

THE PERMISSIBLE NORM OF TRUTH AND “OUGHT IMPLIES CAN”

Xintong WEI

ABSTRACT: Many philosophers hold that a norm of truth governs the propositional attitude of belief. According to one popular construal of normativity, normativity is prescriptive in nature. The prescriptive norm can be formulated either in terms of obligation or permission: one ought to or may believe that p just in case p is true. It has been argued that the obligation norm is jointly incompatible with the maxim *ought implies can* and the assumption that there exists some truth that we cannot believe. The problem of the incompatible triad has motivated some to adopt the permissible norm of truth. I argue that the permissible norm faces an analogous problem of the incompatible triad.

KEYWORDS: epistemic norms, ought implies can, nature of belief, the truth norm of belief

1. Introduction

Most philosophers hold that there is a standard of correctness for belief: a belief that p is correct if and only if p is true. Belief is subject to the norm of truth. Philosophers disagree, however, about whether the norm of truth is genuinely normative and whether belief is *essentially* subject to the norm of truth. According to one popular construal, normativity is prescriptive in nature, i.e., a prescriptive norm is essentially capable of guiding and it issues requirements, permissions or prohibitions. Genuine norms tell one what one ought (not) to do under given circumstances.¹

Assuming the prescriptive construal of normativity, there are two intuitive ways to formulate the norm of truth governing the attitude of believing:

(\vec{J}_O) For any S , p : S *ought to* believe that p if and only if p is true.

(\vec{J}_P) For any S , p : S *may* believe that p if and only if p is true.

¹ The prescriptive construal of the truth norm is widely endorsed, for discussion of alternative construal in evaluative and teleological terms, see, Conor McHugh and Daniel Whiting, "The Normativity of Belief," *Analysis* 74, 4 (2014).

One problem with $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ is that we *cannot* believe every truth that is out there in the world, as such, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ clashes with the principle *ought implies can* (OIC). In other words, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$, OIC and the claim that there are cases where if p is true S cannot believe that p are jointly incompatible. Call this the problem of the incompatible triad.

The problem of the incompatible triad has motivated *normativists* to either revise $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ or adopt $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$.² In this paper, I will focus on the second strategy as developed by Daniel Whiting. I will first present the problem of the incompatible triad and show how it motivates Whiting's permissible norm $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$. I then show that $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ faces an analogous version of the incompatible triad. I will conclude by briefly considering the implication of the result in the debate concerning the truth norm of belief.

2. The Problem of the Incompatible Triad

According to Whiting,³ the prescriptive formulation of the truth norm $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ seems too demanding, given that we are ordinary epistemic agents with finite cognitive powers. Since there are infinitely many truths in the world, and S cannot, surely, believe every single one of them, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$, therefore, faces the following incompatible triad:

($\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$) For any S, p: S ought to believe that p if and only if p is true.

(OIC) For any S, φ : Necessarily, if S ought to φ then S can φ .

(Limited Capacity (LC)) There are cases where if p is true, S cannot believe that p.⁴

² For instance, Paul Boghossian proposes a weaker version of $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ by dropping the biconditional—for any S, p: S ought to believe that p *only if* p is true, in his "The normativity of content," *Philosophical Issues* 13, 1 (2003): 37. Ralph Wedgwood suggests that $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ should be restricted to propositions that one considers in his "Doxastic Correctness," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 87, 1 (2013); "The Right Thing to Believe," in *The Aim of Belief*, ed. Timothy Chan (Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ Daniel Whiting, "Should I Believe the Truth?" *Dialectica* 64, 2 (2010):213-224.

⁴ According to doxastic involuntarism, belief-formation is not under our voluntary control. But given OIC, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ implies that we have voluntary control over our belief-formation. Therefore, OIC, doxastic involuntarism, and $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ also seem jointly incompatible. For the classic discussion on doxastic involuntarism, see William P. Alston, "The deontological conception of epistemic justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988). I assume that some form of doxastic voluntarism is correct.

Motivated by the problem of the incompatible triad, Whiting contends that we should reject $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_O$ and instead adopt $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$. After all, by weakening the deontic requirement from an *obligation* to a *permission*, we avoid the triad. $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ is compatible with OIC and LC, since $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ does not say anything about what one ought to believe. There is no relevantly parallel principle of “*may implies can*,” by which we could derive a statement about what one can believe under $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$. Adopting $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ therefore solves the original problem of the incompatible triad.

3. Does $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ Escape the Incompatible Triad?

Upon a closer inspection, however, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ faces an analogous problem. To see this, I will first show that the permission norm implies a falsity norm and, second, identify a corresponding claim of Limited Capacity* (LC*) that is incompatible with the falsity norm and OIC.

