

This is the author version of the following article:
Podlaskowski, A. (2010). “Unbelievable Thoughts And Doxastic Oughts.”
Theoria: A Swedish Journal of Philosophy, 76(2), pp. 112–118, which has
been published in final form at:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1755-2567.2010.01062.x/abstract>

Unbelievable Thoughts and Doxastic Oughts

by

ADAM C. PODLASKOWSKI

Fairmont State University

Abstract

From the dictum *ought implies can*, it has been argued that no account of belief’s normativity can avoid the unpalatable result that, for unbelievable propositions such as ‘It is raining *and* nobody believes that it is raining’, one ought not to believe them even if true. In this paper, I argue that this move only succeeds on a faulty assumption about the conjunction of doxastic ‘oughts.’

Truth is the mark of a correctly held belief. It has been argued that, not only is truth a major aim of investigation, but that the notion of *belief* is constitutively normative, so that the notion itself implies that one *ought* to form true beliefs (e.g., Boghossian, 2003, Gibbard, 2005, Shah, 2003).¹ This thesis has recently been challenged on the grounds that no formulation of the thesis can successfully accommodate the dictum *ought implies can*. In one notable instance, Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi (2007) argue persuasively that most plausible accounts of belief’s normativity face the unpalatable result that, for unbelievable propositions such as ‘It is raining

¹There are several interesting (and not entirely uncontroversial) respects in which the notion of *belief* (and related notions) might be construed as normative. For present purposes, though, I attend to the version of the thesis targeted by Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007). See Alston 1998 and Feldman 2001 for arguments about the normativity of epistemic notions such as *justification* and *knowledge*. For a dissenting view, see Fumerton 2001. For an argument that *mental content* is a normative notion owing to its privileged relationship to belief, see Boghossian 2003. For a challenge to Boghossian’s insistence on the primacy of belief over desire in attributions of mental states, see Miller 2008. Settling how the normativity thesis for belief (defended in this article) relates to these other notions is a matter to be addressed elsewhere.

and nobody believes that it is raining’, one ought not to believe them even if true. And given a few seemingly intuitive assumptions, even appropriately restricted accounts of belief are unacceptable. For such accounts lead to a contradiction that one ought to believe such unbelievable propositions *and* one ought not to do so.

Though this objection appears small, its ability to undermine the thesis that belief is normative is significant—it warrants a response. In this paper I do just this, by arguing that the aforementioned contradiction results from a faulty assumption about conjunction as it pertains to the ‘ought’ of belief. As I shall argue, the relevant principle of conjunction is best understood as a thesis restricted to those propositions (be they simple or complex) entertained by an agent which are truly believable. As such, a thoroughgoing normativity thesis, one that maintains that belief is normative and respects the appropriate logical relations between them, remains intact. On these grounds, unbelievable propositions do not serve as genuine counterexamples to the normativity thesis. I begin in the next section by characterizing the normativity of belief. In the following section, I reconstruct the objection raised by Bykvist and Hattiangadi. And in the final section, I argue that their objection fails because of a mischaracterization of conjunction as it pertains to the ‘ought’ of belief.

1 Doxastic ‘oughts’ and doxastic ‘cans’

A common way to express the relationship between believing a proposition p and the truth of p is:

- (1) For any p : the belief that p is correct $\leftrightarrow p$ is true²

Proponents of the normativity of belief insist on reading (1) so that ‘correct’ is a normative term. The claim ‘any belief that p is *correct* if and only if it is true’ is not to be taken descriptively, so much as prescriptively. This prescription is directed to the act of believing (hence ‘doxastic ought’) rather than the proposition believed. Because ‘correct’ is a normative term, (1) may be restated, for any subject S and proposition p :

- (2) For any S, p : S ought to believe that $p \leftrightarrow p$ is true

²Note that any instance of the symbol ‘ \leftrightarrow ’ should be interpreted as a biconditional, and any instance of the symbol ‘ \rightarrow ’ should be interpreted as a material conditional.

