Belief, Correctness and Constitutivity

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Abstract - Many philosophers have recently argued that belief is governed by a norm of truth. Such philosophers state this norm in terms of a standard of correctness according to which a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. These philosophers also argue that the truth-standard is constitutive of the essence or the concept of belief. This roughly means that a mental state is not (or cannot be understood as being) a belief if it is not a mental state that is correct if and only if it is true. Some arguments have been given in support and against the claim that the standard of correctness is constitutive of belief. However, all these arguments resulted to be affected by problems. The aim of my paper is to provide a new argument in support of the claim that the correctness standard is constitutive of belief. I will first argue that the correctness standard of belief is necessary. Then I will argue that the necessity of the standard is a consequence of the essence or the concept of some thing. I will then show that the only essence or concept from which the necessity of the standard can stem is that of belief.

Many philosophers have recently argued that belief is governed by a norm of truth.¹ Such philosophers state this norm in terms of a standard of correctness according to which a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. These philosophers also argue that the truth-standard is constitutive of the essence or the concept of belief. This roughly means that a mental state is not (or cannot be understood as being) a belief if it is not a mental state that is correct if and only if it is true. These philosophers argued that assuming that beliefs are constitutively governed by such a norm would explain the relation between belief and truth, distinguish belief from other mental attitudes and explain a series of features of belief, such as the absurdity of asserting Moorean sentences and the phenomenon of doxastic transparency.

Some arguments have been given in support and against the claim that the standard of correctness is constitutive of belief.² However, all the arguments, both in support and against the constitutivity of the standard for belief, resulted to be affected by problems. The aim of my talk is to provide a new argument in support of the constitutivity of the standard for belief. The argument is constituted by the following steps (where necessity can be either metaphisical or conceptual):

1) It is necessary that a belief is correct if and only if its content is true (A1)

2) Necessities stem from (are such in virtue of) the essence (or concept) of some thing (A2)


² Arguments against the constitutivity claim have been given by, for example, Steigail-Petersen (2006) and (2008), Bykvist & Hattiangadi (2007), Gluer & Wikforss (2009). Arguments for the claim have been given by, for example, Velleman (2000), Engel (2005), Wedgwood (2002), Shah (2003).
3) That [it is necessary that a belief is correct iff its content is true] stems from some essence (or concept) (1,2)

4) If (3), then it is very implausible that the necessity in (1) stems from an essence (or concept) other than that of belief (A3)

5) The necessity in (1) stems from the essence (or the concept) of belief (3,4)

In my talk I will substantiate and defend each of the above steps.

**Assumption 1 (A1)** - The first assumption says that it is a metaphysical or conceptual necessity that a belief is correct if and only if its content is true. There is a set of considerations leading us to suppose that the connection between true and correct belief is not a mere contingent matter. First of all, the phenomenon of transparency in doxastic deliberation seems to show a necessary connection between correct belief and truth-regarding considerations. In particular, doxastic transparency seems to show a conceptual connection between correct belief and belief holding a true content. When an agent asks himself whether to believe a given proposition p, in absence of a specification of a standard of assessment the only considerations taken in account by default in order to decide whether to believe that p are considerations relative to the truth of p. This happens in an immediate and non-inferential way, as if it were implicit that what one ought (is correct) to believe is only the truth. This fact seems to be necessarily the case, regardless of any further contingent factor.

A second type of reasons supporting the non-contingency of the standard is the following. There are important differences between such a correctness standard and other standards stating contingent relations of supervenience. It is not just that from the fact that a belief having the property of holding a true content we can conclude that any true belief is correct. Rather, it seems that we cannot even conceive a possible situation in which the property of being correct of a belief does not supervene on the truth of that belief. In other words, it seems to be an analytical truth, and not merely a contingent matter, that correctness supervenes on true belief. In my talk I will suggest several arguments and linguistic tests in order to substantiate the latter claim.

**Assumption 2 (A2)** - The second assumption in my argument, according to which necessities stem from some essence (or concept), is a consequence following from the main view about essence and necessity endorsed nowadays, due to Kit Fine, that I assume here. According to this view, each necessity is rooted in the nature of some entity. More precisely, metaphysically necessary truths are defined as propositions that are true in virtue of the nature of some object, and conceptual necessities as propositions that are true in virtue of the nature of some concept.

**Step 3: (1) stems from some essence (or concept)** – If necessities stem from some essence or concept (A2), then also the necessity claimed in the first assumption must

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4 Many philosophers engaged in the present discussion assume such a form of essentialism. See, for example, Wedgwood (2002) and Steglich-Petersen (2008). However notice that for the validity of my argument one has not to accept Fine’s essentialism in toto. It is sufficient to interpret the intuitions in the cases that Fine discusses in a similar way, as cases supporting the derivability of necessity from some specific thing (or concept). Several theories accept this point.
derive from some essence or concept. Therefore, from the first two assumptions it follows that the standard of correctness of belief is a necessary truth in virtue of the essence of some thing or concept.

Assumption 3 (A3) - The third and last assumption of my argument is that, if the necessity of the standard stems from some essence or concept, then it is implausible that it stems from an essence or concept other than that of belief. Such an assumption will be adequately discussed and defended in my talk. I will first restrict the potential sources of this necessary truth to essences or concepts that are involved or related to the correctness standard of belief: those of belief, truth, correctness, propositional content, or other essences constituting them if these are further analizable. I will argue that the necessity of the standard cannot be a consequence of the essence or the concept of correctness and propositional content.

The essences of two entities seem to be the best candidates for the role of source of such necessary truth, namely, those of belief and truth. According to the former option it would be essential of belief (or constitutive of its concept) that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. On the other side, according to the latter option, it would be constitutive of the essence of truth (or its concept) that a belief is correct if and only if it is true. This would mean to attribute to truth the essential property of being the thing that is correct to believe.

I will argue that it is highly implausible that the necessity of the standard follows from the essence or the concept of truth. I will argue that the view that truth, amongst other things, is ‘what is correct to believe’ faces a deep difficulty in addressing the challenge put forward by a number of paradoxical arguments showing that there are truths that it is logically impossible to believe.5

Step 5: conclusion - Assumption 3 excluded as highly implausible that, if the necessity of the standard for belief stems from some essence or concept, then it stems from an essence or concept other than that of belief (such as those of truth, correctness and propositional content). But the conclusion achieved by the third step of the argument was that the necessity of the standard has its roots in some essence or concept. From the above two claims it follows that it is very plausible that the necessity of the correctness standard of belief stems from the essence or the concept of belief. This is equivalent to the claim that it is a constitutive feature of (the essence or the concept of) belief that beliefs are correct if and only if they hold true contents.

References


5 See, for example, Linsky (2009).