more plausible to think that we ought to believe charitably of another person.

That last point might seem to undermine what has so far been said about the conditions for doxastic charity, but they do not. In fact, when it comes to the attitudes of other persons, I think it is quite *rare* for us to be in a position to know that the evidence, at the first-order, favors suspension of judgment. That kind of epistemic situation arises most easily for things like dice rolls, but as we have already remarked, human beings are much more complicated, and their attitudes are not always directly perceptible. More often, we find ourselves in situations in which *we are not in a position to know what doxastic attitude is favored by the evidence, or favored by the objective chances*. In many cases, this might be because the evidence we have is scarce: we simply have not gotten a lot of information about a person. Plausibly, *Stranger Uncertainty* is one such case. We have just met Strider, and aside from this one conversation and our background knowledge of the sorts of people who show up at parties like these, we do not know much else that might help us decide where the balance of evidence lies.

For most domains of inquiry, if you are not in a position to know what doxastic attitude the (first-order) evidence favors, or if the evidence for what the (first-order) evidence favors is itself unclear, then the proper response is, *ipso facto*, to suspend judgment. If you are not in a position to know whether the evidence, on balance, supports believing, disbelieving, or suspending judgment about whether a carbon tax is the most effective way to combat climate change, then you should suspend judgment. But as Aquinas saw, persons present a unique case. We owe it to others to settle this kind of higher-order ambiguity in favor of our fellow human beings.

## 11. Objections

### 11.1. Why Belief?

One common response to the sort of charitable policy argued for here is to deny that our charity to others must be *doxastic*. When faced with situations like *Stranger Uncertainty*, one should suspend judgment about whether or not Strider is a decent person, in the same way that one should suspend judgment whenever one has strong evidence that the evidence for a proposition is unclear. But in deference to the intuition that *some* kind of charity towards Strider is warranted, we should also say that one should *hope* or *have faith* that Strider is a decent person. Maybe there is some weaker, quasi-doxastic attitude that we should adopt towards Strider, like *accepting* that he is a decent person.<sup>87</sup> Or perhaps our charitable response towards Strider need not involve any inner attitude at all, and we should simply *act-as-if* he is a decent person. Even if in one's heart of hearts, one cannot bring oneself to believe in Strider's decency, there other cognitive or quasi-cognitive responses that might be the appropriate for treating him in a charitable way. According to this objection, the intuitions at work in cases like *Stranger Uncertainty* are actually directed at these other attitudes, rather than belief.

We do not need to respond to each version of this objection individually, by showing how holding that particular attitude towards Strider would be insufficient in giving him what he is owed. This would be an enormously difficult task. For one, many of these notions — hope, faith, acceptance — themselves admit of many variations and sub-species. What is worse, there are many competing accounts of these particular sub-species. Even worse, it is an open question

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<sup>87</sup> Acceptance, as discussed by Cohen 1992, is a mode of assenting to a proposition that is similar to belief in some respects, but crucially difference in others. The most important difference is that acceptance is a *context-sensitive* attitude: it informs action only in certain contexts in which it makes sense to “activate” the assumption that the proposition is true, such as in scientific inquiry.

whether two competing accounts of a particular attitude like hope are genuinely competing, or simply account of different psychological phenomena. Even *worse*, there is disagreement about to what extent these attitudes can be explained in terms of or reduced to the others. So in some ways, we have some like an objection *schema* that needs to be responded to. Thankfully, such a response is possible: all that need to be shown is that, regardless of what alternative attitude or response is proposed for *Stranger Uncertainty*, anything less than full belief is insufficient for giving Strider what he is owed. This argument will come in two parts.

The first part begins with the observation that some of the attitudes that might seem to be alternatives to belief — faith, for example — have species that themselves are constituted by or imply having full belief. The “propositional” variant of faith, expressed in English by phrases of the form ‘having faith that *p*’, arguably involves believing that *p*, or believing that *p* in a specific way.<sup>88</sup> However, many of the other attitudes on the list are not so easily reduced to full belief — at least full belief with the right content. While hoping that *p* might involve believing that *p* is *possible*, for example, it plausible does not involve actually believing that *p*. So something else must be said about why the proper response in *Stranger Uncertainty* is to, say, hope, but not believe, that Strider is a decent person.

