



**HAL**  
open science

## Is Truth a Norm ?

Pascal Engel

► **To cite this version:**

Pascal Engel. Is Truth a Norm ?. Peter Kotatko, Peter Pagin. Interpreting Davidson, CSLI, Stanford, pp.37-51, 2001, 3. ijn\_00000152

**HAL Id: ijn\_00000152**

**[https://hal.science/ijn\\_00000152](https://hal.science/ijn_00000152)**

Submitted on 23 Sep 2002

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Is Truth a Norm?

PASCAL ENGEL

### 1 Introduction

A familiar theme—indeed a sort of slogan—in contemporary philosophy is that meaning and mental content are ‘normative’ or have a normative dimension. One of its origins is in Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations: to understand the meaning of a word, or to possess a certain concept, is to be able to appraise correct or incorrect uses of it. This feature is often held to be the main obstacle to a naturalistic analysis of meaning and intentional concepts. Davidson is equally skeptical about such an analysis, since he has long held that the ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ which governs our concepts of propositional attitudes have no ‘echo’ in physical theory and in naturalistic concepts in general. One of his main arguments for this view is that ‘the concepts we use to explain and describe thought, speech and action are irreducibly normative’ (Davidson 1999:460). In a previous article (Engel 1999<sup>1</sup>), I have tried to elucidate in what sense we can say

---

<sup>1</sup> That paper was a descendent of the one I read at the Karlowy Vary conference on Interpreting Davidson in 1996. The present paper is an attempt to answer Davidson’s reply (Davidson 1999) and to further the discussion that I have initiated in Engel 2000 and Engel *forthcoming*. I have been much influenced, while writing this paper (especially the second section), by Paul Boghossian’s article ‘The Normativity of Content’, read at the Summer School on Normativity and reason in Parma (July 2000). Boghossian is, of course, in no way responsible for the mistakes and misunderstandings of his views that might be present in this paper.

that, for Davidson, mental concepts have a normative dimension, and I have suggested a reading of this claim, which, I thought, he could at least partly agree with: that the normative dimension in mental content resides in the specific norms attached to concepts, along the lines of conceptual role accounts and theories of concept possession, and in a general norm of truth attached to the concept of belief, which is central among the propositional attitudes. But Davidson disagrees. He sees little promise in conceptual role accounts of concepts, and bluntly rejects the second suggestion: ‘Truth is not, in my opinion, a norm’ (Davidson 1999:461). Since he has taught us that what matters in interpretation (including the interpretation of philosophers) is more understanding than agreement, I shall leave aside here the first suggestion, and shall try to articulate better the second, in the hope of furthering this dialogue with him. In the first part of this paper, I try to spell out what is at stake in the claim that truth is a norm and why Davidson could have grounds to oppose this claim. In the second part, I try to argue that there is a reasonable sense in which we can, and must, say that truth is a norm of belief, and that most of our epistemic norms are grounded in this one.

## 2

What does it mean to say that truth is a norm, and what is at stake in such a claim? There are, basically, two strands in this debate, although they are intimately connected. One strand is with the analysis of the concept of truth and of the meaning of the word ‘true’, which opposes, in contemporary philosophy, two camps. A number of philosophers hold that truth is a ‘robust’ property, to be analyzed in terms of such ‘substantive’ notions such as correspondence, coherence, or perhaps along pragmatist lines. A number of other philosophers hold that truth is a ‘thin’ property, which does not contain more than what is expressed by the disquotational feature of the truth predicate or by the trivial equivalence ‘It is true that P iff P’, and propose ‘deflationary’ or ‘minimalist’ conceptions.<sup>2</sup> For a philosopher of the second persuasion, any attempt to read into the concept of truth more than these trivial or formal features, would be an attempt to ‘pump more content in the concept of truth’ than a minimalist theory should allow (Davidson 1996:310). Thus, when Crispin Wright (1992), following to a large extent Dummett (1959), claims that a deflationary theory of truth should be ‘inflated’ in order to accommodate the fact that truth is ‘a norm of our assertoric practice’ and of belief, this claim is rejected by one of the main con-

