



A Puzzle About Knowledge, Blame, and Coherence

Marc-Kevin Daoust¹ 

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Abstract

Many philosophers have offered arguments in favor of the following three theses: (i) A is epistemically permitted (or required) to believe P only if A is in a position to know that P, (ii) incoherent agents fail to satisfy the aforementioned knowledge norm of belief, and (iii) A's *apparent* reasons are relevant to determining what A is *blameworthy* for believing. In this paper, I argue that the above three theses are jointly inconsistent. The main upshot of the paper is this: even if the knowledge norm of belief is correct, it cannot explain some deontic requirements governing belief.

Keywords Knowledge · Apparent reasons · Coherence · Blame · Epistemic norms

The knowledge norm of belief states that an agent is epistemically permitted (or required) to believe that P only if he or she is in a position to know that P.¹ The knowledge norm relies on the idea that there is a close connection between epistemic norms and *epistemic success* or *epistemic value*. Beliefs that result in knowledge are successful or valuable beliefs, in the sense that an agent is epistemically better off with knowledge than with ignorance.

Many epistemologists have tried to identify some fundamental or primary epistemic norms, in the sense that other epistemic permissions and obligations are derived from them (or can be explained by them).² Plausibly, the knowledge norm can explain many

¹See Bondy (2018), Grimm (2009), and Weiner (2014) on epistemic normativity. See Williamson (2002, 255–56; [forthcoming](#)) on the knowledge norm of belief. See also Littlejohn (2012) and Sutton (2005). I here take the knowledge norm endorsed by Williamson and others to be a deontic (or prescriptive) norm. See Simion et al. (2016) on knowledge as the evaluative norm of belief.

²For instance, Kiesewetter (2017) and Lord (2014, 2017, 2018) argue that various requirements of coherence can be explained in terms of reasons-responsiveness. In other words, some types of incoherence can be explained in terms of a failure to respond correctly to reasons one has. Williamson ([forthcoming](#)) suggests that all the norms governing belief are somehow related to (or explained by) a norm of truth.

✉ Marc-Kevin Daoust
marc-kevin.daoust@umontreal.ca

¹ Département de philosophie, Université de Montréal, 2910 Boulevard Édouard-Montpetit, Montréal, QC H3T 1J7, Canada

epistemic permissions and obligations agents have. For instance, it can explain why an agent is epistemically prohibited from believing P without having sufficient epistemic reason to believe P.³ Epistemic reasons are here understood as ordinary facts (or true propositions) counting in favor of the belief that P.⁴ An agent who lacks sufficient epistemic reason to believe P will also lack *epistemic justification* for believing P, an essential component of knowledge. Hence, the norm of responding correctly to reasons one has can be explained away by the knowledge norm of belief. If an agent does not respond correctly to his or her reasons for believing P, he or she also violates the knowledge norm of belief.

In this paper, I analyze to what extent the knowledge norm can explain all the epistemic permissions and obligations there are. I will argue that some deontic requirements governing belief cannot be derived from the knowledge norm. In Section 1, I present the view according to which the knowledge norm can explain norms of coherence governing belief. Then, I present an internalist objection according to which agents might be blameless for having false beliefs. In response to such an objection, the knowledge theorist makes a distinction between blame and justification (or between the hypothetical and the deontic). This will bring us to the main argument of this paper. In Section 2, I argue that, in making a distinction between blame and obligation, the knowledge theorist paves the way for permitted combinations of incoherent beliefs. But this cannot be right. So, the knowledge norm cannot explain some requirements governing belief. In Section 3, I consider various escape routes on behalf of the knowledge theorist.

1 Knowledge, Coherence, and Blame

Can the knowledge norm of belief explain all the other epistemic permissions and obligations governing belief? For instance, norms of reasons-responsiveness and norms of coherence are relevant to our epistemic permissions and obligations. The question is this: provided that an agent satisfies the knowledge norm, does he or she automatically satisfy these other norms?

