

Gibbons, John: *The Norm of Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013. 302+xv pages [978 -0-19-967339-1]

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John Gibbons' book deals with the question as to which epistemic norm belief is subject to. Some chapters draw on ideas from previously published articles, but the book definitely stands on its own. The chapters follow a clear, overarching thread and the material presented within goes beyond previous articles.

The central question of the book is approached through a puzzle which arises given two seeming platitudes about belief. It is often said that our beliefs aim at truth. A concern for truth is non-optional when we form beliefs and there is always automatically something wrong with false beliefs. This suggests the following norm:

(T) Necessarily, for all p , you ought to believe that p only if p . (2)

But there seems to be a further norm governing belief. This is illustrated with the case of the missing keys (4), which is a constant companion throughout the book. Imagine you come home from work and put your keys on the dining room table. Then you leave the room. While you're in another room, a burglar sneaks in and steals your keys. Meanwhile, you form the belief that your keys are on the dining room table. This is a reasonable thing to believe given your evidence. This suggests the following norm:

(J) Necessarily, for all p , you ought to believe that p only if you are justified in believing that p . (5)

Both (T) and (J) are intuitively plausible. The problem is that (T) and (J) form an inconsistent set of norms because they deliver inconsistent verdicts given the everyday phenomenon of false justified belief. In the example of the keys, (T) and (J) give incompatible recommendations. (T) entails that you ought not believe that the keys are on the table and (J) entails that you ought to believe that the keys are on the table. The result of accepting both (T) and (J) is a contradiction.

In light of this, one might be tempted to give up either (T) or (J). But Gibbons argues that this would render certain Moore-paradoxical thoughts acceptable. Assuming one rejects (T), knows that p obtains and knows that

one does not follow (T), it seems possible that one might be committed to the thought “p, but I don’t believe that p”. If we could just reject (T), such thoughts should be acceptable. But since they are not, we cannot just reject (T). The same problem arises for (J). A rejection of (J) while one knows that one has good reason to believe that p and one knows that one does not follow (J) results in the acceptability of thoughts like “I have every reason to believe that p, but not p”. Whatever it is exactly that is wrong with Moore-paradoxical thoughts, they are something to be avoided. And it seems that we cannot avoid them if we reject either (T) or (J). Thus, there is a genuine puzzle. Both (T) and (J) are intuitively plausible, but jointly inconsistent. However, neither (T) nor (J) can simply be rejected. Finding a solution to this puzzle is the central aim of the book.

Here then is a quick outline of the course of Gibbons’ investigation. Various attempts to hold on to both (T) and (J) are considered but deemed unsuitable to actually solve the puzzle. Gibbons then turns to the defenders of (T), the objectivists or the “lovers of truth”, as he calls them. If the objectivist can account for the intuitions behind (J) by only relying on ideas driving (T), rejecting (J) would be acceptable after all. This would solve the puzzle, but Gibbons argues that the objectivist cannot properly account for (J). He then goes on to a more general objection to objectivism based on what he calls the “natural reaction”. The requirements of the objectivist are incapable of getting a grip on people in the right way. In response to this, Gibbons develops an account of genuine reasons and requirements. This account is driven by the intuitions of the subjectivist, the defender of (J). In the final part of the book Gibbons then sides with the subjectivist, giving up (T) while trying to account for the intuitions of the objectivist.

As a model for holding on to both (T) and (J), Gibbons considers a practical analogue to the puzzle about belief. If there is a fire in the basement of your hotel, should you jump out of the window to save your life, even though you have no knowledge of the relevant facts? The prevailing opinion among ethicists is that you ought to jump, even though you have no way of knowing about the fire. The point of such examples for the ethicist is to introduce a distinction between normative (objective) and motivating (subjective) reasons. The general idea is that since “reason” is ambiguous, and “oughts” depend on reasons, then “ought” must be ambiguous as well (33). Various versions of the ambiguity theory that try to find a reading of both (T) and (J) that keeps them from conflicting and yet is true to their regular meaning are discussed in Chapter 2. Gibbons finds them all wanting because

the question which “ought” is the regular “ought”, which provides a definite answer to the question what one ought to believe in a case like the missing keys, is left unanswered (50).

One admirable quality of Gibbons’ discussion here and throughout the book is his effortless transition between the epistemic and the practical domain. If one shares Gibbons’ worry mentioned in the preface (ix) that our theories about reasons should not greatly differ from one domain to the other, then it is striking how different our current theories are. Although this is not discussed explicitly, if what Gibbons says about the epistemic domain is correct, and if one wishes to hold on to a unified picture, then our theories of practical reasons seem in need of serious revision.