---

<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, a number of different versions of ‘minimalism’ about truth. But for the purposes of the present discussion, I shall largely ignore these differences.

temporary proponents of the deflationary theory, Paul Horwich (1998).<sup>3</sup> The second strand concerns the question whether truth itself is a norm, or a value, which should be pursued for its own sake: is truth a goal or an ideal of our inquiries? Is there any sort of ethical command to search after the truth? Some pragmatist philosophers, such as Peirce, believe that there is; other pragmatists, such as Rorty (1986, 1995) or Stich (1990), disagree. They do not see why we would be aiming at truth, more than utility or pragmatic value. And the connection between the two strands seems to be this: in claiming that truth is a norm or an ideal, we reintroduce the idea that truth is a grand or robust notion, which, according to minimalist theories, it is not.

Where does Davidson stand in these debates? With respect to the issue of robustness vs. minimalism about truth, it seems quite obvious that he sides with the second camp, although he does not accept Horwich's version of deflationism, and does not hope to give any general definition of truth along this or other lines (Davidson 1996). So it seems that his denial that truth could be a norm is based on his suspicion that any attempt to read more into the concept of truth than the familiar formal features would be an attempt to define or to explain further this fundamental and essentially 'indefinable' concept. With respect to the second issue, he is equally clear: 'I do not think it adds anything to say that truth is a goal, of science or anything else. We do not aim at truth, but at honest justification' (Davidson 1999:461). His reason for this claim is this: 'There must be cases of fully justified beliefs where the fact that they are false will never come to be known. I cannot see that cases of the last kind are more desirable than cases of the first kind' (ibid.). The point, presumably, is this: if truth were a goal of inquiry or of science, then in some sense truth should be essentially knowable and justifiable, the concept of truth would coincide with the concept of justification and truth would have to be an epistemic concept. But this implies a form of anti-realism about truth, and an attempt at 'humanizing truth by making it basically epistemic' (Davidson 1990:298). On the other hand, the goal of belief is justification, but there is no point in linking justification intrinsically to truth, as the claim that truth can be a norm of belief and knowledge seems to imply. So theories of truth, which like

---

<sup>3</sup> Other writers who have advocated the idea that truth is a norm include Hornsby (1997 and 1998). She defends this claim in the context of her own version of the 'identity theory of truth': 'The conception of truth which the identity theory brings with it allows truth to be a *sui generis* norm, in play where there are rational beings who may go right or wrong in their thought and speech' (Hornsby 1997:22). I have myself defended the view that truth is a norm in Engel 1991, in the context of the philosophy of logic, and along more general lines in Engel 1998.

Peirce's, or Putnam's, tie truth to rational acceptability at the 'limit' of scientific inquiry and which make truth a goal of inquiry, are equally guilty of epistemologizing truth.

Here, Davidson's position seems to be quite close to Rorty's, who, in a paper targeted at Wright's claim that truth is a norm of our assertoric practice (Rorty 1995), has also denied that truth could be a goal of inquiry, on behalf of a 'Davidsonian' conception of truth. In spite of Rorty's tendency to try to read more (and more Rortian theses) into Davidson's views than Davidson himself would allow, it is useful to briefly go over Rorty's account of these issues.

Crispin Wright (1992) basically agrees with minimalism about truth that truth is a 'metaphysically lightweight' notion, which contains not much more than the usual platitudes attached to it (namely that 'P' is true iff P, that our statements are true if things are such as they say they are, or that every true statement has a negation).<sup>4</sup> But he denies, contrary to what is claimed by pure deflationism, that the whole meaning of the word 'true' is exhausted by the 'Disquotation Schema':

(DS) 'P' is true if and only if P

Wright claims that deflationism is subject to a characteristic tension, since the acceptance that (DS) says all there is to say about truth, associated to the acceptance of the platitude about negation:

(Neg) Every statement P, has a negation, not P

entails inconsistent claims about the relations between truth and assertibility. Both are, according to Wright, norms of assertoric discourse, in the sense that in making an assertion, we aim at truth, and aim at making assertions that are warranted or justified. So (DS), according to Wright, says *more* than simply the fact that 'P' and 'it is true that P' are equivalent. It also says that if we have a reason to say that P is true we have thereby a reason to assert or to accept it. DS entails that 'true' and 'is warranted assertible' or 'justified' coincide in 'normative force': to think that P is true is to think it warrantably assertible, and conversely. In this sense deflationism is committed to granting the 'normativity' of the truth predicate. Now if deflationism holds that DS exhausts what there is to say about truth, it should also deny that truth and warranted assertibility are *distinct* norms of assertion. But these are distinct norms, since the predicate 'is true' and 'is warrantably assertible' diverge in their extension. For it follows from (DS) and (Neg) that :

---

<sup>4</sup> Wright calls his own view 'minimalism', but he intends to dissociate it from other varieties of minimalism, in particular from Horwich's (1990) deflationary conception.

(1) 'It is not the case that P' is true iff it is not the case that P

and contraposing on DS :

(2) It is not the case that P iff it is not the case that 'P' is true

and by the transitivity of the biconditional:

(3) 'It is not the case that P' is true iff it is not the case that 'P' is true

But replacing 'true' by 'is warrantably assertible' in (3) is incorrect: for if P nor the negation of P are warrantably assertible, it may be that neither 'P' nor 'It is not the case that P' are warrantably assertible.

It should be noted that Wright's argument, to the effect that truth is a *distinctive* norm of assertion in no way implies the *coincidence* of truth and warranted assertibility or justification. On the contrary, the argument trades on the difference between a statement being true and our being warranted in asserting it. So in Wright's hands, the thesis that truth is a distinctive norm of assertoric practice does not amount to making truth an essentially epistemic concept.

Now, of course, Wright's argument rests upon the claim that truth *is* a norm of our assertoric practice, or at least a norm of belief, and someone who denies the existence of such a norm would immediately reject it as question begging. But is this claim so controversial? It seems to amount to the familiar idea that the concepts of belief, of assertion, and of truth are intrinsically interconnected: to assert that P implies (or at least implicates) that one believes that P, and to believe that P is to believe that P is true (hence the oddity of utterances such as those which give rise to Moore's paradox: 'P, but I believe that not P'). Now, why should Davidson deny this obvious point? Has he not repeatedly claimed that the concept of belief and the concept of truth are intimately connected, that the basic attitude which lies behind belief and which is evidence for it is the 'holding-true' of sentences? And has he not emphasized that the indispensability of the Principle of Charity amounts to the claim that 'belief is by nature veridical'?

But Rorty urges us *not* to interpret this basic conceptual link between belief and truth as implying that there is a distinctive norm of truth:

To say, as Davidson does, that 'belief is in its nature veridical' is not to celebrate the happy congruence of subject and object but rather to say that the pattern truth makes is the pattern which *justification to us* makes (Rorty 1995:286).

This, according to Rorty, is not alien to Davidson's emphasis on the 'normative character' of meaning and intentionality. But this character does not amount to the recognition of the distinctive normative nature of truth itself:

The pattern that truth makes is, in fact, indistinguishable from the pattern that justification to us makes—so it might be best to say simply

that ‘most beliefs held by anybody are justifiable to us’ rather than ‘most beliefs held by anybody are true’. [...] The former expression seems to me the clearest way to exhibit the force of Davidson’s claim ... that the guiding principles used in detecting this pattern ‘derive from normative considerations’ and to bring out the importance of his reference... to ‘the norms that govern our theories of intentional attribution’. The need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and to our fellow-agents subjects *us* to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioural pattern which we must detect in others before confidently attributing any beliefs to them. But there seems no occasion to look for obedience to an *additional* norm, the commendment to seek the truth. (Rorty 1995:287).

