1

Introduction

1.1 Norms of belief

I will start towards the end and work my way back to the start.

This book is in part an investigation of the *norms for believing*, that is, the standards or principles which govern us, or to which we are subject, in forming, revising, and maintaining beliefs. Suppose that Carlita believes that a storm is coming. One might ask: Is she *right* to believe this? *Should* she believe this? Is she *justified* in believing this? Is it *rational* for her to believe this? When we ask these questions, or when Carlita asks them of herself, we are inviting or prompting an appraisal or assessment of Carlita's belief or, better, of Carlita in believing what she does. Where there are appraisals or assessments, there are standards or norms relative to which the appraisals or assessments are made. So, these questions point towards norms to which Carlita's belief is held.

Questions concerning belief like those above are not forced, precious, or, worse, the invention of philosophers; they, or questions like them, are familiar features of our ordinary thought and talk concerning belief. In this way, our ordinary thought and talk reveals or gestures at norms of belief. Indeed, as will emerge, it reveals or gestures at a number of standards to which belief is subject. One of the aims of this book is to identify and articulate some of those standards.[1]

There is one source of resistance to such an undertaking that I mention here only to set it aside. Some deny that there are any norms for belief; or, more cautiously, they accept that there are norms for belief but deny that those norms are *genuinely* normative.[2] That is to say, they deny that those norms entail reasons for believing in accordance with them; or, more cautiously again, they accept that those norms entail reasons but deny that those reasons are *authoritative*.[3] On this view, the norms of belief are comparable to the norms of etiquette. According to

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[1] The issue of what the norms of belief are is often run together with the issue of whether those norms stand in some essential relation to belief—either as constitutive of its nature or as holding in virtue of its nature. For a critical overview of the debates surrounding this issue, see (McHugh and Whiting 2014). I do not seek to engage with those debates here.

[2] For versions of this thought, see (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007; Dretske 2000, chap. 14; Fumerton 2001; Glüer and Wikforss 2013; 2018; Olson 2011; Papineau 2013). Some deny that belief is subject to norms on the grounds that belief is not subject to the will (Alston 1989, chap. 5; Chisholm 1966, 12; Glock 2005, 238–9; Mayo 1976, 151–2). For responses, see (Chuard and Southwood 2009; Hieronymi 2006; McHugh 2012a).

[3] For critical discussion of this sort of suggestion, see (Paakkunainen 2018a).

etiquette, a person should stand when another person enters a room for the first time. Perhaps this entails an 'etiquettean' reason to stand when a person enters. But, one might think, there is no genuine or authoritative reason for doing so (cp. Foot 1972).

I will not try here to address this opposition, not just to the specific view I develop in what follows, but to any view according to which epistemology is, even in part, a normative discipline. One can develop a moral theory, a theory of morally right action, without answering the moral sceptic, that is, without answering to their satisfaction the question, 'Why be moral?' Similarly, one can develop an epistemic theory, a theory of epistemically right belief, without answering the corresponding sceptic.[4] That is just what I will do.

To return to the main thread, and as my remarks so far indicate, I recognize a plurality of norms for belief. But, on my view, they do not make for a 'heap of unconnected obligations'.[5] For one thing, as will emerge, they are not all obligations. For another, and more importantly for now, underlying this plurality is a unifying standard, or so I will suggest. On the view I develop in this book, assessments of *rightness* (fittingness, correctness) are fundamental and, when it comes to belief, *truth* and *truth alone* makes for rightness (fittingness, correctness). It is right to believe what is true, wrong to believe what is false. So, truth provides the fundamental standard for believing.[6] To be clear, this standard is explanatorily fundamental with respect to other norms for belief, or at least those I discuss here; it does not follow from this that it is primary, or even predominant, in our everyday thought and talk about belief. Compare: A band might be explanatorily posterior to its members, but a fan might be more concerned with the band than with its members. More generally, the order of our concerns does not always correspond to the order of explanation.

1.2 From norms to reasons, from belief to action

Charting the relations among the norms of belief requires a theoretical framework which both explains the relevant normative notions—such as being justified, being rational, being obliged, and so on—and traces the relations among them. Another aim of this book is to provide that framework. To do so, I introduce and

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[4] The sceptic here is not the one that denies knowledge is possible (in general or in some domain).