First, consider norms of coherence. An agent is epistemically required to have coherent combinations of beliefs.⁵ Many philosophers think that if an agent satisfies the knowledge norm of belief, then he or she has beliefs that are coherent with each other. This can be explained in terms of reasons for believing P. If one is epistemically permitted to believe P only if one is in a position to know that P, and one is in a position to know that P only if one has sufficient epistemic reason to believe P, then one is epistemically permitted to believe P only if one has sufficient epistemic reason to believe P. Apparently, no body of epistemic reasons simultaneously supports incoherent conclusions

³ See Littlejohn (2012) and Lord (2017) on this concern.

⁴ See Littlejohn (2013) and Mitova (2017) on the factivity of epistemic reasons. In this paper, I assume that epistemic reasons are facts. But as I will explain in Section 1, *apparent* reasons can be non-factive.

⁵ As I indicate in Sections 2 and 3, some philosophers argue that there can be cases of permissible incoherence. I will come back to this possibility in the next sections.

such as “P and \sim P” or “P, but I don’t believe P.” This means that responding correctly to reasons agents have secures having coherent combinations of attitudes. In such a context, “whenever one is incoherent, one fails to correctly respond to some of the possessed reasons” (Lord 2017, 15). If this is correct, and if epistemic justification is somehow connected to the balance of epistemic reasons one has, coherence requirements can be derived from the knowledge norm.

Second, consider a popular internalist objection against the knowledge norm. According to many internalist theories of epistemic norms, an agent is epistemically permitted to believe P if and only if his or her apparent reasons support the belief that P. Apparent epistemic reasons are here understood as *apparently* true propositions, which are not necessarily facts.⁶ This view is motivated by the claim that we should not blame agents who are not in a position to identify which apparent reasons are facts. For example, consider the following cases:

Debby in a Vat. Debby forms beliefs in accordance with her apparent perceptions, memories, and sensations; competently weighs her apparent epistemic reasons; reasons correctly and draws clever conclusions concerning her vat-environment. However, Debby is a brain in a vat. Since reasons are facts or true propositions, she is ignorant for the most part (on the assumption that her hallucinations are misleading). Debby has apparent epistemic reasons to believe P, but she lacks epistemic reasons to believe P.

Debby’s Doppelgänger. Becky is Debby’s doppelgänger. Becky forms beliefs in accordance with her perceptions, memories, and sensations; competently weighs her epistemic reasons; reasons correctly and draws clever conclusions concerning her environment. Even if Debby and Becky have the same beliefs and credences, Becky’s beliefs are sensitive to epistemic reasons, since she is not a deceived brain in a vat.

Against the knowledge norm, internalists argue that Debby and Becky are subject to the same obligations and permissions, since we cannot make a deontically significant distinction between Debby and Becky. Of course, Becky ends up forming false beliefs, or beliefs that are not supported by epistemic reasons, but this is through no *fault* of her own. We should not *blame* Debby for being an ignorant brain in a vat, because this is not a piece of information that she can take into account when forming beliefs. She is not *epistemically responsible* for her own deception. Both agents are doing their best to respond correctly to what they take to be reasons. So, it is plausible that apparent reasons are relevant to determining an agent’s epistemic permissions and obligations.

As we can see, this internalist objection presupposes a necessary connection between epistemic obligations and epistemic blame. A knowledge theorist can then offer the following debunking argument: we can explain the internalist intuition by making a

⁶ See notably Parfit (2011, 34, 111) or Conee and Feldman (2004). Such an account is sometimes understood as a type of internal coherence between (i) a priori knowledge, experiences, perceptions, seemings, memories or intuitions, and (ii) beliefs or credences. See Turri (2009) or Wedgwood (2017, sec. 0.5).

distinction between the deontic and the hypological.⁷ Hypological factors are considerations relevant to determining what one is *blameworthy* or *responsible* for believing. Deontic factors are considerations relevant to determining what one *ought* to believe. While facts about one's apparent reasons are relevant to determining what one is blameworthy for believing, they are not relevant to determining what one ought to believe. Only facts counting for or against the conclusion that P are relevant to determining what one ought to believe. Deontic factors have to do with value conduciveness and epistemic success, not with what agents are praiseworthy or blameworthy for believing. As Williamson puts it,

[Following the knowledge norm of belief], the brain in the vat's belief that it has hands is unjustified: it does not constitute knowledge, because it is false. What the brain in the vat has is a cast-iron excuse for the belief, not a justification: it is of good cognitive character, has the right general cognitive dispositions, and thereby arrived at its belief, with no accessible reason to doubt that in doing so it complied with all the relevant epistemic norms, no accessible reason to suspect that the belief was unjustified. The belief is therefore blameless, but still unjustified. (Williamson [forthcoming](#), 17)

Hence, while the knowledge theorists do not deny that brains in vats are blameless for believing various propositions, they give a debunking argument of why this does not bear on epistemic permission. Apparent reasons are relevant to a good account of epistemic *blame*, but not to a good account of epistemic *permission*.

