

Correct Beliefs as to What One Believes: A Note

Allan Gibbard

Department of Philosophy
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

A supplementary note to Chapter 4, “Correct Belief” of my *Meaning and Normativity* (forthcoming 2012 October from Oxford University Press).

It is raining, imagine, but nobody believes that it is raining. Ought we to believe this? It may seem not: if we did believe it, after all, it wouldn’t be true. And one ought to believe a thing only if it is true.

In “Does Thought Imply Ought?” Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi use this example to refute a combination of claims that I and others make in various forms.¹ I claim that invariably,

It is correct to believe the truth,

One ought to do what’s correct.

There is a normative requirement, then, on belief: to believe the truth.

The second claim, that one ought to do what’s correct, requires specifying the kind of “ought” in play. This “ought” must be taken in an objective sense; it is a matter of what one ought to do in light of all that is the case. It can’t be a moral ought or a prudential ought; it has to be an ought of what one has most reason to do or believe. The ought, moreover, is idealized: it is a matter of what one ought to do or believe apart from all limits on our capacities to entertain claims and to reason about them.² I’ll render all this as “ought_{ob}”. (I’ll also denote concepts with small caps, so that this objective ought concept, as I designate it, is OUGHT_{ob}.) I maintain that ‘correct’, in these contexts, can mean OUGHT_{ob}, and that invariably, one ought_{ob} to believe the truth.

Bykvist and Hattiangadi reject this. More precisely, they deny that in any sense in which it is invariably correct to believe the truth, CORRECT is a normative concept. In an article and in my

¹ See my forthcoming *Meaning and Normativity* (2012), Chap. 4 (pp. 75–91); also my “Truth and Correct Belief” (2005).

² This sort of idealization figures in standard subjective probability theory and decision theory, whose precepts often extend beyond our limited capacities to carry them out.

forthcoming book, I agree in a way and disagree in a way. The concept OUGHT_{ob}, I hold, is substantively normative in most contexts, and it figures in the claim that one ought_{ob} to believe the truth. This particular claim that one ought_{ob} to believe the truth, however, isn't normative substantively. It is analytic. This is because the concept OUGHT_{ob} is definable rather than primitive. It is definable in terms of the basic, primitive OUGHT that makes normative concepts normative. Analyze the claim that one ought_{ob} to believe the truth, and the primitive oughts cancel out—as I'll explain. Thus when 'correct' means OUGHT_{ob}, it voices a non-primitive normative concept, but this concept can figure in claims that are not substantively normative. That invariably one ought_{ob} to believe the truth is a case in point.

How does this work? Correctness is a matter of objective oughts: what's correct to do is what we ought to do in light of everything that's the case, whether or not we have any way of knowing it. A man who appears remarkably charitable but who secretly abuses his wards is not admirable, even if in light of the information we have, we ought to admire him. Although in light of our available information, we ought to admire him, in light of all that is the case we ought not to admire him. Whether an attitude is correct, I claimed, is a question of whether we ought to have it in light of all that is the case. With whether the man's conduct is admirable is a question of whether, in this objective sense of 'ought', we ought to admire it—or in my notation, of whether we ought_{ob} to admire it.³

The primitive normative concept, the concept that figures as a conceptual atom in all normative concepts, is, I claim, an ought in a subjective sense. I'll denote this concept as plain 'OUGHT', with no subscript. I argue that the objective ought concept OUGHT_{ob} can be defined in terms of this primitive concept OUGHT. The subjective OUGHT takes account of limitations on our information, but it is still idealized, in that it is a matter of what we ought to do or believe all limitations on our powers of calculation and judgment aside.

How, then, define OUGHT_{ob}? Begin with action: Rushing a child to the hospital and approaching a blind intersection where in fact no cross-traffic is coming, you ought_{ob} to save time by driving straight on through without looking. This is a substantive normative claim, though an obvious one. True, in the subjective sense, in light of your information, you ought to slow down and look; but still, what you ought_{ob} to do is to drive straight on through. What does this last mean, then? What does it mean to say that in light of all that if the case, you ought to drive straight on through. I'll skip the false starts we might make, and report my proposal. The claim,

You ought_{ob} to drive straight on through

³ I make these claims in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990) and elsewhere.

I propose, means this:

If you ought to believe (with certainty) all that is the case, then you ought to drive straight on through.

The term ‘ought’ in this analysis is meant in the primitive, subjective sense. No cross-traffic is coming, and if you ought to be certain of this, then you ought to drive straight on through. (In truth, to be sure, you ought not to believe this with any certainty, but *if* you ought to, then you ought to drive straight on through.)