In Chapter 4 and 5, Gibbons discusses various forms of objectivism. Besides the “lover of truth”, the discussion here and throughout the book includes the “lover of knowledge”, who holds that knowledge is the norm of belief. However, I shall restrict myself to the former in this review. The primary target of these chapters, although not the only one, is a teleological account of belief. The general problem for the objectivist lies in accounting for the importance of justification, especially in cases where it does not lead to true belief. The challenge is to account for (J) in terms of (I) and without the assumption that one ought to be reasonable.

As Gibbons observes, beliefs come with a built-in set of standards. One of them is that truth is not an optional extra. One explanation for this is that belief, or the believer herself, has the aim of getting at the truth. Putting it into a slogan, the resulting picture of epistemic normativity is this: the epistemic ought just is the instrumental ought with the goal of truth plugged in (102). The problem with this picture is that if truth is the goal, then how is a justified false belief valuable? If justification has derivative value as a mere means, given that the actual goal is to get at the truth, it does not seem to have any real value in the case of false justified beliefs. Similarly, if truth is the goal, then why is irrationality sometimes not instrumentally valuable? So the teleological picture struggles to account for (J) in its own terms (104).

Besides this apparent failure to solve the puzzle, Gibbons sees a deeper problem for teleological accounts. Their problem is that the desire for truth alone is powerless to rationalize beliefs. If one is modelling theoretical reasoning based on practical reasoning, then the desire for truth should play the same role in both models. In the practical case, a combination of a belief plus a desire is needed in order to rationalize a subsequent action or intention. The desire for milk plus the belief that there is milk at the store together

rationalize going to the store for milk. Analogously in the theoretical case: In order to rationalize a belief, we must have some other belief about where the truth lies that combines with the desire for truth. Gibbons thinks that the belief to be added must be like the following:

(B) Believing that *p* will amount to or result in believing the truth about *p*. (106)

But Gibbons assumes, and in my eyes correctly, that anybody who believes (B) already believes that *p* because (B) presupposes that *p* is true. If the desire for truth alone cannot get one to believe that *p*, but only in conjunction with (B), then teleological accounts seem problematic.

However, I wonder why the defender of a teleological account must accept (B). In order to meet Gibbon's challenge, the teleologist needs a belief that is indicative of where the truth about *p* lies, but that does not imply that one already believes *p*. If this is the model, the teleologist might rid themselves of (B) in favour of (B'): an obtaining consideration *c* is an indicator that *p* is true. Unlike (B), I think that (B') does not immediately imply that one already believes *p*. This hardly amounts to a defence of the teleological picture, nor might this be sufficient to solve the puzzle in favour of (I). But it seems that there are further options besides (B) for the teleologist and a discussion of them might have been worthwhile.

Chapter 6 and 7 develop an account of the epistemic ought and reasons based on what Gibbons calls the natural reaction to objectivism. As objectivism would have it, we were required to suspend belief in the missing keys case. However, the natural reaction is that this requirement is beyond our reach and we could not be held responsible for not living up to it. Thus it cannot be a genuine requirement. Taking the natural reaction seriously means that one must find a kind of "ought" that can always get a grip on us.

Gibbons' first step to do so is making a clear distinction between the normative and the evaluative. Facts about what we are normatively required come with an epistemic constraint. Facts about what is good, e.g. jumping out of the window in the case of the unknown fire or withholding belief about the location of the keys do not (132). Consequently, since it must always be possible for genuinely normative reasons to get a grip on us, they must be capable of guiding us and they must be accessible to us. As a result of the natural reaction, Gibbons argues that the only genuine reasons can be subjective or motivating reasons. These are the reasons that make things

reasonable, the things that rationally move you (133). They contrast with objective reasons, which are based on facts.

For Gibbons, one distinguishing mark between motivating and objective reasons is the way they guide us (139). Motivating reasons guide us directly, while objective reasons do so indirectly by way of knowledge of facts. Gibbons says that we need neither knowledge nor awareness of motivating reasons in order for them to move us (145). Here is an example of the distinction just introduced: “Your lack of milk can only get you to the store indirectly, by way of your knowledge of it. But your knowledge of that you are out of milk can get you there directly. You do not need to know that you know” (Ibid.). I shall return to a discussion of this distinction once I have given a fuller presentation of Gibbons’ account of reasons.

In order to guide us, reasons must be accessible. One might think that an accessibility condition on reasons leads to internalism or the view that being required to do something is a luminous condition (a condition is luminous if whenever one is in it, one is in principle in a position to come to know upon reflection that one is). But for Gibbons, the most natural conception of motivating reasons leads to externalism. Gibbons’ motivating reasons are not entirely determined by one’s inner mental life, but by one’s point of view. Reasons and consequently rational requirements essentially depend on the first-person point of view, on one’s epistemic position (176). However, one does not need to know one’s epistemic position, one only needs to be in it. One’s epistemic position does depend simply on what one is in a position to know, and is not exhausted by inner mental states. Consequently, the space of reasons extends beyond the mental realm. These reasons have to be accessible somehow, but they do not have to be introspectively accessible (180). Thus, neither internalism nor luminosity follows.