Suppose that, in *Stranger Uncertainty*, you suspend judgement about whether Strider is a decent person, but adopt all of these other suggested attitudes, insofar as they are distinct and possessing them together is mutually consistent. You *hope* that Strider is a decent person. This will likely mean that you will dedicate some of one’s attention to the fact that Strider being a decent person is a real possibility, even if you do not outright believe it. You will desire it to be

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<sup>88</sup> Swinburne (2005, 138) calls this the ‘Thomistic’ conception of faith, because it can be found throughout that religious-scholarly tradition.

true that Strider is a decent person, and will be pleased if you were to learn that Strider is, in fact, a decent person. This hope might also have certain motivational consequences, as well. You might do what you can to make it more likely that this state of affairs obtains, if given the opportunity. One might make sure that, in the future, one fairly scrutinizes the evidence for and against Strider's decency. Further suppose that, in addition to hoping that Strider is decent, that you decide to *act as if* Strider is decent. Perhaps you are convinced that acting as if Strider is a decent person will make it more likely for Strider himself, or others, to believe this — even if you yourself cannot do so. Maybe you think this is simply the kind thing to do. Regardless of the rationale, we can suppose you do everything you can to make it appear that you sincerely believe that Strider is a decent person. You are even willing to assert that you so-believe. What is even more, we can assume that you also do what you can to *cause yourself* to believe that Strider is a decent person. You attend to all the evidence in favor of his decency, and try to ignore the evidence against it. You meditate after the party, and make 'Strider is a decent person' your mantra. You write 'Strider is a decent person' over and over again on a chalkboard, and so on.

We can, of course, quibble about whether any of the above attitudes is an appropriate response to the situation in *Stranger Uncertainty*. Quite certainly, some of these responses are unnecessary, and in some cases, border on the obsessive. What strikes me as the more important point is that the whole bundle, whether containing unnecessary responses or not, is not a *sufficiently* charitable response to Strider's behavior. To see this, it is helpful to imagine what it would be like from Strider's perspective to learn that you did not believe in his decency in light of his wrongdoing. More generally, it is helpful to imagine being on the receiving end of charitable belief and its lack. How does it feel when, in the face of uncertainty about what the

evidence about your supports, someone else suspends judgment instead of thinking better of you?

Even if someone displays all of the outer trappings of charity — acting-as-if you are a decent person, and perhaps hoping that you are — I think we would say, in the very least, that we *want* to be believed good, even when the evidence does not clearly show it to be so. While hope and action say a lot about a person's orientation toward you, belief, in some ways, is closer to the *core* of that orientation. Knowing that someone believes that we are decent, or have the attitudes that make us decent, is much more meaningful than knowing that they merely hope this to be the case. Belief is the inner outlook from which hope and action spring. A charitable policy of belief, therefore, is one of the deepest ways in which one person can treat another well.

### **11.2. The Costs of Charity**

The previous objection was an attempt to show that charitable belief is not necessary, given the availability of attitude charitable attitudes. We can object from the opposite direction, too: that it is necessary *not* to have charitable beliefs about other persons.

Having beliefs in Strider's goodness will rationalize certain other attitudes and actions that would not otherwise be rationalizable. Full belief in a proposition typically closes off *inquiry* into whether that proposition is true. If you believe that Strider is a decent person, you will not probably actively seek out additional evidence for or against that proposition. While you might be willing to change your belief in light of evidence you receive, you will not typically make an active effort into collecting this evidence. By contrast, if the evidence for a proposition is uncertain — or if it is uncertain what attitude the evidence supports — then it will often be rational to continue one's inquiry into whether the proposition is true; evidential uncertainty is the impetus for scientific and prosaic inquiry alike. But if the (higher-order) evidential situation

in purported cases of doxastic charity is uncertain, it seems we should not believe charitably, but suspend belief, in order not to foreclose such inquiry.

It is not true that, for any proposition, one should inquire into that proposition's truth if the evidence for that proposition is uncertain. There are innumerable many propositions that are evidentially uncertain for us, and inquiry into all of them is both impossible (because inquiry takes time) and undesirable (because some propositions are not worth inquiring into).

