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**Relevant Beliefs**

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Beliefs are often presented as descriptive psychological matters, say in opposition to desires or wishes. Yet beliefs are intentional features. A plausible conception of intentionality is reviewed that does not figure description but rather teleological engagement along with normativity as its basis. Such intertwining of teleology and deontics, several objective and subjective dimensions involving, may be applied to an explanation of belief-formation. Beliefs then exchange their descriptive, functional and instrumental engagements for teleological and deontic ones. In this direction, belief turns out to be a form of genuine judgment, with several normative rationalities involving dimensions. The relevance of belief shows itself as a matter of virtuous character, in epistemic and other capacities.

Keywords: belief-formation, morals, epistemology, genuine judgment, teleology, deontics.

*Beliefs are often presented as descriptive psychological matters, say in opposition to desires or wishes.*

Belief talk in philosophy is usual in such areas as that of moral theory and epistemology. In *metaethics*, one treats moral judgments as beliefs, or again as emotional responses to the encountered situation, involving one’s wishes or desires. If this last turn is taken, reasons are not supposed to have their place in belief-formation. And if descriptive interpretation of beliefs is embraced, reasons are absent again, due to their normative nature which is not important in pure description.

Metaethics deals with the nature of moral *judgments*. If these moral judgments are supposed to *describe* some reality, say that of moral properties or facts which one encounters in a morally charged situation, then one embraces what is known as *cognitivism*. Cognitivism is the view that moral judgments are *beliefs*. Once this is recognized, one infers that moral judgments have *semantic* role of *describing* the reality that they apply to. Besides to this, one acknowledges that these beliefs have their *psychological* side. Expression cognitivism is used here to convey the meaning that moral judgments are cognitive psychological states such as beliefs, whose aim is to *describe* the encountered situation. *Noncognitivism* refers to the denial of this, i.e. namely that moral judgments are not beliefs, that they are not cognitive items, and so that they do not describe some reality but rather express one’s attitudes. (Strahovnik 2016) Description is thus the overall background assumption.

Description is a semantic feature of beliefs: as they are supposed to describe, they have possibility to refer to the reality in question, and in a successful case they happen to be true, otherwise false. Description and ascription of truth value go hand in hand. Besides to their semantic role beliefs as well have their psychological role. The expressions cognitivism and noncognitivism in metaethics usually apply to beliefs’ semantic role.

It turns out that at the landscape there are possibilities of mixed positions overcoming the tie between semantic descriptivism and psychological belief as standing for cognitivist interpretation of moral judgment, and noncognitivism as its counterpart denying both semantic descriptive and psychological belief joining relation. Breaching that tie, cognitivist expressivism claims moral judgments to be genuine beliefs, although their main task is not to describe some reality but to evaluate and serve as guides for a possible action. But what does it mean that we do have to do with genuine beliefs, according to this view? First, this implies that there are beliefs which do not have descriptive but rather an evaluative role, and so they turn out to be *ought*-beliefs and not *is*-beliefs (they value and they do not describe). In fact, this brings us to the point where it might be more appropriate to call these beliefs genuine (moral) judgments. But it seems that the accepted practice which is shaped in accordance with the *descriptive* role of beliefs blocks their recognition as genuine judgments. (Potrč, to be published). For cognitivist expressivism moral judgment is still belief, although it does not describe. So it is recognized as a *valuing* belief species, i.e. *ought*-belief. Notice that still one uses belief as *reduction* of genuine judgment. But one realizes that moral judgment as belief has *valuing* role. Another mixed proposal is fictionalism, which retains moral judgments’ descriptive role, all in denying their psychological, i.e. genuine belief role. Little Red Riding Hood story allows for non-arbitrary description following such requirements as consistency (she walked, didn’t fly in the air during her itinerary to grandma’s place, didn’t perform contradictory actions at the same time[[1]](#footnote-0)). Similarly, moral judgments are held to be useful descriptive fictions, without that one would ultimately believe in their truth. Notice that both these proposals still stick to the belief descriptive function paradigm, including the denial take upon the situation. They thus comply to the *reduction* of genuine judgment to belief. This is strange, for in metaethics one really deals with moral *judgment*. The habit of reducing judgment to belief, and then distinguishing its semantic and psychological sides rules both standard and mixed proposals from the background.