As it stands, though, (2) is untenable. Starting with the dictum *ought implies can*, it has been argued that no such principle can adequately express the ‘ought’ of belief because it fails to account fully for the ‘can’ of belief (e.g., Boghossian, 2003, Bykvist and Hattiangadi, 2007). This principle requires that, for *any* true proposition p , one ought to believe that p . But there are true propositions that an agent cannot believe. For instance, the conjunction of true propositions is also a true proposition, and by continually adding conjuncts to an increasingly complex proposition, one can be created too large for a finite mind to believe. Because one cannot believe such propositions, and *ought implies can*, one ought not believe such propositions even if they are true—an unacceptable result.³

It appears, then, that in order to capture a doxastic *ought* without ignoring the corresponding *can*, we require a successor to (2) that does not inherit its weaknesses. The following principle does so by restricting the principle to those propositions one actually entertains:

- (3) For any S , p : S considers whether $p \rightarrow (S$ ought to believe that $p \leftrightarrow p$ is true)

This principle restricts the candidates for doxastic obligation, not to those one might entertain, but to those one actually entertains. By putting (3) this way, S is neither obligated to believe *every* true belief, nor those too complex for S to believe (since they cannot even be entertained by S). I take a principle such as (3) to hold promise.

In the next section, I develop an objection against this principle on behalf of Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007). And in the following section, I shall indicate where their objection fails, thereby retaining a thesis about the constitutively normative nature of belief.

2 Doxastic ‘oughts’ and doxastic ‘cannots’

Despite its initial plausibility, Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007) argue that a principle such as (3) fails to accommodate every instance of the doxastic *can*. For there are propositions that it is logically impossible to believe

³Boghossian (2003) suggests that we accept a weaker alternative such as:

(2*) For any S , p : S ought to believe that $p \rightarrow p$ is true

truly. These include ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ and ‘There are no believers.’ Such propositions cannot be believed if they are true because their truth depends on nobody believing them. Roy Sorensen (1988) calls such propositions *blindspots*.⁴ Applying (3) to the blindspot proposition ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ yields:

- (4) For any S, p : (S has considered whether it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining) \rightarrow (S ought to believe that ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ \leftrightarrow the proposition ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ is true)

According to (4), S ought to believe that ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ just in case it is raining and nobody believes it is so. As an application of (3), (4) serves as a counterexample to the general principle. For S ’s believing that proposition renders it false, since it would no longer be the case that nobody believes that it is raining. So one *cannot* believe the proposition when it is true.

The following principle avoids such counterexamples by further restricting (3) to those propositions which are truly believable:

- (3a) For any S, p : (S considers whether p & p is truly believable) \rightarrow (S ought to believe that $p \leftrightarrow p$ is true)

And by way of a principle complementary to (3a), we can also appreciate that S ought *not* to believe p if it fails to be truly believable:

- (5) For any S, p : (S considers whether p & p is *not* truly believable) \rightarrow (S ought *not* to believe that p)

Though (3a) and (5) have been formulated in order to avoid counterexamples such as (4), they inadvertently generate a contradiction. Bykvist and Hattiangadi begin their reasoning with a seemingly innocuous principle about conjunction:

- (6) (S ought to believe that p & S ought to believe that q) \rightarrow (S ought to believe that $p \mathcal{E} q$)

⁴More generally, *blindspots* are consistent propositions to which one cannot take certain propositional attitudes. Following Sorensen’s lead, I shall call such propositions *blindspot propositions*.

According to (6), one ought to believe that ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ if one ought to believe both ‘It is raining’ *and* ‘nobody believes that it is raining’. Each conjunct is truly believable when taken separately, whereas their conjunction is not. By (3a), one ought to believe each of the truly believable conjuncts of a blindspot proposition, and by (6), one ought to believe their conjunction. This surprising conclusion conflicts with an application of the blindspot proposition to (5), where we yield the conclusion that one ought not to believe the proposition (so conjoined) because the conjunction is not truly believable. So by assuming (3a), (5), and (6), we generate the contradiction that, ‘you ought to believe that it is raining and you ought to believe that nobody believes that it is raining, but you ought not to believe that it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ (Bykvist and Hattiangadi, 2007, p. 283). In short, each doxastic obligation can be satisfied when taken separately, but not when taken together; we face a more insidious version of the objection that the doxastic ‘can’ cannot be captured.

While this objection from unbelievable thoughts appears convincing, I am nevertheless sympathetic to principles such as (3a) and (5). In the next section, I shall initiate a defense of these principles, aimed at Bykvist and Hattiangadi’s handling of conjunction as expressed by (6).