However, I think there is a problem concerning the compatibility of direct guidance and externalism. Direct guidance requires neither knowledge nor awareness. If the space of reasons extends beyond the mental realm and includes worldly things, then given that these are genuine reasons capable of guiding us, they must also guide us directly. Let us assume that there are things external to me, that I am in a position to know (which makes these things reasons) but which I do not actually know. For these reasons, the question of how they are capable of guiding me directly arises. It seems natural to say that I must know or be aware of them, but this is neither compatible with the scenario just mentioned nor with the concept of direct

guidance. On the other hand, it is hard to see how I could be guided by things external to my mind without my knowledge or awareness of them.

Gibbons' picture of direct guidance is convincing for reasons that are mental states, especially propositional knowledge states. As Arpaly, Railton and Stanley have argued, to act on propositional knowledge states can be automatic and non-deliberative. I see Gibbons' picture of direct guidance as just one variant of this view. But once the space of reasons is extended beyond the mental realm, this picture seems problematic. One wishes that Gibbons would have explained how worldly reasons can guide directly without even tacit knowledge or some form of awareness. It seems as if things external to me can only guide me indirectly, but then the proposed distinction between motivating and objective reasons in terms of guidance collapses.

Leaving these worries aside, the natural reaction to objectivism and the resulting picture of reasons for belief leads Gibbons to an endorsement of (J) over (T). Genuine norms must be capable of getting a grip on us. The only notion of reasons available that always gets a grip on us is not the notion of what is true, but things that make things reasonable. Consequently, the epistemic ought is properly captured by (J), and not (T), making (J) the genuine norm of belief that we ought to follow. However, to solve the puzzle, the subjectivist must make sense of the objectivist's intuitions in subjectivist terms.

This is what the final three chapters of the book are devoted to. Gibbons proposes that the distinction between belief and other propositional attitudes is that belief involves a commitment to the truth of p . This is what makes (T) appealing. Gibbons' idea then is to make sense of this notion of commitment in terms of the requirements of rationality. The commitments of belief are made explicit through various versions of Moore's Paradox. Take for example a sentence like "I believe that p , but not p ". Gibbons argues that these commit us to two rationally incompatible stands on a single issue: whether p (249). What is distinctive about these Moorean sentences is that we take one stand directly and the other indirectly.

What is right about (T) can then be explained in terms of the Moore Conditionals (262). Since Moorean sentences like the above are rationally unacceptable, they ought to be negated. The result looks like this: "It is not the case that I believe that p , but not p ". However, this negated Moorean sentence is logically equivalent to a conditional sentence "If I believe that p , then p ". Here is this equivalence formalized: $\sim(\text{Bel } p \ \& \ \sim p) = \text{Bel } p \rightarrow p$. If

the notion of a requirement is added to this conditional, we arrive at something very similar to (T). Gibbons thinks that what is right about (T) can be explained in terms of such Moore conditionals and the fact that we take them to be rationally binding.

The Moore Conditionals mirror the first-personal nature of Moore's paradox. From one's own point of view, the question of whether p is true does not come apart from the question whether one ought to believe p . For every instance of belief, from the first-person point of view, truth is required. This requirement is one of rationality. Violating it would be taking two stands on a single issue. However, whether truth is actually required varies with the circumstances (264). In a case like the missing keys where all the reasons available are misleading, truth is not actually required. For Gibbons, this answers why truth is not an optional extra for the subjectivist. However, there is no norm of belief that demands truth in every case. Only (J) is strictly true, not (T).

A nice feature of this account is that it explains why belief revision is rationally called for upon coming to know that a particular belief that one holds is false. However, I'm afraid that this account does not capture the intuition that there is always automatically something wrong with false beliefs. Even in a case like the missing keys, this intuition is hard to discard. But Gibbons' account delivers the verdict that everything is normatively alright with such a belief, because it is rationally held. Insofar as the automatic wrongness of false beliefs is the driving force of the objectivist, Gibbons' account cannot be satisfying for her. Gibbons could try to discard this intuition by accusing the objectivist of failing to make the distinction between the evaluative and the normative. However, the objectivist might simply dispute that this distinction has been properly drawn.

Altogether, this is an incredibly rich book, deserving of far more discussion than I can provide here. While this is an epistemology book and highly commendable for everybody working on epistemic norms or reasons for belief, a lot of the material will be of interest to those working on practical reasons and requirements, too. Last but not least, I must credit Gibbons' prose that is always lucid and never shy of a humorous remark. Therefore, even those disagreeing with the author will find this book to be a delightful read.

References

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