Nonetheless, it is true for some propositions, in some circumstances, that we ought to inquire into them when the evidence for them is uncertain. (Almost all scientific inquiry begins from this epistemic situation.)

Second, it is not true that we have no reason to inquire into propositions that we believe. Reevaluating beliefs over time is an essential part of inquiry, and we should not only change our beliefs in response to evidence that we passively learn. Sometimes, it is rational to seek out evidence for and against the propositions we already believe.<sup>89</sup> This is a part of proper doxastic upkeep. So the very fact that doxastic charity commits us to beliefs in certain propositions does not commit us to never actively seeking out evidence for those propositions.

Still, it is true that believing a proposition often *does* lead us to not actively seeking out new evidence for that proposition; belief is often the *conclusion* of that process, and subsequent deliberation. And that seems sufficient to raise trouble for doxastic charity. There are countless situations in which it is advisable to seek out more information about a person's attitudes or character. After receiving a resume, an employer might ask for an interview with a job applicant

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<sup>89</sup> Jane Friedman (2017) has recently argued that inquiry into whether a proposition is true or false requires suspending judgment about that proposition. This sort of view might seem to contradict the argument here that belief is compatible with inquiry, but it does not. The question is whether arriving at a charitable belief would always make it irrational to seek new evidence for or against the belief. Seeking this evidence might itself require not believing the proposition for the duration of one's inquiry, but this is compatible with having reason to *initiate* this inquiry, even though one believes the charitable proposition.

in order to learn more about the applicant's personality. The resume, though strongly suggesting that the applicant has the requisite skills, might not conclusively establish whether he or she has the requisite disposition for the job. The employer, then, should try to learn more. But if the employer were to exercise doxastic charity and believe that the applicant does have the requisite disposition, then it is likely that the employer would go on to hire the applicant without bothering to learn more through, say, subsequent interviews. And that seems grossly irrational.

However, the view defended here does not imply that employers should engage in this kind of irrational activity. Recall the earlier discussion doxastic partiality in friendship. One of the reasons that picture of partiality was rejected was that it seemed that some kinds of friendship demand a kind of doxastic treatment that we do not expect from others. In this way, reasons for belief grounded in impartial doxastic charity can be defeated by overriding reasons to suspend judgment provided by a relationship. Friendships are not special in this regard. Other kinds of relationship might also require a different doxastic policy than charity. And plausibly, the relationship between an employer and a prospective employee is one such relationship.

At this point, it might seem like doxastic charity is inching closer and closer to irrelevance. If special relationships can defeat charity, and such relationships are pervasive in human life, then it appears that we should not expect doxastic charity to have a regular place in our belief-forming practices. But this appearance is misleading. We should not assume that all, or even most, human relationships will defeat doxastic charity when it comes to propositions about their members' attitudes and character. For one, even within relationships in which charity is defeated, this defeat will usually only extend to *particular* questions about a person's attitudes and character. An employer is primarily interested in getting to the truth about a specific subset of a person's psychology: the subset that bears on their capacity for a particular kind of labor. A

friend might expect you to be charitable when it comes to his or her most general moral dispositions, but not when it comes to the moral quality of particular acts, or the attitudes that directly gave rise to them. And some relationships might not commit their members to overriding doxastic charity at all.

Still, one might extend this objection from inquiry to a broader class of relationships, and a broader class of propositions. The most pressing version of this objection is that doxastic charity licenses a kind of *naivete* about other persons, a naivete that threatens to put oneself and others in harm's way.<sup>90</sup> If there is evidence that some person intends to harm you or another, but it is inconclusive whether the total balance of evidence favors this proposition, then it seems you should both (1) try to collect more evidence if it is possible, and (2) act with an appropriate degree of caution. But if charity compels you in this situation to believe that the person in question does *not* intend you harm, then it seems that (1) and (2) will often be rationally precluded: if you believe that the person in question is not malicious, then there appears to be no special reason to inquire further into whether they are, and it will not be rational to act if they are, either. This means that doxastic charity will likely commit persons to acting in ways increase the risk of harm to themselves and others. One will sincerely assert to others, for example, that the person in question is not malicious. And that might lead to terrible results.<sup>91</sup>

It must be acknowledged at the outset that some costs to doxastic charity of this sort will be unavoidable. A policy of believing charitably of others when the evidence is inconclusive,

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<sup>90</sup> This is a topic taken up in Preston-Roedder 2013. While the focus there is on the possible harm that might come to the *believer*, rather than the believed, the arguably more pressing question is whether faith or charitable belief in other persons is a liability to others.