In *epistemology*, belief features in definition of knowledge as justified true belief, with all its rich variants, involving foundationalism and coherentism, up to the heavy industry Gettier proposals. Again, definitory project trying to determine necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be knowledge treats belief as a semantic and psychological ingredient of the definition as a whole. Truth is one necessary, objective semantic condition in definition of knowledge, whereas belief provides the needed psychological underpinning and connection. Building upon these, the definition of knowledge refuses though to take it as a case of *genuine* (epistemic) *judgment*. This may be disciplined by recognition of the *virtue* based approach to morals and to knowledge. More about this further on.

Both metaethics and epistemology try to reduce -- moral or epistemic -- genuine judgment to *belief*, in order to adapt it to definitory and *descriptive* requirements. The presupposition of belief entering the stage is *reduction* of moral *judgment* to it, in order that one is then able to comply with the belief's descriptive function. But this is as just said *reduction* of genuine judgmentto belief, in order to present judgment to have description as its goal (cognitivism) or again absence of description substituted by emotive or expressivist ingredients.[[2]](#footnote-1)

*Yet beliefs are intentional features.*

The *psychological* side of belief -- leaving aside for a while the fact that it leans upon its semantic descriptive role -- as well involves *intentional directedness*. Beliefs thus have a content which is *directed* at some reality (real or nonreal, perhaps ideal).

There are different approaches to *intentionality*. Externalists suppose that psychological intentional directedness is related to the the really existing items in the external world. So even if I think about the cat which isn’t around at the moment, my cat presentation and the ensuing intentional directedness at it is kind of causally related to the real cat exemplars that I have encountered in my empirically supported experience and that gave me possibility and incentive to form the directedness at the cat which I am now exercising. Internalists will think that my cat-belief does not need any such external support in order to succeed; it is sufficient for me to entertain a representation that may be of a perfectly narrow nature. Again, Meinongians take my intentional acts to be directed at a kind of Platonic in ideal sense existing object cat.

Notice that all these trials to account for intentional relation, though, still derive their activity from the descriptive semantic story, which is claimed to be the one about belief but finally turns out to be that of genuine judgment. More about this later on. It should be noted that the descriptive approach to judgment which features as reduced to belief eliminates phenomenology as constitutive for intentional relation, as this is claimed by the intentionality of phenomenology and phenomenology of intentionality thesis[[3]](#footnote-2). A first question to ask however is in what manner one may put into question the *descriptive* inclination which led to belief’s actual popularity in such areas as morals and epistemology. The answer is that there is *teleology* and *normativity* involving approach to intentionality, distinguishing it from more description or representation friendly ways to go.

*A plausible conception of intentionality is reviewed that does not figure description but rather teleological engagement along with normativity as its basis.*

An interesting conception of *intentionality*, i.e. of intentional directedness, tries to minimize the impact of content and accordingly that of description. It is rather a kind of *practical* directedness to one’s surrounding world. Heidegger in his early work (1927) in its introductory chapters proposes that intentionality consists of two ingredients, call them Intentionality I and Intentionality II.[[4]](#footnote-3) Intentionality I figures practical activity, such as my hammering a piece of wood, trying to attach it to another piece of wood. Hammering is practical activity, it is actually a *skill*, consisting of *knowing how* and not of so called propositional attitudes involving knowing that. Hammering is my purposeful activity in the environment that I happen to inhabit.[[5]](#footnote-4) As said, the important specifics of this kind of intentionality is that it does not describe and that it rather actively engages one into interaction with one’s own environment, with the aim to produce something useful. Intentionality II, now, consists in realization that the useful activity happens in an environment where I get *recognized* as a skilfull master. I namely hammer two pieces of wood in a trial to get them together, so that they will properly fit into a chair that I am trying to produce. This activity of mine happens to be *recognized* by community of peers and then of customers as being the work of a skilfull master. Intentionality II thus carries a *normative* charge with it. One can ask about the specific importance of each of these in their mutual relationship: whether Intentionality I or perhaps Intentionality II is what matters.

The answer is that the real intentional directedness features them both: it is an intertwining of skilfull practical engagement in one’s surrounding world (Intentionality I) and of *normative* recognition of one’s engagement in the world from the side of one’s community (Intentionality II). Real intentionality encompasses both Intentionality I and also Intentionality II, in their intertwining constitutive interaction. Being directed at, engaged into something, I need to be recognized by community in order that my activity would have its appropriate value. My skilfull and purposeful interaction with the world needs to be supported by normative recognition.

Realize that one can present Intentionality I as teleological end of my engagement. But this one is then supported down there in its basis by the normativity involving Intentionality II. Where is belief in all this? One can just say that we have turned our attention away from descriptive matters, towards agency and normativity. It is on time to ask whether *belief* is agentive and normative as well, despite the tradition that would like to reduce it to its descriptive role.