3 Conjoining doxastic ‘oughts’

As it stands, (6) is an imperfect counterpart to (3a) and (5). For (6) purports to express the conjunction of doxastic ‘oughts’, even though it fails to include any of the qualifications that render (3a) and (5) plausible expressions of the normativity thesis. Since (6) is about how *S* ought to conduct herself doxastically, we should expect the lesson of moving from (3) to (3a) to apply to complex propositions as well as simple ones. Similar cases also prompted adopting (3) over (2), where such unacceptable results were remedied by restricting the propositions that one ought to believe to those that one can believe. By parity of reasoning, we should restrict the propositions to which

(6) applies.⁵ We might expect a principle such as:

- (6a) For any S, p, q : (S considers whether p & whether q , & p is truly believable & q is truly believable) \rightarrow [$(S$ ought to believe that p & S ought to believe that q) \rightarrow (S ought to believe that $p \ \& \ q$)]

But even this principle runs afoul in the same way as (6). For the constituents of a blindspot proposition, p and q , are each truly believable when taken separately. But their conjunction is not truly believable, a fact that (6a) does not include amongst its antecedent conditions. So (3a) and (6a) also yield the unpalatable consequence that one ought to believe a blindspot proposition.

It appears that we require a principle that ranges over all of the propositions that S ought to believe, one which allows for S to fulfill all of her doxastic obligations. That is, the normativity thesis applies, not only to atomic propositions, but also to compound propositions. This necessitates yet another tweak to the principle, where the meta-variable ϕ stands for *any* proposition that S might entertain, be it conjunct or conjunction (i.e., $p, q, p \ \& \ q$):

- (6a*) For any S, ϕ, p, q : (S considers whether $\phi_1 \dots \phi_n$, & all ϕ 's so considered are truly believable) \rightarrow [$(S$ ought to believe that p & S ought to believe that q) \rightarrow (S ought to believe that $p \ \& \ q$)]

And for much the same reason that (3a) is complemented by (5), we appreciate that S ought *not* to believe the conjunction of p and q if any of the propositions involved fail to be truly believable:

- (7) For any S, ϕ : (S considers whether $\phi_1 \dots \phi_n$, and for any considered ϕ_i that is *not* truly believable) \rightarrow (S ought *not* to believe ϕ_i)

According to (6a*), when all of the propositions S entertains are truly believable, S ought to believe a conjoined proposition if she ought to believe its conjuncts. And according to (7), if one of propositions involved is *not* truly

⁵In reaction to his Lottery Paradox, Kyburg (1961, 1970) suggests rejecting a principle about conjunction pertaining to rational belief acceptance, not unlike (6). While this too might serve as an acceptable response to Bykvist and Hattiangadi's objection, I offer the alternative of *restricting* the principle about conjunction. Whether a similar restriction strategy would serve us well as a solution to the Lottery Paradox is a matter to be addressed elsewhere.

believable, then that proposition (be it conjunct or conjunction) ought *not* to be believed. So while the conjuncts of ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ are each truly believable when entertained separately, so that S ought believe each of them just when they are true, according to (6a*), S ought to believe their conjunction if the conjoined proposition is also truly believable. But this is not the case for a blindspot proposition. That such a conjunction is not truly believable brings it under the antecedent conditions of (7), so that one ought not to believe it. So (6a*) and (7) yield the right result that one ought *not* believe a blindspot proposition, even when one ought to believe its conjuncts individually.⁶ That (6a*) and (7) avoid the fate befalling (6) is due to restricting the conjunction of doxastic *oughts* to only those propositions that are truly believable, which includes the conjunction itself. In short, blindspot propositions do not, *contra* Bykvist

⁶Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007, p. 283) voice another concern that, independent of any view about conjunction, we cannot jointly fulfill our doxastic obligations. By (3a), though we can separately fulfill our doxastic obligations to believe that ‘It is raining’ and ‘Nobody believes that it is raining’ (when they are both true), believing both propositions leads to believing something one ought not to believe. The way to take this objection is that (3a) demands that we accept two beliefs that, when taken together, make for an inconsistent set.

It is not entirely clear, though, as to whether this presents a genuine problem. To see this, recall Kyburg’s (1961, 1970) response to the *lottery paradox*. He resolves the paradox by maintaining that, though it is not rational to accept belief in a contradictory proposition, it is nevertheless rational to tolerate joint inconsistency: though we may not believe a contradiction, we may have a set of beliefs that contains a falsehood. (Makinson (1965), in regard to the *paradox of the preface*, makes a similar point.) In Kyburg’s case, he suggests rejecting a conjunction principle not unlike (6). But is unlikely that he would have similar reservations towards a principle such as (6a*), which captures the intuition that conjunction plays some role in our cognitive lives, albeit a restricted one. (Though there are various versions of each paradox, with emphases on (e.g.) rationality, justification, and true belief, we should expect the basic point to remain pertinent.) So perhaps we may tolerate believing both ‘It is raining’ and ‘Nobody believes that it is raining’, even though we are not obligated to believe their conjunction (and hence a blindspot proposition).