<sup>91</sup> This sort of argument should be reminiscent of W.K. Clifford's (1947) argument that not believing in accordance with the evidence can be morally blameworthy in virtue of rationalizing actions that can lead a person into unreasonable risk, like the shipowner who believes that his ship is seaworthy even though the evidence does not support this conclusion.

rather than restricting those beliefs to when the evidence is conclusive, will necessarily lead to more frequently believing well of others, and in situations in which those beliefs are possibly false. That straightforwardly implies that a policy of doxastic charity will lead to more false beliefs about the goodness of others than a “agnostic” policy. Assuming that these beliefs rationalize more trusting behavior, that will in turn lead to more persons being harmed as a result of this doxastic policy. The question, then, is whether these costs are too severe to justify a policy of doxastic bias.

To answer this question, we need to get a firmer grip on just how extensive these sorts of cases would be were doxastic charity to be adopted. This partly depends upon how often it is the case that human beings are malicious when the evidence for their maliciousness is inconclusive — a difficult proposition to assess. What we can establish, however, is that doxastic charity does not always license unjustifiable risk-taking behavior, even when the proposition in question concerns a person’s propensity to harm.

Recall again the doxastic charity is defeasible. So far, we have considered ways in which the nature of a relationship can defeat the impartial reason to believe charitably. However, there are also facts about the *proposition in question* that can do the same. In particular, facts about the practical consequences for a proposition’s being true or false can affect whether it is rational to *inquire further* into whether the proposition is true. In a situation like the *Stranger Uncertainty*, the chances of harm that resulting from having a charitable belief about Strider are not terribly significant. If Strider turns out not to be a person who is generally considerate of other people, the life of Strider or others will not be gravely endangered by you believing this. The truth of (Impartial Charity) in no way implies that Strider would be a harm to others.

But now consider a different sort of case: you stumble upon a note from your child that states that he intends to harm his peers. This is the first evidence you have ever received that he has violent tendencies, and you are wondering whether he really intends to do as the note suggests. Let us stipulate that the evidence does not clearly favor belief, disbelief, or suspension. What should you believe? Well, a question with a clearer answer is what you should do. You should inquire further. You should talk to your son, and to others who know him. Does this mean that one should also suspend judgment about whether your son intends to harm others? This depends on what the exact connection is between belief, suspension of judgment, and inquiry. Some have recently argued that inquiring into whether a proposition is true psychologically requires suspending judgment into whether the proposition is true.<sup>92</sup> Assuming that it can never be the case that you have a reason to have an attitude that is psychologically impossible to hold, the truth of this thesis would imply that, in situations like the above, it is not the case that you should believe that your son does not intend harm. Whether doxastic charity in cases like these is defeated depends upon whether inquiry requires suspension of judgment.

The question of whether inquiring into whether  $p$  requires suspending judgment about  $p$  is difficult. Consideration of certain kinds of cases suggests the answer is ‘yes’: A Sherlock Holmes who exhibited all of his signature inquisitive behavior — searching the scene of the crime, interrogating witnesses, making deductions on the basis of the collected evidence — while simultaneously believing that the Butler committed the crime, would be more properly described as *pretending* to inquire into who committed the crime. On the other hand, cases of persons who openly admit to the possibility of their beliefs being wrong and ask others with contrary opinions for the evidence against their own beliefs, seem properly described as instance

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<sup>92</sup> See Friedman 2017.

of both believing a proposition and inquiring, by way of dialog, into whether their belief is true.<sup>93</sup> (This situation should be familiar enough to academic philosophers.)

There is not enough space to adjudicate this issue here. However, we can at least offer the following disjunctive conclusion. If inquiry into whether a proposition is true requires suspending judgment about that proposition, then in cases in which the stakes involved in a question about another person's attitudes justifies further inquiry, the reason to believe charitably is defeated. If inquiry into a proposition does *not* psychologically require suspension about that proposition, then the reason to believe charitably is not defeated. In neither case is the central thesis of this chapter threatened.