2 A Worry Concerning Coherence and Beliefs About Blame

In this section, I argue that the above lines of reasoning cannot be right. This is so, because the following views are incompatible with each other:

- (1). *Knowledge Norm*. A is epistemically permitted (or required) to believe P only if A is in a position to know that P.
- (2). *Reductionism About Coherence Norms*. Incoherent agents fail to satisfy the Knowledge Norm of belief.
- (3). *Debunking Argument*. A's merely apparent reasons are relevant to determining what A is *blameworthy* for believing, but are not relevant to determining what A is permitted or required to believe.

⁷ The distinction between permission and excuse is common. Scanlon (2009, chap. 4) argues that good intentions or abnormal conditions such as being under great stress are relevant to determining whether one is blameworthy for believing, but such factors have no impact on what one ought to believe. He specifies that blame can play an interpersonal role, in the sense that it can explain why agents sometimes refuse to "enter into other specific relations that involve trust and reliance" (Scanlon 2009, 143). Littlejohn argues that an agent can "be fully reasonable and responsible while failing to do all that the reasons required" (Littlejohn 2011, 115). Boulton (2017a, 2017b) argues that the connection between obligations and blame is incompatible with our epistemic practices. If obligations and blame were closely connected, we would never be excused for failing to satisfy our obligations. However, as a matter of a social fact, we frequently excuse people for having violated their obligations. See also Williamson ([forthcoming](#)), Lord (2017, 28), Madison (2017), and Schechter (2017, secs. 5–6; [forthcoming](#)) for discussion.

I will argue that (1) and (3) together entail the rejection of (2). The claim that epistemic permissions and obligations have to do with knowledge and the claim that A's apparent reasons are relevant to determining what A is blameworthy for believing together entail an implausible type of epistemic incoherentism. This compromises the view according to which the knowledge norm can explain all the other epistemic permissions and obligations governing belief. If there are norms of coherence governing belief⁸ (and I will suggest that there are such norms), the knowledge norm cannot explain all of them.

The view that incoherent combinations of beliefs are sometimes epistemically permitted has been defended elsewhere. For instance, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio (2014, 2018) has argued that combinations of attitudes such as "P but it is epistemically irrational for me to believe P" can be epistemically permitted. She roughly argues that, since we are *fallible* and we sometimes form rational false beliefs, there can be rational false beliefs concerning what one is rational to believe. However, such cases are essentially different from the type of incoherence I will describe. I will argue that an agent can come to hold incoherent beliefs because, in some situations, the considerations determining what he or she ought to believe *have nothing in common* with the considerations determining what he or she is blameless for believing. In other words, instead of this being a case of rational fallibility, this is a case where the considerations justifying beliefs concerning blame and the considerations justifying first-order beliefs are *totally different*. In other words, I am concerned with a case where the balance of considerations counting in favor of believing P has nothing to do with the balance of considerations counting in favor of believing "I am blameworthy for believing P," which is a lot more problematic than the cases discussed by Lasonen-Aarnio.⁹

On to the argument, to begin with, consider the following case:

Debby's Appearances. Debby is a brain in a vat who knows the deontic requirements she is subject to, endorses the Debunking Argument, has perfect access to her own mental life and is fully epistemically responsible for her attitudes.¹⁰ Debby has no reason to believe that she is a brain in a vat. Now, it appears very clearly to Debby that P. Knowing that appearances are relevant in determining what she is blameworthy for believing, Debby comes to the conclusion that "it is blameworthy for me not to believe P." However, she lacks sufficient reason to believe P (we can even assume that P is false), and as it happens, she withholds judgment concerning P (perhaps she does not want to accept that P). In view of the foregoing, Debby forms the belief "I do not believe P." Hence, Debby believes that "I do not believe P" and that "it is blameworthy for me not to believe P."