In a sense, Rorty does not deny that there is, for our beliefs, a norm, in the sense that any interpretation of a being as having beliefs derives from certain ‘guiding principles’: precisely those that Davidson calls ‘norms of rationality’ governing our attributions of beliefs and other propositional attitudes to agents. Truth, in the form of the principle of charity as a principle of veridicality (the other half of the principle being a principle of coherence) may well be such a ‘norm’. But there is no point in taking this ‘norm’ to be different from the norm according to which our beliefs have to be *justified*. But ‘justified’ here does not mean *objectively justified*, for there are as many ways of justifying our beliefs and our actions as there are human interests, and there is no way in which these interests could be subsumed under a single interest or goal. This would come up to reintroducing into truth the very metaphysical weight that deflationism or ‘quietism’ about this notion have gotten rid of. This is why, according to Rorty, talking of a ‘norm of truth’ as distinctive, and attempting to read it into our very concept of belief, is highly misleading. On his view, pragmatism, in the form advocated by Dewey and by himself, does recognize this fact, as does (according to Rorty) Davidson’s own version of ‘pragmatism’:

If Dewey and Davidson are asked ‘What is the goal of inquiry?’ the best either could do would be to say that it has many different goals, none of which has any metaphysical presupposition: for example, getting what we want, the improvement of man’s estate, convincing as many audiences as possible, solving as many problems as possible, and so on. Only if we concede to Wright that ‘truth’ is a name of a distinct norm will metaphysical activism seem desirable. For Dewey and Davidson, that is an excellent reason not to view it as a norm (Rorty 1995:298-299).

It seems to me that Rorty gets Davidson right on the negative side, and that his reasoning is quite close to the one which underlies the latter’s refusal to consider truth as a distinctive norm of belief. On the positive side, however, it is less obvious to me that Davidson would subscribe to the so-called ‘pragmatist’ idea that inquiry has as many different goals as one

might want to have, and that there is some essential relativity in these goals. For he says, as we have seen, that ‘we aim at honest justification’, and I do not see how this could imply that there are as many justifications that it might please to us, as ‘Dewey-and-Davidson’'s view seem to imply. In other words I do not see why Davidson would agree with what ‘pragmatism’, according to Rorty, implies, i.e. that justification cannot be objective, but is purely subjective or context–relative.

Be it as it may, is the negative part of this reasoning correct, and are Rorty and, for that matter, Davidson, right in denying that there is any interesting sense in which we can call truth a norm? In order to see whether it is the case, we should try to spell out a little more what this talk of ‘norm’ and ‘normativity’ amounts to.

### 3

The above description of the debate about the normativity of truth suffers, just as do the debates about the normativity of meaning and mental content, from serious ambiguities. Indeed both claims are far from clear.<sup>5</sup> When we talk about the ‘normative’ character of truth are we saying that its normative property or (properties) *exhaust* the concept, or are *essential* to it, or are we merely saying that truth has, among other (non-normative) properties, some normative properties as well? And if there are any such properties, do we want to say that they enter this concept *directly* or that they enter merely *indirectly*? If truth is ‘normative’ what *kind* of norm is it, and in what sense is this norm attached, or implicated, by the very concept of truth? There are plenty of norms: ethical, legal, social, culinary, architectural, and so forth, relative to a whole range of human activities. Truth is presumably a norm of the cognitive kind, and not a norm pertaining to certain actions. But then in what sense is it normative?

We have encountered above two senses of ‘norm’ which may be relevant for answering these questions: (a) truth is a norm of belief and of assertion, in the sense that it is *constitutive* of belief and assertion that ‘belief aim at truth’ and that asserting something is asserting something that one takes to be true; (b) truth is a norm of belief, in the sense that it is the *goal* of inquiry or of our epistemic enterprises. The celebrated phrase ‘belief aims at truth’ seems to imply both senses, and in fact to conflate them, and since it has been used by Dummett (1959) and by Williams (1971), it has been the source of many confusions. On the one hand, saying that belief ‘aims at truth’ seems to say something about what belief *is*, namely that the concept