*Intertwining of teleology and deontics, several objective and subjective dimensions involving, may be applied to an explanation of belief-formation.*

Once as we abandon reduction of belief to its descriptive role and away from the genuine judgment (knowledge may as well be a matter of judgment, not just moral matters), we can actually recognize belief to have a *practical teleological* ingredient fitting to what was thought to be its *semantic* role. In fact, there is *teleological goal* in belief-formation, that of forming *true* beliefs. Notice that semantics becomes teleologically supported from this perspective. That would be kind of parallel to the just discussed Intentionality I. In fact, one’s (semantic) goal certainly is to form *true* beliefs.[[6]](#footnote-5) And one recognized one’s belief-formation as one’s activity, not as a passive matter, as happening in the space of reasons and not in the space of causes. This does not lead one to embrace voluntarism though. One does not form one’s beliefs at will, and yet one feels concerned and responsible in their regard, the point to which we will turn in what follows.

The goal of belief-formation, that of forming *true* beliefs, parallel to Intentionality I, does not come into existence in a direct manner. It is supported by several stages of means-to-ends nested hierarchy, where the lower level supports the upper one, and the lower one, supporting the upper goal, is basic in respect to it. The lowest level in hierarchy of means-to-ends goals is the most basic. *Truth* as the goal of belief-formation is supported by the *evidence* that one has for forming the belief under scrutiny. Call this the *objective evidence* sub-goal, which leads to the ultimate upper *truth* goal as that of belief-formation. But where does objective evidence come from? One needs to rely upon reliable sources of information. Notice that reliability is an externalist feature figuring in epistemic belief-formation support. My sightseeing of cat should happen under appropriate circumstances (no thick fog), I should have fairly uncontroversial vision ability (not being too myopic, too tired, irrational). This externalist support of belief-formation is objective, but in order to be sure about it, I need to extend it to the appropriate environment, which finally turns out to be not just global (as extension from the local environment, so that some questions tied to the local perspective may be addressed) but even transglobal experiential environment.[[7]](#footnote-6) Now, the further means-to-ends support comes from involving one’s epistemic *sensibility* into belief-formation. One sees the shift towards deontic from the upper teleological goal in belief-formation. One’s sensibility is namely rooted in one’s *responsible* handling of the situation. In fact, ultimately, at the lowest basic level, one needs to rely upon one’s *all-in ultima facie epistemic seemings* in order to undergird one’s belief formation in an appropriate manner. At this stage, one encounters *deontic* foundation of one’s belief-formation.[[8]](#footnote-7) In order to be an epistemically responsible agent, one needs to rely upon what (moral or epistemic) *seemings* deliver as the basis to work on, towards one’s sensibility and responsibility involving take upon belief-formation.

*Beliefs then exchange their descriptive, functional and instrumental engagements for teleological and deontic ones.*

In moral and epistemic areas beliefs mainly figure in support of descriptive goal and truth as direct correspondence enhancing semantics[[9]](#footnote-8). This goes along with beliefs support of functional and instrumental approaches.[[10]](#footnote-9) In metaethics, a *teleological* perspective[[11]](#footnote-10) is opposed to this trend. The reconstruction of belief-formation shows that *semantic* truth ascription needs to be taken as teleological and not as descriptive. Support for such an approach then naturally comes from several supporting levels of means-to-ends engagement, ultimately resting upon all-in ultima facie epistemic (or moral[[12]](#footnote-11)) seemings.[[13]](#footnote-12) The basis of belief-formation has no other objective ground, although it is directed towards objective teleological truth aim at the upper end of its reconstruction. All-in ultima facie seemings need to be taken in their serious *responsible* and *sensibility* involving manner. In simple terms: there is no other ultimate basis for belief-formation as one’s seemings (epistemic or moral in the cases that we now discuss), thus as one’s phenomenological data upon the matter at hand. These phenomenological data -- and this is of the utmost importance -- need to be taken in (epistemic or moral) *sensibility* involving manner, in an (epistemic or moral) *responsible* way. This *subjective* engagement underlying part is thus not arbitrary, for it needs to be supported by *normative* and *deontic* pressures, in order to have a chance to be in support of the teleological truth-aim in belief-formation. The intertwining of teleological and deontic ingredients in belief-formation is similar to that of the formerly discussed Intentionality I and Intentionality II, which goes in a practical, engaged, and normatively supported manner. Belief-formation inquiry shows that belief is not descriptive and functional, but that these characteristics of it are properly disciplined by quasi-agency involving teleological and deontic dimensions.[[14]](#footnote-13)

*In this direction, belief turns out to be a form of genuine judgment, with several normative rationalities involving dimensions.*

What is proposed as belief in such areas as epistemology and morals turns out to be actually a *reduced* version of *genuine judgment*. Now, what is genuine judgment? We take its characteristics to involve (i) phenomenology, (ii) commitment, (iii) responsibility and (iv) reasons supported objectivity. Let us take these shortly in turn.