To facilitate our discussion, I shall follow the notations in standard deontic logic (SDL).⁵ “Ought” is understood in terms of the propositional operator **OB** (It is obligatory that...). According to SDL, **OB** is a modal operator and the deontic formulas are evaluated with respect to sets of worlds, in which some are ideal. For our purpose, I adopt the standard semantics for deontic operators, which appeals to possible worlds semantics in which all worlds are ranked—some worlds are better than others. I will leave it to the reader to decide how to best construe ideality with the background theory they prefer (nothing in particular will hinge on this here).⁶ The dual concept of “ought,” i.e. “may,” is abbreviated using the operator **PE**. As is common, the modal operator **PE** is defined in terms of **OB**:

$$\mathbf{PE} x =_{\text{def}} \neg \mathbf{OB} \neg x.$$

It is not difficult to show that $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ entails a falsity norm. $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ can be broken into two conditionals:

$$(\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P) \text{ For any } S, p: p \text{ is true} \rightarrow \mathbf{PE} (S \text{ believes that } p)$$

$$(\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P) \text{ For any } S, p: \mathbf{PE} (S \text{ believes that } p) \rightarrow p \text{ is true}$$

Using contraposition, $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_P$ is equivalent to:

⁵ See, Paul McNamara, “Deontic logic,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Ed Zalta (2010), <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-deontic/>>.

⁶ The standard semantics is defended by pioneering deontic logicians such as, Lennart Åqvist, “Interpretations of Deontic Logic,” 73, 290 (1964); David K. Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Blackwell, 1973). More recently, it is also defended by Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, vol. 2 (Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 5.

For any S, p: p is false \rightarrow \neg PE (S believes that p)

Hence, given that PE x $=_{def}$ \neg OB \neg x, $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ is equivalent to the following falsity norm:

($\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$) For any S, p: p is false \rightarrow OB (\neg S believes that p)

In other words, $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ entails that for any S, p, if p is false then S ought not to believe that p. Whiting is aware that $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ entails the obligation norm $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$, after all, obligation and permission are dual deontic concepts. He regards this as a welcome result because it offers a response to the criticism that $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ is not normatively interesting.⁷ According to Whiting, $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ is normatively interesting just because it is capable of guiding our belief-formation through $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$, which tells us that we ought to refrain from believing p when p is false. Moreover, on Whiting's view, $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$ captures a more fundamental aim of belief, namely, to avoid falsity.

However, given OIC, $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$ implies that we can refrain from believing whatever that is false. There is the analogue of the incompatible triad for $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$, since $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_0$ and OIC are jointly incompatible with the following claim:

(LC*) There are cases where if p is false, S cannot refrain from believing that p.

Whiting quickly dismisses the problem by rejecting (LC*). He considers a case where someone is said to be psychologically unable to refrain from believing that there are aliens. Suppose that there are no aliens. Does example like this show that LC* is true? Whiting thinks not. First, he complains that the relevant modality of “can” figured in OIC is weaker than psychological possibility. He suggests that ought to ϕ implies that it is *humanly possible* to ϕ . Second, he argues that critics of $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ have not shown there are cases where if p is false, it is humanly impossible to refrain from believing that p. Finally, he claims that even if the critic of $\vec{\mathcal{J}}_p$ can show that there are such cases, there is a further question whether the attitude S has towards p counts as a genuine belief.

The question regarding the modality of “can” is indeed an important one. However, Whiting's suggestion that the “can ϕ ” figured in OIC should be understood as “humanly possible” to ϕ seems ill-motivated and lacks reference to the relevant literature on OIC. According to the standard interpretation of “can ϕ ,” one can ϕ just in case one (1) has the ability to ϕ and (2) has the opportunity to exercise that ability to ϕ .⁸ On one influential view, one has an opportunity to ϕ if

⁷ See, for instance, Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, "Against Belief Normativity," in *The Aim of Belief*, ed. Timothy Chan (Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi, "Does Thought Imply Ought?," *Analysis* 67, 296 (2007).

⁸ Such formulation is widely adopted in the debate concerning OIC. See, for instance, David

there is a non-zero objective chance to φ assigned by the relevant psychological laws, where psychological laws are laws that are broadly based on folk-psychology and deal with agent’s actions and attitudes.⁹

On this common interpretation of “can φ ” as having the ability and opportunity to φ , given the psychological laws governing agent’s actions and attitudes, we have at least some reasonably good grasp of what “can φ ” amounts to, broadly based on folk-psychology. By contrast, Whiting does not explain his notion of “humanly possible” to φ . On the face of it, whether it is “humanly possible” to φ would depend on the kind of creature we are, empirically speaking. If that’s right, a natural way to flesh out what is “humanly possible” to φ is just the standard interpretation of *can φ* . It is *humanly possible* for S to φ just in case S has the ability and opportunity to φ , given the psychological laws governing agent’s actions and attitudes.