Debby believes that it is blameworthy for her not to believe P because she has sufficient *apparent* reason to believe P (say, she hallucinates that P). Given her apparent reasons, she *knows* that it is blameworthy for her not to believe P. Given the Debunking Argument, her apparent reasons are relevant to determining what she is blameworthy

⁸ Or, at least, if there are norms entailing that agents ought to avoid having incoherent combinations of beliefs. Other norms could explain why agents ought to avoid having incoherent combinations of beliefs.

⁹ I compare these types of incoherentism in Daoust (2018, sec. 2).

¹⁰ I am here glossing over some subtleties. Other conditions could be added: for instance, Debby is not forming and revising her beliefs under special conditions such as extreme stress. See Scanlon (2009, chap. 4) on blameworthiness and extreme stress. I here assume that full responsibility excludes extreme stress.

for believing. Since she knows what her apparent reasons consist in, she knows that it would be blameworthy for her not to believe P. Yet she has no reason to believe P—she does not have access to ordinary facts that count in favor of the conclusion that P. In any case, we can assume that P is false, which means that she is not in a position to know that P. So, assuming that Debby satisfies the Knowledge Norm, she refrains from believing P. Otherwise, she would violate the Knowledge Norm.

Debby satisfies the Knowledge Norm of belief when she comes to the conclusion “I do not believe P, but it is blameworthy for me not to believe P.” Following the Debunking Argument, the factors relevant to determining what she is blameworthy for believing can be entirely distinct from the factors determining what she ought to believe. Hence, Debby has no reason to believe anything about the external world, but she would be blameworthy not to have some beliefs about the external world.

Now, the problem is that Debby’s combination of beliefs is deeply incoherent. Believing “I don’t believe P, but it is blameworthy for me not to believe P” makes little sense. Of course, such a combination of attitudes is not inconsistent, as in believing P and believing \sim P simultaneously. Still, such a combination of attitudes is incoherent in a broad sense. For instance, combinations of beliefs such as “P, but I don’t believe P” or “P, but I am irrational to believe P” display a kind of incoherence in a broad sense. Similarly, believing “I do not believe P, but it is blameworthy for me not to believe P” is incoherent.

Here is why such a combination of beliefs is incoherent. If Debby’s apparent epistemic reasons were all factive (e.g., if her apparent reasons were reasons *tout court*) and if she were fully responsible of her beliefs, the same considerations would support first-order beliefs and beliefs concerning epistemic blame. There can be a conflict between first-order beliefs and beliefs concerning epistemic blame only if one’s apparent reasons are not reasons. Now, if it is correct for Debby to conclude that it is blameworthy for her not to believe P and if she has no reason to think that some of her apparent reasons are nonfactive, this should somehow count as a reason for the conclusion that P. In normal circumstances (i.e., in cases where an epistemically responsible agent is not deeply deluded), the same considerations generally determine both what one ought to believe and what one is blameworthy for not believing. So, except if a responsible agent like Debby has a reason to think that some of her apparent reasons are nonfactive (which is not the case here), her learning the fact that she would be blameworthy for not believing P is a reason for her to come to the conclusion that P. In such a context, the conclusions “I do not believe P” and “it is blameworthy for me not to believe P” are incompatible, in the sense that no body of reasons and merely apparent reasons should support such conclusions simultaneously. Thus, believing both propositions simultaneously is a kind of internal failure for Debby. These beliefs do not make sense with each other, even if she satisfies the Knowledge Norm in having such beliefs.

Here is another way to put it. Debby knows that, in normal circumstances where an agent satisfies his or her epistemic permissions and obligations, beliefs about blame line up with first-order beliefs. She has no reason to believe that she is in abnormal circumstances. Specifically, she has no reason to believe that she is a deceived brain in a vat. Now, she knows that her apparent reasons clearly support the conclusion that P. So, she comes to know that it would be blameworthy for her not to believe P. In such a context, not believing P would not make any sense to her. Of course, if she were

actively trying to violate the deontic or hypological requirements that she is subject to, such a mismatch among her attitudes could make sense to her. However, we can assume that Debby is not trying to violate the deontic or hypological requirements that she is subject to. So, provided that Debby satisfies her epistemic obligations and does not believe P, there is a clear mismatch among her attitudes.