But if such a response proves unsatisfactory, I suspect the concern here is not with the norm expressed by (3a), but with a concern about the role of *consistency* in maintaining a set of beliefs. If so, we should expect a revision to (3a), where we recast it as the expression of a *pro tanto* obligation to hold true beliefs, so as to remain responsive to additional normative constraints on accepting beliefs, while still holding some weight of its own:

(3a*) For any S, p : (S considers whether p , & p is truly believable) \rightarrow (S ought *pro tanto* to believe that $p \leftrightarrow p$ is true)

and Hattiangadi, undermine the thesis that belief is normative.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the major motivation by which we arrived at (6a*) and (7) is that one ought only believe those propositions which are genuinely believable. The proposition ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ shows that a conjunction does not necessarily inherit its being truly believable from its constituents in the same way that it inherits its truth value. Though one might wonder whether a proposition such as ‘It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining’ is true, a rational agent will upon reflection, realize that one cannot believe it. That is, as a matter of logical structure, blindspot propositions cannot be believed. As such, they should not be regarded as counterexamples to the thesis that belief is normative so much as constraints on those beliefs that fall under the scope of the normativity thesis about belief. What the emphasis on (6a*) and (7) shows is that a thoroughgoing normativity thesis eliminates the threat posed by Bykvist and Hattiangadi. (So even if one finds fault with the particular formulations of (6a*) or (7), the initial motivation should nevertheless remain persuasive, meriting a revision to the principles, rather than conceding defeat to Bykvist and Hattiangadi.) Since we can accommodate the doxastic *can* without worrying about true though unbelievable contents, we retain the means for appreciating the doxastic *ought*. Part of what it is to be a belief is to bear a normative relationship to truth.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Joshua Smith, Nicholas Jones, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

Though on its own, (3a*) might prescribe admitting into *S*’s set of beliefs both ‘It is raining’ and ‘Nobody believes that it is raining’, as expressed by theories of *rational belief revision* (e.g., the *AGM* theory), we cannot ignore the obligation of any rational agent, when faced with an inconsistent set of beliefs, to eject one of the problematic beliefs. So though all things being equal, (3a*) prescribes accepting both propositions, additional normative constraints involving consistency might *overshadow* the demands of (3a*). As such, there is no problem in jointly maintaining one’s doxastic obligations, since in this case, one does not possess an obligation to believe both propositions—additional normative demands rule against believing one of those propositions. Surely, this reply requires more detail, but the basic details suggest a response to the original worry.

References

- ALSTON, W.P. (1988) “The Deontological Conception of Justification.” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2: 257–294.
- BOGHOSSIAN, P. (2003) “The Normativity of Content.” *Philosophical Issues*, 13: 32–45.
- BYKVIST, K. AND HATTIANGADI, A. (2007) “Does Thought Imply Ought?” *Analysis*, 67: 277–85.
- FELDMAN, R. (2001) “Voluntary Belief and Epistemic Evaluation.” In M. Steup (ed) *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility and Virtue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- FUMERTON, R. (2001) “Epistemic Justification and Normativity.” In M. Steup (ed) *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility and Virtue*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- GIBBARD, A. (2005) “Truth and Correct Belief.” *Philosophical Issues*, 15: 338–350.
- KYBURG, H. (1961) *Probability and the logic of rational belief*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- KYBURG, H. (1970) “Conjunctivitis.” In M. Swain (ed) *Induction, Acceptance, and Rational Belief*. Dordrecht-Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- MAKINSON, D. C. (1965) “The Paradox of the Preface”, *Analysis*, 25: 205–207.
- MILLER, A. (2008) “Thoughts, Oughts and the Conceptual Primacy of Belief.” *Analysis*, 68: 234–38.
- SHAH, N. (2003) “How Truth Governs Belief.” *Philosophical Review*, 112: 447–482.
- SORENSEN, R. (1988) *Blindspots*. New York: Clarendon Press.