(i) Phenomenology is the basis of belief-formation. We talk about (epistemic or moral) seemings as the ultimate ground upon which a belief gets formed. There is no other objective characteristics to rely upon. The subjective dimension of seemings or phenomenological data in a certain area though obtain their needed objectivity from *normative* engagement that is needed for it to come through in a relevant, appropriate manner. That’s deontic stuff. Genuine judgment has no other basis than phenomenological seemings support of an epistemic or moral agent. But it needs to be taken, and it is normally taken in a committed and responsible manner.

(ii) Commitment. Forming a belief, one is committed to it. The belief may be obtained in an involuntary manner, but it still gets treated by the subject as a part of his agentive or quasi-agentive involvement. The same goes for one’s genuine judgment about some matter at hand. Commitment shows one’s engagement.

(iii) Belief-formation normally succeeds in an (epistemically or morally) *responsible* manner. One gets automatically engaged in one’s belief-formation in a responsible way, despite that one’s belief may be objectively irresponsible. In one’s own (epistemic or moral) eyes, the responsibility is unavoidable. The same goes for one’s genuine judgment in these and other areas.

(iv) Reasons supported objectivity. Both belief and judgment may be taken as something arbitrary and relative. But this is not the manner in which they are experienced. Belief and judgment namely get experienced as based upon reasons, not as proceeding from causes. And these reasons support the *objective* experience going along with one’s beliefs and judgments.

Given that judgment shares all of the just mentioned characteristics with belief, one may conclude that belief is in fact a reduced judgment. Doing away with reductionist descriptive role of belief as being its primary engagement, one realizes that belief is actually itself a form of genuine judgment.

*The relevance of belief shows itself as a matter of virtuous character, in epistemic and other capacities.*

Descriptive belief lacks relevance. The reconstruction of belief-formation reintroduces relevance into belief constitution. Teleology and deontic ingredients act in an intertwined and mutually supportive manner in belief-formation. This then just shows that belief is actually a name for genuine judgment, resurging under the cloud of descriptive and functionalist fog.

In order to reconstruct *relevance* of belief as genuine judgment, one needs to take recourse to *virtue*. Beliefs and judgments in moral and epistemic areas are really relevant just in the case as they are forthcoming in one’s virtuous exercise of one’s epistemic or moral character. Relevant belief turns out to be a virtuous genuine judgment.[[15]](#footnote-14)

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1. Although the consistency requirement is kind of thin in fiction. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Noncognitivism: normativity may obtain its role in some approaches, such as the one that considers judgments to be kind of commands (Hare 1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Horgan and Tienson (2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Intentionality I engaged teleological nature is stressed by Dreyfus (1991), whereas Intentionality II normative side was elaborated by Haugeland (1985). See Potrč 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Applying pressure upon the door knob is another case of the basic Intentionality I relation, thereby distinguishing actively engaged intentionality from its *representation* friendly forms. Dreyfus (1991) criticizes Husserl’s classical computation representations and rules inspired model in favor of behavioral learning friendly connectionism inspired model of mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Henderson, Horgan, Potrč and Tierney (1917). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Henderson, Horgan and Potrč (2007). See as well Henderson and Horgan (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. This is actually *phenomenological* experiential basis, and not a metaphysical or epistemic foundation. See Timmons (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Horgan and Potrč (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Searle’s Chinese room thought experiment (Searle 1980) is a trial to cast doubt upon the functionalist approach to mind. Potrč (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Hampton (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Belief naturally figures as an epistemic venue. It may as well exercise this dimension in the area of morals. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. All-in ultima facie epistemic seemings exhibit epistemic (and moral) sensibility and responsibility as their ultimate ground. This may be called Potrč’s principle (Potrč 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Horgan, Potrč, Strahovnik and Timmons (to be published). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. In writing of this article I am thankful for their long term support to Terence Horgan and Vojko Strahovnik. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)