---

<sup>5</sup> I have tried to spell out further what these claims mean in the case of meaning and mental content in Engel 2000 and *forthcoming*.



of belief has to be defined, or at least understood, through the concept of truth, and this points in the direction of the sense (a) of the notion of norm. On the other hand, saying that belief 'aims at truth' seems to indicate what belief is *for*, and to suggest that aiming at belief is a conscious, or unconscious goal of all believers, or that it is something desirable or a value. Rorty's discussion of Wright on this point explicitly moves from the first to the second, when he claims that taking truth to be constitutive of assertoric practice implies that there is some 'duty' to attain the truth (Rorty 1995:288). But certainly there is no such direct implication, and the two senses are distinct. For instance the fact that 'being an unmarried person' is constitutive of the concept of bachelor does not imply that there is any special value in being an unmarried person, or some duty attached to having this status.

Still, it is often claimed that there is some element of normative appraisal, or some action-guiding implication, in the concept of truth itself. For it is often said that one of the ordinary uses of the word 'true' is an *endorsing* use: saying that something is true, or adding to a given assertion: 'And that's true', seems to imply that the speaker praises his assertion, and enjoins his hearer to believe it or to take it as worth asserting. This idea often underlies what is called the 'performative' theory of truth: saying 'It is true that ...' is the performance of a sort of illocutionary or perlocutionary act. This, indeed, is but one version of the deflationary conception.<sup>6</sup> But it is not clear that this meaning of the word 'true' exhausts all the possible uses of it, and it is even less clear that this kind of use implies that the speaker invokes some sort of duty, on the part of his hearer to believe or to assert what he claims is true. Certainly there are uses of 'true' which are, at least *prima facie*, purely descriptive, and which carry no sort of commitment. And there are truths that we do not even dream of asserting or of believing, and hence for which we do not feel any sort of obligation to believe or to assert them. Hence saying that 'truth is normative' needn't commit us to some performative conception of truth.

In order to get a clearer grip on the normative implications of the concept of truth, let us try first to spell out different senses of the word 'norm' in ordinary parlance. A number of theorists who have dealt with the meaning of 'norm' in moral philosophy and in law have long remarked that there

---

<sup>6</sup> The view is often attributed to Strawson (1950), but it lies also behind Rorty's own version of deflationism: 'Truth is but a little tap that we do on the shoulders of the beliefs that we like'. Strawson himself has later rejected his previous view. See his note at the end of the reprinting of his 1950 paper in Blackburn and Simmons eds. 1999.

are, basically two main kinds of normative vocabulary or of normative concepts:<sup>7</sup>

- (a) concepts of the 'deontic' kind or normative concepts proper such as: ought, obligation, norm, requirement, permission, regulate, correct, *rectified, etc.* Such concepts are action-guiding, in the sense that they are such that they imply that an appropriate response to what they prescribe, permit, or prohibit is a voluntary or intentional action: *ought implies can*;
- (b) concepts of the evaluative kind such as : *good, valuable, desirable, worth, etc.* The appropriate responses to judgments involving such concepts are not actions performed by the agents, but feelings or psychological attitudes.

This is a very rough characterization, but it is enough for our purposes here. We can ask the question: if truth is a norm of belief or of assertion, and if saying or believing something true involves something 'normative', does it involve a norm of the first kind or of the second kind, and if so in what sense does it involve it?

Let us suppose first that it involves a norm in the first, deontic sense. The idea would then be that in ascribing truth to certain statements or beliefs, we are in some sense speaking 'oughts', or implicitly relying on certain imperatives about what one ought to believe or assert. The plausible sense in which we could cash out imperatives, prescriptions, or permissions from the application of the predicate 'true' to a sentence or a belief would presumably be by issuing conditionals of the following form:

- (1) If it is true that P, then one ought to believe (assert) that P.

For instance:

- (1') If it is true that snow is white, then one ought to believe (assert) that snow is white.