That being said, I agree with Whiting that critics of \vec{J}_p are yet to show that LC* is true. The case Whiting offers on behalf of his critics—that of a person who cannot refrain from believing that there are aliens does not lend much support to LC* because it is hardly convincing that, in so far as how the case is described, that the person genuinely cannot refrain from believing that there are aliens. I now turn to the task of offering three more persuasive cases in support of LC*.

First, some beliefs might be deeply integrated in our psychological make-up that we cannot refrain from having them. Consider forms of clinical delusions, e.g. patients with Capgras delusion cannot refrain from believing that a close relative has been replaced by an impostor, often due to cognitive failure including abnormal perceptual experiences (as a result of a malfunctioning face recognition system) and possibly also with a deficit in their belief evaluation system.¹⁰ Now, of course, few of us suffer from clinical delusions, yet I think some of our core beliefs may be psychologically impossible to shake off in a rather similar way as a result of how we are hard-wired to perceive the world. In fact, many philosophical theories, if correct, would render some of our core beliefs false. For instance, if error theories about mathematics and ethics are correct, none of our mathematical and

Copp, "'Ought' Implies 'Can' and the Derivation of the Principle of Alternate Possibilities," *Analysis* 68, 297 (2008): 67 fn2; P. A. Graham, "'Ought' and Ability," *Philosophical Review* 120, 3 (2011); Moti Mizrahi, "Does 'Ought' Imply 'Can' from an Epistemic Point of View?," *Philosophia* 40, 4 (2012); Moti Mizrahi, "'Ought' Does Not Imply 'Can'," *Philosophical Frontiers* 4, 1 (2009); Peter B. M. Vranas, "I Ought, Therefore I Can," *Philosophical Studies* 136, 2 (2007); Ralph Wedgwood, "Rational 'Ought' Implies 'Can'," *Philosophical Issues* 23, 1 (2013).

⁹ See Wedgwood, "Rational 'Ought' Implies 'Can'," 87.

¹⁰ For a recent overview of neuropsychological accounts of delusions, see Lisa Bortolotti, *Delusions and Other Irrational Beliefs* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

ethical beliefs are literally true.¹¹ If the B-theory of time is correct, then the passage of time is an illusion and the present is not ontologically privileged.¹² And yet, arguably, we cannot refrain from having beliefs about temporal experiences, that $2+2=4$, or that murder is wrong.

Second, it is not always within our power to avoid falsity if all evidence available to our epistemic community supports the false belief in question. For example, we might say that the best evidence available to the ancient Greek supports the claim that Phosphorus and Hesperus are two different celestial bodies. Given the restricted epistemic circumstances back then, arguably one cannot revise the false belief that Phosphorus and Hesperus are two celestial bodies. Similarly, some of our current scientific beliefs may turn out false, yet we may not be able to revise them if they are supported by what our best evidence suggests. Of course, given the development of science and technology, more evidence will become available and we will be able to spot more falsehoods and revise our beliefs accordingly. Indeed, this is the story of our scientific progress. However, for any given period of time, our epistemic position is always limited and we cannot revise our false beliefs if they are supported by the best evidence available at the time.

Third, some propositions are deeply integrated in our epistemic life, such as the so-called cornerstone propositions. We cannot refrain from accepting them despite the possibility that they are false.¹³ If I were a brain in a vat, then those cornerstone propositions would be false. Yet, can I genuinely refrain from believing those cornerstone propositions? Perhaps in an epistemology seminar I can momentarily refrain from believing cornerstone propositions while entertaining the sceptical scenarios. However, it is hard to imagine that we can carry on refraining from believing cornerstone propositions if we were to live a normal epistemic life, since if I did not believe that I am not a brain in vat, I would not be able to have the ordinary empirical beliefs which are crucial for me to navigate through the world. Of course, the point here is not to claim that scepticism is true. Rather, the point is to emphasize that there are some propositions at the core of our belief system that we cannot refrain from believing, given the kind of creatures we are. As such, if scepticism were true, we would not

¹¹ See, notably, Hartry Field, *Realism, Mathematics & Modality* (Blackwell, 1989); John L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin Books, 1977).

¹² For an influential account of B-theory of time, see, for instance, Theodore Sider, *Four Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time*, vol. 3 (Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹³ The concept of cornerstone proposition is first coined in Crispin Wright, "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?," 78, 1 (2004), which is inspired by Wittgenstein's idea of hinge proposition in his *On Certainty*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Harper Torchbooks, 1969). My use of cornerstone proposition simplifies the details of Wright's account.

be able to refrain from believing false cornerstone propositions and hence LC* is true.