[5] To echo a remark by Joseph concerning Ross's (1930) ethical theory (quoted in McNaughton 1996, 434).

[6] The view that truth is the fundamental norm for belief is found in (Boghossian 2008; Engel 2013; Fassio 2011; Greenberg 2020; Griffiths 1967; Littlejohn 2012; Lynch 2004; McDowell 1996, xi–xii; McHugh 2012b; Millar 2009; Morris 1992; Olinder 2012; Shah 2003; Shah and Velleman 2005; Sylvan 2012; Wedgwood 2002b; 2013; see also Whiting 2010; 2012; 2013a; 2013d; 2020a). These authors differ in important ways in how they formulate the norm and in the explanatory purposes to which they put it.

defend a comprehensive theory of *normative reasons*, that is, of considerations which justify, support, or rationalize attitudes—like belief but also intention—and the actions that manifest them.[7] For example, that clouds are gathering is a reason for Carlita to think that a storm is coming, and also a reason for her to take shelter; it justifies her in so thinking and in so acting.

It is the theory of reasons that, together with the substantive commitment that truth is the sole right-maker for belief, delivers and underwrites the account of the norms of belief. But that theory is not peculiar to the domain of belief—the epistemic domain. On the contrary, it is designed in the first instance to capture the domain of intentional action—the practical domain.[8] By proceeding in this way, I embed the debate about the norms of belief, which too often takes place in isolation, in a broader vision of our normative thought and talk and their subject matter. This sets the project apart from other efforts to defend the idea that truth is the fundamental standard for belief. At the same time, I hope to vindicate the theory of reasons by demonstrating its generality.

While in this way I bring the theory of reasons to bear on issues concerning the norms of belief, it is, I think, of independent interest. Reasons play an important part in our ethical lives. They figure in our deliberations as to what to do. For example, that clouds are gathering might be a premise in Carlita's reasoning concerning whether to take shelter. Reasons move us to do things.[9] Carlita might take shelter for the reason that clouds are gathering. We cite reasons when defending what we do. If asked to justify her decision to take shelter, Carlita might mention that clouds are gathering. We appeal to reasons when advising others on what to do. If asked for guidance as to whether to take shelter, we might tell Carlita that clouds are gathering. Reasons also determine what a person may, must, or ought to do. That clouds are gathering might make it the case that Carlita ought to take shelter.

This (non-exhaustive) survey reveals the prominent roles reasons play in our decision-making, interactions, and reflections. The goal of the theory of reasons is, in part, to reveal something about the nature of reasons which helps us to understand how they might play these roles.

One might object that there is no one kind of thing that performs all of these functions (cp. Wedgwood 2017, chap. 4). Perhaps the considerations that justify acting are not those that move us, or perhaps the considerations that determine what we should do are not those that we cite when providing advice. We might call them all 'reasons', but, in doing so, we pick out different things on different occasions.

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[7] Alongside reasons for belief (or, more broadly, cognitive states) and intention (conative states), there are also reasons for feeling (affective states). They are not the focus of the present work.

[8] I explain why I draw the contrast in these terms in §1.4.

[9] Perhaps in conjunction with desires. Some argue that it is not reasons that motivate a person but their beliefs, which, if true, might correspond to reasons. For different perspectives on this issue, see (Alvarez 2010a; Dancy 2000a; Fogal 2018; Hornsby 2008; Mantel 2014).

I think that there is a lot to this point. Indeed, one of the things the resultant framework allows me to do is precisely to distinguish reasons of different kinds.

The account of reasons I arrive at makes central appeal to the notions of rightness and wrongness;[10] it is original in also making appeal to *modal* notions, more specifically, the notion of a possibility, more specifically still, the notion of a nearby possibility. A nearby possibility is one that could easily obtain (Sainsbury 1997). Very roughly, my proposal is that some consideration is a reason to act just in case, given that consideration, it could not easily be wrong in some way to perform that act or could easily be wrong in some way not to perform it. To illustrate: Clouds are gathering. Given this, the possibility that Carlita will be harmed if she does not take shelter is a close one. That it will cause harm is one respect in which it is wrong for a person not to act. So, the fact clouds are gathering is a reason for Carlita to take shelter. I spell out this proposal more fully in the chapters to follow.

