Cognition and Conation: An Analogy
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THE DIRECTION OF FIT (DOF) CASE: The different “directions of fit” of (i) my grocery list and (ii) the detective’s inventory. If my list doesn’t match the cart, then there is something wrong with the cart; if the detective’s list doesn’t match the cart, then there is something wrong with his list. (Anscombe, *Intention*, §32)

This suggests the thought that, necessarily, a belief is wrong when it fails to fit the world, but that this is not true of desire.

TRUTH IS THE AIM OF BELIEF (TAB): Being true is a constitutive standard of correctness for beliefs. Necessarily, and in virtue of being the kind of things they are, beliefs are wrong (mistaken, incorrect) if they are not true. (Wedgewood, “The Aim of Belief,” Shah and Velleman, “Doxastic Deliberation”) (Compare: going through the hoop is a constitutive standard of correctness for shots in basketball.)

Two disanalogies between the DOF case and TAB, which show that the DOF case doesn’t support TAB:

1. The “direction of fit” of the two lists supervenes on the intentions of the two people involved; the intentionality of the lists is derived from the intentionality of the people. It is not “constitutive” of the lists.
2. It sounds right to say that the detective’s list is wrong (mistaken, incorrect) if it fails to match the cart, but it actually sounds very weird to say that the cart is wrong (mistaken, incorrect) if it talks to match my list. How could an inanimate, mindless cart be wrong (and, even worse, wrong in virtue of being the kind of thing that it is)? And consider the analogous claim about desire: that the world is wrong if it fails to fit my (our? someones?) desires (and, even worse, wrong in virtue of being the kind of thing that it is)?

So why think that being truth-directed is an essential feature of belief?

COGNITIVE DELIBERATION IS TRANSPARENT TO TRUTH: “The deliberative question *whether to believe that* *p* inevitably gives way to the factual question *whether* *p*.” (Shah and Velleman, op. cit., p. 499, see also Williams, “Deciding to Believe,” p. 148 and Moran, “Making Up Your Mind,” p. 146)

BEST ARGUMENT FOR TAB:

1. Deliberation about whether to believe *p* is transparent to the question of whether the belief that *p* would be true.
2. If deliberation about what to *Φ* is transparent to deliberation about whether *Φing* would have feature *F*, then having *F* is a constitutive standard of correctness for *Φing*.
3. Therefore, being true is a constitutive standard of correctness for believing.

This suggests a disanalogy between belief and desire, flowing from the essential nature of belief. However …

CONATIVE DELIBERATION IS TRANSPARENT TO GOODNESS: Deliberation about whether to desire *p* inevitably gives way to the evaluative question of whether *p* would be good, whether *p* ought to be the case, whether *p* would be better than various alternatives, and so on.

Figuring out what to believe, so the argument goes, *just is* figuring out what is true. But if that’s plausible, then so is this claim: that figuring out what to desire *just is* figuring out what is good. Just as the phenomenology of cognitive deliberation suggests the truth-directedness of belief, the phenomenology of conative deliberation suggests the goodness-directedness of desire.

ARGUMENT THAT GOODNESS IS THE AIM OF DESIRE:
(1*) Deliberation about whether to desire \( p \) inevitably gives way to the evaluative question of whether the desire that \( p \) would be good (i.e. have a content that would be good).

(2) If deliberation about what to \( \Phi \) is transparent to deliberation about whether \( \Phi \)ing would have feature \( F \), then having \( F \) is the constitutive standard of correctness for \( \Phi \)ing.

(3*) Being good is a constitutive standard of correctness for desiring.

CLAIM: If the best argument that truth is a constitutive standard of correctness for belief (i.e. for TAB) works, then an argument that goodness is a constitutive standard of correctness for desire works. In other words, if TAB is plausible, then so is the claim that goodness is a constitutive standard of correctness for desire.

This doesn’t mean that it’s wrong to say that desire isn’t necessary truth-directed, whereas belief is. But it means that, if we want to say that belief is necessarily directed at something (truth), then we should say that desire is necessarily directed at something as well (goodness).