However, if inquiry *does* require suspension, and doxastic charity is defeated in cases in which further inquiry is justified, one might resurrect the earlier worry that doxastic charity is practically irrelevant. There are few topics more central to human life than the attitude of others: should we not expect inquiry into them to be just as central? It seems, then, that we have reasons to inquire further into a vast swath of propositions about other persons' attitudes and character, reasons that would very frequently defeat doxastic charity.

A little bit of phenomenological reflection, however, shows that this objection exaggerates the extent to which we actively inquire into the attitudes of others. Some of the most salient cases of such inquiry are institutional: legal investigations into a suspect's defendant's intent, for example, or inquiries by therapists into their patient's psyches. But it is difficult to

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<sup>93</sup> One such example, at least at the time of writing this chapter, is provided by the website [www.changeaview.com](http://www.changeaview.com). Users of this site post a "view," which the rules of the site require to be a genuinely held belief of the user at the time of posting. The purpose of the site is to solicit arguments from other users why the view is false; the person who posts the target view is allowed to respond to other users' arguments and can award "deltas" to users who succeed in doing so. The most notable aspect of this exchange, for our purposes, is the frequency with which users who are not convinced by an individual argument in the discussion state that they still believe the view under scrutiny. If the user is sincere and correct about this, and if the user is also properly described as inquiring into whether their belief is true throughout their participation in the discussion, then this appears to be a case of inquiring into a proposition's truth while believing that proposition.

imagine common, everyday cases in which one actively spends time looking into what attitudes a person possesses. The majority of human interactions are not mediated by inquiry; even if we are constantly open to revising our beliefs about others on the basis of those interactions, *receptivity to new evidence* and *active inquiry* are quite different things.

Consider new relationships, like a budding friendship, in which neither person is well-acquainted with the attitudes of the other. It seems that, given the initial paucity of evidence, prospective friends should remain agnostic about many questions of character as they get to know the other person. Their committing to spending time together is, in part, a form of mutual inquiry into each other's character, one in which both persons intend to learn more about the other. And that might seem to show that doxastic charity is overridden wherever and whenever a new relationship is underway. However, the description of this sort of prosaic interaction as 'inquiry' is inapt. It is certainly true that, when we are in the early stages of getting to know a person, we are *curious* about them and *wonder* what they are like. These attitudes will often lead us to want to spend more time with a person. But those sorts of attitudes are not equivalent to *inquiring*, which is a kind of activity. Inquiry requires just not being curious about some proposition, or wanting to know whether it is true, but actively seeking and evaluating evidence for and against it. And few interactions with your prospective friend will be properly characterized in that fashion. Although you might be particularly attentive or receptive to such evidence in the early stages of a relationship, this is not sufficient for inquiry, and is compatible with charitable beliefs about the person.

Of course, we ask about other persons all the time, and asking others is a way of inquiring. But more often than not, this sort of inquiry is not directly concerned with the sorts of questions of moral character for which doxastic charity has a place: directly asking about

whether somebody is altruistic, or kind, or fair, is far less common than more mundane inquiries into somebody's weekend plans.

## **12. Conclusion**

There seems to be an important difference in the beliefs we have about persons and the beliefs we have about, to borrow a bit of Kantian phraseology, "mere things." If the proposition in question were about the weather, or the location of one's keys, inconclusive evidence would make it reasonable to suspend judgement. But other people seem to place different demands on us than the weather or our keys. Keys do need us to have faith in them. For them, we can be guided by the evidence and the evidence alone. To suspend judgment in service to the evidential balance seems to be a strange and alienating stance to take to Samwise and Strider both. It is to treat their attitudes as a mere subject of empirical inquiry, to make beliefs about them subject to the same standards as beliefs about anything unthinking and unfeeling.

This is what I have attempted to show in this chapter. Once we do away with the idea that there is a particularly epistemic species of normativity that bears on our beliefs, and focus our attention on the important and real question of how we ought to believe, we see that doxastic charity towards others is not only a conceptual possibility, but a normative necessity.

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