In developing the theory of reasons, I connect normativity—roughly, what should be the case—with modality—roughly, what could be the case. There is a venerable tradition in epistemology of characterizing in modal terms notions such as knowledge and justification.[11] Modality, it is fair to say, does not figure so prominently in ethics, and certainly not in the theory of reasons.[12] As a result, there is a seeming mismatch between the way epistemic normativity is understood and the way practical normativity is understood. By starting with a modal theory of practical reasons and extending it to the epistemic domain, I hope to (start to) remedy this situation.

1.3 The unity of reason

The last point serves to introduce an assumption that frames or guides the book, namely, that the normative is *unified*.[13] According to this assumption, notions such as being a reason, being right, being obliged, being rational, and so on are to be understood in the same way whether applied to the practical domain or to the epistemic domain. A corollary of this is that the relations in which these notions

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[10] I am not the first to characterize reasons in terms of rightness or its cognates. I survey and critically discuss other attempts in **chapter 2**.

[11] See, for example, (Becker 2007; Dretske 1971; Nozick 1981; Pritchard 2005a; Roush 2007; Sainsbury 1997; Smith 2016; Sosa 1999a; Williamson 2000).

[12] Notwithstanding work on the semantics of sentences involving deontic modals. For a critical overview, see (Bronfman and Dowell 2018). As Bronfman and Dowell point out (2018, 109), the standard semantic theory for deontic sentences—due to Kratzer (1977)—is neutral on the relationship between the truth of such sentences and reasons and has nothing to say about the nature of reasons. A theory of reasons that employs deontic modals—say, by analysing reasons in terms of their relationship to what a person ought to do—might qualify as modal. As it happens, proponents of such theories do not typically present them in this way (see Broome 2004; Kearns and Star 2009; Thomson 2008). Be that as it may, modal notions play a very different role in the theory I will develop.

[13] This assumption is implicit in much recent work on normativity. For explicit statements of it, see (Gibbons 2013, vii; Skorupski 2010, chap. 1.6). It relates, no doubt, to Kant's notion of the 'unity of reason' (1785, 4:391). For discussion, see (Mudd 2016; Timmermann 2009).

stand to one another when applied to action mirror those in which they stand when applied to belief.

By way of preliminary support for the unity assumption, note the striking fact that we apply the same vocabulary in relation to both action and belief. One might equally speak, perhaps in the same breath, of what it is right for a person to do and what it is right for them to think, of what there is reason for a person to do and what there is reason for them to think, of what a person should do and what they should believe, of what a person is justified in doing and what they are justified in believing, and so on.[14] Of course, such ways of speaking might be misleading or confused, but, insofar as they exhibit no obvious ambiguity, they establish a presumption in favour of unity. However, the real support for that assumption lies in its fruitfulness, which I will try to demonstrate in what follows.

It is important to keep in mind that the unity I have in mind is structural, as it were, rather than substantial. That is to say, the unity lies at the meta-level, not at the first-order. For example, the notion of rightness, I assume, is to be understood in the same way whether applied to action or to belief. As mentioned in §1.1, I take the truth of what is believed to make for right belief. But I do not take the truth of what is done—whatever that might mean!—to make for right action. What makes for right action is instead promoting wellbeing, or keeping a promise, or preserving autonomy, or whatever.

So, I will explain how the epistemic and practical domains differ—their substance—while revealing what they share—their structure. This brings out a related theme which runs throughout the book: unity in diversity. As things proceed, I will distinguish between a number of intersecting kinds of reasons—justifying and demanding, for and against, possessed and unpossessed, objective and subjective—and at the same time capture what they have in common such that their members all count as reasons. In doing so, I will distinguish several statuses those reasons determine in terms of their force—whether they concern what a person may, should, or must do—and in terms of how independent they are of a person's perspective, while also explaining how those statuses relate to the more fundamental status of rightness. This then allows me to distinguish different norms to which belief is subject—truth, knowledge, and rationality—while, again, revealing their common cause.

1.4 A terminological interlude

At several points, I have contrasted *practical* norms and *epistemic* norms, and I will continue to do so throughout the book. One might query this (cp. King Forthcoming).

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[14] In **chapter 7**, I will argue that there is nothing that a person should believe, only what they may believe. But that rests on first-order commitments. I do not deny that the claim that a person should believe a proposition is a coherent one.