When this analysis is applied to oughts of belief, that that one ought_{ob} to believe the truth trivializes. Trivially,

If nothing is coming, you ought_{ob} to believe that nothing is coming.

For on the analysis, this says,

If nothing is coming, and you ought to believe all that is the case, you ought to believe that nothing is coming.

This amounts to saying that if you ought to believe, among other things, that nothing is coming, then you ought to believe that nothing is coming.

A Counterexample?

How does all this apply to the example that Bykvist and Hattiangadi put forth? I’ll simplify their example slightly, in a way that I think retains its relevant logical features. Let p be the claim,

It’s raining and I don’t believe that it is raining,

and suppose p is true. Is it something that I ought_{ob} to believe? Answering yes might be problematic. Suppose I ought_{ob} to believe all and only what’s true. Then I ought_{ob} to believe this. But if I do believe it, it is false, and I ought_{ob} not to believe it.

This isn’t exactly contradictory. From the claim that invariably, we ought_{ob} to believe all and only what’s true, we have the following:

Suppose I ought_{ob} to believe that p . Then if I believe as I ought_{ob}, I ought_{ob} not to believe that p .

Suppose I ought_{ob} not to believe that p . Then if I believe as I ought_{ob}, I ought_{ob} to believe that p .

What this violates, say Bykvist and Hattiangadi, is a principle that “‘ought’ implies ‘can satisfy’.” This satisfiability principle, they think, is a test for whether an ought is truly normative.

We have to ask, then, whether the satisfiability principle obtains for funny-behaving sentences like this one—and whether it gives a proper test for when an ought is truly normative. On the second question, remember, I say two things: First, the concept OUGHT_{ob} is normative in the sense that its analysis contains the primitive normative concept OUGHT in a way that in most contexts renders claims normative. Second, in this special context of belief, the normativity trivializes and is no longer substantive. If this second is what Bykvist and Hattiangadi are claiming, then I agree with them. I insist, however, that OUGHT_{ob} in this context is the same concept as the one that in most contexts goes to make claims in which it figures normative substantively.

All this follows notwithstanding whether the satisfiability principle “‘Ought’ implies ‘can satisfy’” applies to funny cases like this one. As for whether it does, if my analysis of the objective ought OUGHT_{ob} is right, then it appears that it doesn’t. The principle “‘Ought’ implies ‘can satisfy’” doesn’t apply to this funny case. Does that show that where ‘correct’ means OUGHT_{ob} , the concept CORRECT isn’t normative? We have already seen the sense in which it is, and the sense in which, for correct belief, it isn’t.

Is the Analysis Mistaken?

So far, I am following out the consequences of the analysis I offered for ‘correct’ and for the objective ought. In this note, I say very little to motivate and test this analysis, and so I won’t get far into the question of whether the analysis is right. I will, though, explore one choice that matters for the analysis. I explained

ought to do ϕ

as meaning,

If ought to believe all that is the case, then ought to do ϕ .

Alternatively, though, I might have tried,

If ought to believe all that would be the case if did ϕ , then ought to do ϕ .

For the blind intersection case, it makes no difference which of these two analyses we choose. Suppose that in fact, will slow down and look. Many things would be the case if drove straight on through that aren’t the case as things are: among other things, and his child would be killed. But even if ought to believe that they will both be killed, that isn’t relevant to whether he ought to slow down and look. Whatever he ought to believe as to whether they will both be killed, he ought to believe that if he were to slow down and look, no one would be hurt, and if he were to drive on through without looking, he and the child would be killed. If he ought to believe this, then he ought to slow down and look.

Either of these two analyses, then, gives the right results for most questions of what one ought_{ob} to do. This stymies testing which analysis is right by looking at simple, unproblematic cases. Still, for the Bykvist-Hattiangadi example, the difference is important: my analysis makes it unproblematic that invariably, we ought_{ob} to believe the truth, whereas for their example, the alternative analysis makes the question of whether we ought to believe the truth paradoxical.

My own conclusion is that we should adopt the analysis of the objective ought concept that makes for least paradox and the most straightforward system. If, however, you have a taste for paradox and want things not to work straightforwardly, I don't know how to show you that the alternative analysis is not to be preferred. (I also don't know how you can show me that it is to be preferred.)

Paradoxical Suppositions?