In view of the foregoing, we can offer the following argument:

- (P1). A is epistemically permitted (or required) to believe P only if A is in a position to know that P.
- (P2). A's apparent reasons are relevant to determining what A is blameworthy for believing.
- (P3). Given (P1) and (P2), if A's reasons do not support believing P but A's apparent reasons support believing P, A can be epistemically permitted not to believe P but blameworthy for not believing P.
- (P4). Suppose A has perfect access to his or her mental life and knows that apparent reasons are relevant to determining what agents are blameworthy for believing. Then, given (P1) and (P3), A can come to know the following: "I do not believe P" and "it is blameworthy for me not to believe P."
- (P5). Simultaneously believing "I do not believe P" and "it is blameworthy for me not to believe P" is incoherent.
- (C) So, agents are sometimes epistemically permitted to have incoherent beliefs.

We are left with a problem. Even if agents satisfy the Knowledge Norm, they can end up with incoherent combinations of beliefs. But agents should not have such incoherent combinations of beliefs. Thus, some types of problematic incoherence cannot be explained in terms of a failure to satisfy the Knowledge Norm.

3 Some Escape Routes

I will now consider some escape routes to my argument on behalf of the knowledge theorist.

First escape route: it could be denied that there are positive epistemic requirements concerning what one is blameworthy for believing. In other words, perhaps one can be blameworthy for believing P, but one is never blameworthy for not believing P. Many philosophers have endorsed similar views.¹¹ If they are right, the puzzle discussed in the previous section is solved—there is no puzzle because Debby may never come to know that she is blameworthy for not believing P.

The putative nonexistence of positive epistemic requirements does not solve the puzzle discussed in the previous section. Here is why. The various arguments for the claim that there are no positive epistemic requirements often boil down to the fact that one is required to believe P (or blameworthy for not believing P) only if some *practical*

¹¹ As in Wrenn (2007) or Nelson (2010).

conditions are satisfied.¹² For instance, perhaps the agent has to care about whether P,¹³ or has to think that the expected utility of believing P is sufficiently high,¹⁴ or has to pay attention to the question of whether P.¹⁵ As Nelson argues:

Our epistemic situations (including the experiential and propositional evidence available to us) set limits to what we are epistemically permitted to believe, while other, non-epistemic considerations determine, within those limits, what we should believe. (Nelson 2010, 88)

Even if this is right, we can simply assume that Debby satisfies these conditions. In other words, we can simply assume that some background practical conditions C are satisfied, and that with respect to such background conditions, agents are blameworthy for not believing some propositions. Thus, even if there are no purely positive epistemic requirements, Debby may come to know that she is blameworthy for not believing P.

Second escape route: it could be denied that there are norms of coherence governing belief. In other words, perhaps we should abandon the claim that an agent is epistemically required not to have incoherent combinations of beliefs. At first sight, this solution is appealing, because there are many plausible counterexamples to norms of coherence. There are incoherentist solutions to the Lottery Paradox.¹⁶ Moreover, some authors deny that akratic combinations of beliefs are always epistemically prohibited.¹⁷ In such a context, one could think that there are no coherence requirements governing belief.

Yet, as I briefly explained in Section 2, there is something different about the kind of incoherence that I discuss in this paper. Roughly, the incoherentist solutions to the Lottery Paradox and cases of rational epistemic akrasia have to do with the fallibility of one's reasons. They rely on the assumption that one can have sufficient epistemic reason to believe P while P is false. The case analyzed in this paper is different—the considerations supporting the belief that one is blameworthy for not believing P and the considerations supporting the belief that P are entirely distinct. The former are merely apparent reasons, while the latter are reasons. So, the problem is not simply that sufficiency does not guarantee truth. The problem is this: given that blame has to do with apparent reasons, an agent can be *certain* that he or she is blameworthy for not believing P, and yet satisfy the knowledge norm in refraining from believing P.