The practical most naturally contrasts with the *theoretical*. This is a distinction between the things norms govern—respectively, things that make for practice, like actions, and things that make for theory, like beliefs. The epistemic most naturally contrasts with, say, the *moral*.[15] This is a distinction among what one might call *concerns*. Candidate concerns proper to the epistemic domain include truth and knowledge. Candidate concerns proper to the moral domain include welfare and autonomy. So understood, the practical/theoretical and epistemic/moral distinctions are crosscutting. Beliefs might answer to moral concerns (Basu 2019). Actions might answer to epistemic concerns (Booth 2006).

These observations help to explain the terms in which I draw the contrast. The theory of reasons I will develop is in the first instance a theory of reasons for action, hence, a theory of practical reasons. I generalize it to reasons for believing, hence, deliver an account of theoretical reasons, but I am only interested here in those that relate to epistemic concerns, in particular, to truth. So, the focus is restricted to those theoretical reasons that are epistemic. The contrast I am drawing, then, is really between practical norms and theoretical-cum-epistemic norms. Since 'theoretical-cum-epistemic' is an ugly phrase, and since I am not aware of a better alternative, I will just use the label 'epistemic'. It will be clear throughout that I am not exploring those epistemic norms, if any, to which action is subject.

1.5   Is something first?

Before proceeding to an overview of the book's contents, I will relate the project I pursue here to two recent projects in metaethics and epistemology. While the book starts with reasons, it is not a contribution to the *reasons first* programme. Those involved in that programme maintain that the notion of a reason is the fundamental normative notion, in the sense that other normative notions—for example, obligation and value—are to be explained in terms of it.[16] It is consistent with this claim that the notion of a reason is itself analysable, so long as it is analysed in non-normative terms. As it happens, however, many of those who subscribe to the reasons first project also think that reasons are unanalysable or primitive.[17]

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[15] Not to mention the prudential, the aesthetic, the political, the legal, and so on. For ease of presentation, I will focus on the epistemic/moral contrast in this section.

[16] Influential proponents of this approach include Parfit (2011), Scanlon (1998; 2014), Schroeder (2007; 2021), and Skorupski (2010), perhaps also Raz (2011, 5–7).

[17] Of those cited in **n16**, Parfit, Scanlon, and Skorupski take the notion of a reason to be unanalysable, while Schroeder and, perhaps, Raz do not. Another position is to accept the unanalysability claim while rejecting the reasons first programme (Dancy 2000b).

This book stands in opposition to the reasons first approach. Its starting point is, precisely, an analysis of reasons. It explains the notion of a reason in part in modal terms, as noted in **§1.2**, and also in normative terms, specifically, in terms of being right. Does that mean I subscribe to the rightness (or fittingness) first project?[18] I do not (need to) commit here. While the notion of rightness is explanatorily fundamental in relation to those normative notions I consider in this work, it is consistent with all that follows that there are normative notions that cannot be explained in terms of rightness, say, value. For that matter, it is consistent with all that follows that rightness itself is analysable in either normative or non-normative terms. I try to do a lot in this book, but I do not try to do everything.[19]

In suggesting that truth is the fundamental norm for belief, one might ask how the project of this book relates to another something first programme, namely, *knowledge first*. The answer to that depends on what it means to put knowledge first. Participants in the programme tend to subscribe to a number of commitments that are on the surface independent of one another (cp. Jackson 2012; Gerken 2018; McGlynn 2014, 15–16).[20] First, knowledge is *metaphysically* fundamental, in the sense that it is not analysable. Second, knowledge is *explanatorily* fundamental in the epistemic domain, in the sense that other epistemic notions are to be explained in terms of it. Third, knowledge is *normatively* fundamental, in the sense that knowledge is the basic standard of assessment for belief relative to which other standards, if there are any, are derivative.

I remain neutral here with respect to the first two commitments. I do put the notion of knowledge to explanatory work in developing the theory of reasons, but I take no stand on whether that notion itself admits of explanation or on how much it might explain. In contrast, I straightforwardly reject the third commitment. I do not deny that knowledge is a standard of assessment for belief—indeed, I support that suggestion in **chapter 8**—but I deny that that standard is fundamental relative to that which truth provides.

One might think that rejecting normative fundamentality somehow forces rejection of metaphysical or explanatory fundamentality. But that is a mistake. By way of analogy, suppose that Laura promises to give John the object that looks

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[18] Recent defenders of this project include Chappell (2012), Howard (2019), and McHugh and Way (2016). Earlier proponents include Broad (1930) and Ewing (1947).