In short, the underlying thought is this: given the psychological and cognitive constraints, and the fact that the world is not always cooperative, we cannot avoid all falsity. “Seek all truths” and “avoid all falsity” are really two sides of the same coin. If we think the former clashes with OIC, there is *prima facie* reason to think the same applies to the latter, given that we are finite epistemic agents. Hence $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_p$ faces an analogue of the incompatible triad, and so in that respect does not fare any better than the obligation norm which it aims to replace.

Now you might point out that Whiting could still maintain that even if we have shown that LC* is true, there is a further question as to whether the attitude in question is in fact a belief. Whiting might insist that if the above three kinds of cases are cases where a subject cannot but have a belief-like attitude towards the propositions in question, then that attitude is not that of belief. Suppose that I cannot refrain from believing, say, that $2+2=4$, even in the presence of overwhelming evidence that mathematical fictionalism is true, then, it may be argued that my attitude towards the proposition $2+2=4$ is not that of belief.

I do not see how Whiting can maintain this point without presupposing a normative account of belief—the very claim that is at issue in the debate. On a normative account of belief, belief is essentially governed by the truth norm, as such, an attitude that is insensitive to evidence and fails to be revised according to the truth norm cannot count as belief. However, to assume this normative account of belief is to beg the question against the critics of the truth norm, who are likely to deny that belief is essentially governed by the truth norm. Without presupposing a normative account of belief, it is hard to see why my attitude towards that $2+2=4$ fails to be a belief, as long as the attitude plays the kind of functional role belief plays in one’s mental economy.

5. Conclusion

If the case for LC* is successful, then the problem of the incompatible triad poses a challenge not only for $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_o$, but for $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_p$ and $\vec{\mathcal{F}}_o$ as well. In so far as one endorses the principle OIC, one cannot avoid the triad by weakening the deontic requirement from an obligation to a permission. Neither can one avoid the triad by adopting an obligatory norm of avoiding falsity.

It is also worth pointing out that Wedgwood’s version of $\vec{\mathcal{T}}_o$ would not escape the triad either. On Wedgwood’s account, one ought to believe a true proposition if one considers that proposition, which is compatible with OIC and LC since the revised truth norm does not require one to believe the infinite many

truths out there that one never ever entertains. Now, if I am right about LC*, then Wedgwood's version of \vec{T}_O does not escape the problem of the triad because it is incompatible with OIC and LC*. Why? Presumably, in virtue of having an occurrent belief that p, one does consider the proposition involved in that belief. So, if the proposition is in fact false, then on Wedgwood's account, one ought to revise that belief, which may be something one cannot do given that for some p, one cannot but believe that p.

The normativists' hands are therefore tight. There remain two options. The normativist may appeal to a different construal of normativity that is not necessarily prescriptive in nature. For instance, many have developed an evaluative account of the truth norm.¹⁴ The idea, roughly, is that it is good or ideal to have true beliefs, even if one cannot always believe the truth. The evaluative construal of \vec{T}_O can avoid the original incompatible triad since it does not issue any requirement. Alternatively, the normativist could simply reject OIC. Numerous authors have recently challenged OIC in light of empirical evidence and counterexamples, independently of the problem that concerns us here.¹⁵ However, neither option is available to Whiting. If he wants to maintain the original motivation for adopting \vec{T}_P , as based on its role in resolving the original incompatible triad, he is *ipso facto* committed to both the prescriptive construal of normativity and the truth of OIC.¹⁶

¹⁴ For evaluative construal of the truth norm see, for instance, William P. Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," *The Monist* 68, 2 (1985); Matthew Chrisman, "Ought to Believe," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 7 (2008); Davide Fassio, "Belief, Correctness and Normativity," *Logique Et Analyse* 54, 216 (2011); Conor McHugh, "The Truth Norm of Belief," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93, 1 (2012); Conor McHugh, "Fitting Belief," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 114, 2 (2014).

¹⁵ For recent arguments against OIC, see Graham, "'Ought' and Ability;" Mizrahi, "'Ought' Does Not Imply 'Can';" "Does 'Ought' Imply 'Can' from an Epistemic Point of View?;" Paul Henne et al., "An Empirical Refutation of 'Ought' Implies 'Can'," *Analysis* 76, 3 (2016).

¹⁶ Acknowledgment: I am particularly grateful to Philip Ebert and Krister Bykvist for their extremely thoughtful and invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank the audience of the 6th Stockholm Graduate Conference where the paper was presented for their helpful questions and suggestions. This work was supported by the John Templeton Foundation under Grant 58450.