Even if we accept incoherentist solutions to the Lottery Paradox and accept that there are cases of rational epistemic akrasia, we should still be skeptical of the kind of incoherentism described in this paper. Specifically, we should be skeptical of the claim that the considerations counting in favor of believing P may have nothing to do with the considerations counting in favor of believing “I am blameworthy for believing P.” Hence, even if we assume that some incoherent combinations of beliefs are

¹² See Kroedel (2011) for another explanation of why we have no positive epistemic duties. See Kiesewetter (2018) for a reply to Kroedel's argument.

¹³ See Harman (1986, chap. 6).

¹⁴ See Nozick (1993, chap. 2).

¹⁵ See Kiesewetter (2017, chap. 7.8; 2018).

¹⁶ See Demey (2013), Easwaran (2015), Easwaran and Fitelson (2015), Foley (2009), Kroedel (2011) or Sturgeon (2008). See also Schechter (2013) on the failure of Closure.

¹⁷ See Coates (2012) or Lasonen-Aarnio (2014, 2015, 2018). See also Daoust (2018) for discussion.

epistemically permitted, there seems to be something particularly problematic with the kind of incoherence described in this paper.

Third escape route: it could be argued that the argument of this paper relies on a narrow understanding of epistemic reasons. An agent's reasons can be ordinary facts, but they can also be facts concerning one's mental states.¹⁸ For example, "the car is red" is an ordinary fact and "it appears to me that the car is red" is a fact concerning one's mental states. Perhaps Debby does not have access to ordinary facts, but she has access to facts concerning her mental states. Now, it could be argued that facts about one's mental states can count as reasons to believe various first-order propositions. Under such an assumption, Debby has reasons, but such reasons are different from Becky's (her doppelgänger's): while the fact that P is Becky's reason to believe P, the fact that it appears to Debby that P is her reason for believing P. As Kiesewetter indicates,

If A's total phenomenal state supports P, and P would—if true—be an available reason for (or against) believing Q, then A's appearances provide an equally strong available reason for (or against) believing Q... whenever some facts provide evidence for us, our appearances provide sufficient backup evidence' that would support the same beliefs [if we were deceived]. (Kiesewetter 2017, 173–74)

Let us assume for the sake of the argument that the argument of this paper relies on a narrow understanding of reasons. Still, a broader account of epistemic reasons will not solve the puzzle discussed in this paper. Specifically, the broader account of epistemic reasons is of no help to the knowledge theorist. Perhaps Debby has epistemic reasons to believe various propositions, but this still does not entail that she is in a position to know them. If P is false, brains in vats might have epistemic reasons to believe P, but they will not acquire knowledge that P. So, Debby will violate the knowledge norm of belief in believing P. Hence, this solution is of no help to the knowledge theorist.

Fourth escape route: an account of reasoning from warranted higher-order beliefs will solve the worry described in the previous section. If Debby knows that "it is blameworthy for her not to believe P," she is epistemically permitted to reason from such a higher-order belief to the conclusion that P. So, Debby does not have to remain in an incoherent state after all, since she can reason correctly to a first-order belief that is coherent with her higher-order belief.

But this escape route is clearly incompatible with the Knowledge Norm. Following such a line of reasoning, A's apparent reasons warrant beliefs concerning what A is epistemically blameworthy for believing. Now, assume that A can reason from such warranted beliefs to first-order conclusions. For instance, assume that, if Debby is epistemically permitted to believe that she is blameworthy for not believing P, she is epistemically permitted to reason to the conclusion that P. However, recall that P can be false. This entails that Debby can be permitted to believe a false proposition, and if one falsely believes that P, one does not know that P. So, the account of reasoning from higher-order beliefs cannot be an acceptable solution to the knowledge theorist. It

¹⁸ See Lord (2018, chap. 7) and Kiesewetter (2017, 173–74) on this possibility.

entails that agents can be epistemically permitted to believe false propositions, which is incompatible with the Knowledge Norm.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the Knowledge Norm of belief and the Debunking Argument together entail an implausible type of epistemic incoherentism. Accordingly, the knowledge theorist cannot explain all the norms governing belief. Some incoherent agents might satisfy the knowledge norm. Yet, the incoherent combinations of beliefs these agents have are epistemically prohibited. So, when it comes to epistemic norms, knowledge cannot be the only game in town.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Marc-Kevin Daoust declares that he has no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

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