[19] I will also not engage with more traditional metaethical—or, more broadly, metanormative—issues, such as whether normative statements express cognitive states or non-cognitive states or some mix of the two. For an overview, see (Miller 2013).

[20] Williamson (2000) is responsible for the prominence of this programme. Precursors include (Price 1935; Prichard 1950; Strawson 1992, chap. 2; Wilson 1926). Those who accept one or more of the commitments to follow include (Adler 2002; Bird 2007; Engel 2005; Ichikawa 2014; Kelp 2016; 2017a; Kelp, Ghijsen, and Simion 2016; Littlejohn 2013; 2017; Mehta 2016; Millar 2010; Miracchi 2015; 2019; Simion 2019b; Smithies 2012b; Sutton 2007). For a critical overview of the knowledge first programme, see (McGlynn 2014).

red. As a result, she ought to give him the object that looks red. Suppose further that the only object that looks red is the object that *is* red. As a result, Laura ought to give John the object that is red. So, the norm involving the notion of being red is derivative—it holds as a consequence of the norm involving the notion of looking red, together with some additional information. It hardly follows that the notion of being red is analysable, let alone that it is analysable in terms of looking red. One might consistently maintain that the norm in which the notion of looking red figures is prior in the order of explanation to the norm in which the notion of being red figures and also that being red is prior in the order of explanation to looking red.

Having situated the project of this book in relation to others, I will provide an overview of what is to come.

1.6 Overview

Chapters 2 to 6 primarily concern metaethics, more specifically, the theory of reasons. In **chapter 2**, I consider the question of what a reason for acting is. To help in answering it, I sketch a job description for reasons, that is, a specification of the roles reasons play. In view of it, I compare and contrast the view that reasons are right-makers with the view that reasons are evidence of right-makers, provisionally settling on a version of the evidence-based account. In **chapter 3**, I motivate and defend a distinction between two sorts of reasons—those that (merely) justify acting and those that (also) demand it—and show how the theory captures it. By appeal to the distinction, I explain the relationship between reasons and overall verdicts about what a person may, should, or must do. In **chapter 4**, I revise the provisional theory of reasons, replacing the evidential relation between reasons and right-makers with a modal relation between the two. Rather than offering this as an analysis of the evidential relation, I present it as a successor.

The focus in the first three chapters is on *objective* reasons, that is, reasons provided by facts irrespective of a person's access or sensitivity to those facts or their reason-giving force. In **chapter 5**, I extend the account to the reasons a person *possesses*, that is, to the reasons a person is in a position to respond to. In **chapter 6**, I extend it to *subjective* reasons, that is, to the reasons that rationalize acting. While the final product makes no claims to completeness, it does offer a fairly comprehensive framework for thinking about reasons, and I gesture at further ways in which it might be developed.

In **chapter 7**, I turn to epistemology and move from the meta-level to the first-order. First, I generalize the theory of objective reasons to the epistemic domain, that is, to reasons for believing. I then combine the theory with a substantive, normative commitment—namely, that truth is the sole right-maker for belief—and explore the consequences. One is that, in the objective sense, a person may

believe all and only truths. **Chapter 8** generalizes the account of possessed reasons to the epistemic domain.[21] By plugging in the first-order principle concerning right belief, I vindicate the idea that knowledge is a (not *the*) norm of belief. **Chapter 9** generalizes the account of subjective reasons to the epistemic domain and, again, plugs in the principle concerning truth. The result is a modal account of rational belief. I explore its implications and contrast it with more orthodox probabilistic views of epistemic rationality.

   Chapter 10 concludes by, among other things, indicating outstanding issues to which the theory I developed in the preceding might be applied in future work.

   Note: An alternative reading order is to turn to **chapters 7, 8, and 9** after **chapters 4, 5, and 6**, respectively. This allows the reader, following the introduction of each element of the metaethical theory, to see immediately its application to the epistemic domain.

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[21] Here and throughout I speak of different senses of normative terms—'reason', 'ought', etc. I do not thereby commit to the view that such terms are ambiguous. An alternative is that the use of such terms makes implicit reference to some contextually-supplied parameter (cp. Henning 2014).