REJECT (2): Don’t infer anything about the constitutive standard of correctness for a practice from the nature of conscious deliberation about how to proceed in that practice. Conscious deliberative proceeding may not be paradigmatic or normal for that practice, and so an examination of conscious deliberative proceeding may not reveal the essential nature of that practice. (Conscious, deliberative believing yields judgment; judgment is a very rare and special kind of belief.)

MY ACCOUNT OF THE “AIMS” OF BELIEF AND DESIRE: A person’s beliefs embody or express her thoughts about the way the world is (her picture of what is true); to find out how she thinks the world is, look at what she believes. A person’s desires embody or express her thoughts about the way the world ought to be (her picture of what is good); to find out how she thinks the world ought to be, look at what she believes.

On my view, belief and desire have the same “direction of fit,” but they are “directed at” different objects (truth and goodness, respectively). (It’s consistent, of course, with the claim that desires aren’t meant to fit the world, where the world = that which is the case.)

This is neutral, so far, with respect of a bunch of questions:

1. Is truth (in a sense to be explained) objective?
2. Is goodness (in a sense to be explained) objective?
3. What is truth? Is there one truth, or a plurality of truths?
4. What is goodness? Is there one good, or a plurality of goods?

How those debates are settled have implications for how this picture looks, in the end.
More Thoughts on “Cognition and Conation”:

**Motivational Internalism:** A person judges that \( p \) is good only if she desires (to some degree) that \( p \).

**Two Claims:** (1) This sits nicely with the claim that conative deliberation is transparent to goodness. (2) My account of the “aims” of belief and desire explains why internalism is true.

**Involuntarism about Belief and Desire:** Necessarily, people don’t have voluntary control over their beliefs and desires.

**Claim:** This sits nicely with my claim that desire and belief have the same direction of fit (but different objects). It’s something of an embarrassment for someone who thinks that belief has an aim, but that desire doesn’t.

**Humean Theory of Action:** Intentional, rational \( \Phi \)ing requires (i) the desire that \( p \), and (ii) the belief that \( \Phi \)ing will make it more likely that \( p \).

**Claim:** This sits nicely with my picture, with belief and desire relating to action as the determiners of means and ends, respectively. Since belief and desire can’t (exactly) be distinguished by their direction of fit, perhaps they can be distinguished by their different roles in the production of action.

**Primitivism about Belief and Desire:** The concepts of belief and desire are primitive, unanalyzable notions.

Motivation for TAB comes from the desire to give an analysis of the concepts of belief and desire. It’s assumed that we need some account of the difference between these two things, and it’s then argued that their different “directions of fit” or “aims” will do this job. But I say this job doesn’t need doing.

We should also consider other criteria of belief and desire: their (aforementioned) roles in the production of action, their psycho-functional roles, their phenomenology, and so on.

**TAB and Epistemic Normativity:** If TAB were true, then we’d have found the source of epistemic normativity. For if being true is a constitutive aim of believing, then epistemic evaluation (evaluation of beliefs in terms of how well they do vis-à-vis the goal of acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones) is vindicated by the essential nature of belief. (See Wedgewood, “The Aim of Belief”)

**Suspicion:** Epistemic normativity can’t be got that cheaply.

**The Uniqueness of Truth:** It’s usually argued that truth is the only constitutive aim of believing. (The claim is that “truth is the aim of belief,” after all.) In terms of transparency, the argument for this is that cognitive deliberation is only transparent to truth. While there may be other “good” features that a belief that \( p \) can have (e.g. its being prudent to believe \( p \), its being morally virtuous to believe \( p \), \( p \)’s being beautiful), the deliberative question of whether to believe \( p \) always turns into a referendum on whether \( p \), and not on whether it’s prudent to believe \( p \), or whatever.

**The Uniqueness of Epistemic Evaluation:** If truth is the only constitutive aim of believing, then epistemic evaluation is a uniquely appropriate way to evaluate beliefs, superior (in some sense) to any other way of evaluating them.

**The Uniqueness of Goodness:** The argument we gave above works for desire and goodness as well. Desires may have other “good” features, but it’s only the goodness of \( p \) that matters when I deliberate about whether to desire \( p \).

**The Uniqueness of Evaluating Desires in Terms of Goodness:** What would this amount to? My suspicion is that it would be something unsavory.