It might be thought, however, that for the funny cases, the analysis I favor comes out itself as paradoxical. What are we to make of the indicative supposition that I ought to believe all that is the case, when this includes believing that it is raining and that I don't believe that it is raining? Can we make sense of the supposition that I ought to believe this? Can we understand the following antecedent?

If I ought to believe that it's raining and that I don't believe it's raining, . . .

Or does trouble lurk here?

I conclude that this sort of thing is fine as a supposition. First, why wouldn't it be? If there is a problem, it is that there is something wrong with believing that it's raining and nevertheless believing that one doesn't have this belief. I agree that there is something wrong: if one is in this state, one lacks knowledge of one's own beliefs. Still, can't we suppose that one is in such a state of deficient self-knowledge, and ask what's so if one is?

Second, allowing such suppositions as intelligible serves important theoretical purposes. How shall we understand conditional probability, as imputed by one's subjective probabilities? Much in the theory of rational decision and degrees of belief depends on this notion. A classic problem in subjective probability theory is this: How are we to understand one's subjective probabilities given something like the following?

It's going to rain and I don't believe that it might rain.

If I'm going out, then given this, it seems likely that I won't arm myself against the rain, and I'll get wet. A frequent way of explaining conditionalization is to say this: to conditionalize on ϕ , add ϕ hypothetically to one's stock of beliefs, and consult one's degrees of belief in that hypothetical state. Where ϕ is "It's going to rain" and ψ is "The streets will get wet," I get my

subjective probability for ϕ given ψ by adding ψ hypothetically to my stock of beliefs and thinking whether ϕ . How, then, can I conditionalize on the above sentence, “ ψ and I don’t believe that ϕ ”? I hypothetically add to my stock of beliefs that it’s going to rain and that I don’t believe that it’s going to rain. To do this is to put myself hypothetically into what must be a state of false belief. Ordinarily, if I learn that it’s going to rain, then I also learn that I now believe that it’s going to rain. But to get conditional probability, I must hypothetically add to my stock of beliefs that it’s going to rain *without* adding, in addition, that I now believe that it is going to rain. I feign a state that lacks epistemic transparency.⁴

Suppose, though, you dislike subjective probability and don’t want the theory to work. Or suppose you have some other way of getting it to work. Still, all theory aside, doesn’t the following reasoning seem to work?

Suppose that it’s going to rain and that I don’t believe it might rain? Then I’ll get wet. Because I don’t believe it might rain, I won’t take an umbrella or raingear, and so when it rains, I’ll get wet.

This reasoning seems fine. It shows that I can intelligibly suppose something with the feature we have been scrutinizing: that if I believed it, I’d have a belief that I believed I didn’t have.

Like things go for the supposition, “Suppose I ought to believe that it’s raining and that I don’t believe that it’s raining”? To suppose this is to suppose hypothetically, that I ought to be in a state of having a belief but believing that I don’t have it. I can reason from the supposition that I *am* in such a state, we have seen, and so why not from the supposition that I *ought* to be in such a state.

We can explain conditional credence (subjective probability) like this: the credence in ϕ given that I ought to accord is the credence I ought to give ϕ if I ought to be certain of ψ . So where ψ is “It’s raining and I don’t believe that it’s raining” and ϕ is “I’ll get wet,” then how strongly ought I to believe “If ψ then ϕ ”? To answer, ask, “If I ought to believe that ψ , then how strongly ought I to believe that ϕ ”? This involves asking, “What if I ought to believe that ψ ”? In this case, the question is, “What if I ought to believe that it’s going to rain but that I don’t believe that it’s going to rain?” In certain contexts, I have been arguing, this is a plausible question to entertain, and it involves the sort of supposition that is involved in my handling of Bykvist’s and Hattiangadi’s problematic sentence.

I conclude, then, that the kind of ought antecedent that I invoke in my analysis is intelligible as applied to the Bykvist-Hattiangadi sentence, and that allowing that sort of thing as intelligible has theoretical importance. If that’s right, it removes a last objection to my way of handling the thesis that objectively, we ought invariably to believe the truth.

⁴ Paul Weirich and Jordan Howard Sobel did important work on this problem, which I need to track down xxx.

Bykvist, Krister and Hattiangadi, Anandi (2007). “Does Thought Imply Ought?” *Analysis* **67**:4 (Oct.), 277–285.

Gibbard, Allan (2005). “Truth and Correct Belief”. *Philosophical Issues*, a Supplement to *Noûs*, **15**, Normativity, E. Sosa and E. Villanueva, eds., 338–351.

Gibbard, Allan (2012 forthcoming). *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).