And if truth is a norm of belief, or of assertion, such conditionals must be issued not simply for some particular truths, but also for *any* particular truth, including those that we do not even dream of believing or of asserting, either because they are so trivial that they do not merit consideration (for instance the truth that there are presently 10 264 blades of grass on the piece of lawn before me), or because we could never figure out any one of them. But this is absurd, for nobody is in the position to believe *every* truth whatsoever. So general conditionals of the form:

---

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted here to a talk given in Paris in March 2000 by Peter Railton. Since then, I have heard from Kevin Mulligan that Brentano had a similar kind of classification.

- (2) For any P, if it is true that P, then one ought to believe (assert) that P

are absurd. Certainly we are under no such obligation. Given that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, and that there is no possible way in which we can perform this obligation (or even the corresponding permission), the claim that truth could be a norm in the deontic sense (a) is absurd. There is a further reason, if our characterization of norms of type (a) is correct, why truth could not be a norm in this sense. It is that we are supposed to conform ourselves to such norms through *actions*. It may be that believing that P, or coming to believe it, in the sense of accepting it, or judging it, is a form of action, as is asserting it. But belief *per se*, the state of believing that P, is not voluntary, and it cannot be an action (in the sense of Williams 1971, but more on this below). Hence belief could not be subject to an ‘ought’ of the deontic kind.

Could it be, then, that the norm involved in truth ascriptions is a norm of the second kind? The idea would then be that the truth of a particular belief or assertion would imply that it is in some sense valuable, or that it merits appraisal, or that it provokes in us some positive feeling. This time, the response to the norm would not be a voluntary action, and it would be plausible to say that it could be an involuntary state such as a belief. But the idea is equally hopeless. For consider:

- (3) If it is true that snow is white, then it is valuable to believe that snow is white

or possibly:

- (4) If it is true that snow is white, then one appraises, or feels well about believing that snow is white

and by generalizing:

- (5) For any P, if P is true, then it is valuable to believe that P.

This is absurd for the same reason as above, since even on the reading of ‘norm’ as ‘value’, it makes no sense to say that we value all true beliefs, including the most trivial. So it makes no sense to say that the norm of truth consists in a form of intrinsic value of truth.

So, on the supposition that our two senses of ‘norm’ exhaust the possible senses of this notion, the claim that truth is a norm of belief is obviously false. It may be what Davidson and Rorty are aiming at when they declare that truth is not a norm, and not a goal of belief or of inquiry. For what the remarks above suggest is that it is not simply truth *in general* which interests us, but, so to say, *interesting* or *relevant* truth. And, to pursue this line, what kinds of truth are interesting depends upon our ex-

planatory interests, which may vary from context to context. In some contexts, certain truths are interesting or valuable, and should be attended to, and others are not, and are not worthy of consideration (for instance a climber will be interested in the truth that the rock on which he is leaning is friable, but a tourist who contemplates the cliff from below has no such interest). We are not interested in truth as such, but in *knowledge*, in so far as knowledge is relative to our human interests (just as we are not interested in believing any truth whatsoever, we are not interested in knowing anything whatsoever). And in so far as knowledge is justified true belief (whatever that means), what we are interested in is, as Davidson says, 'honest justification'.

On this much, then, and in so far as the notion of 'norm' is cashed out in such conditionals as (2) or (5), I quite agree with Davidson and Rorty that truth is not a norm, in any interesting or important sense. But is this the sense which we want to put forward when we say that truth is a constitutive norm of belief, or a norm of assertoric practice? Certainly it is false to say that 'belief aims at truth' if truth is conceived as the goal, conscious or not, of belief, or as a form of obligation to believe everything that is true. But this is not what one ordinarily means when one says that truth is the norm of belief. What one means, rather, is that the concept of truth is constitutive of the concept of belief, in the following sense: if one has good reasons (is justified) to believe that P, then one has thereby good reasons (is justified) to believe that P is true. The concept of truth goes with the concept of good reason, or of justification for belief. Reason or justification for belief is reason or justification for *truth*. Certainly saying that a belief is justified does not entail that it is true, and justification is not truth, but saying that a belief is justified is a *prima facie* reason for thinking that it is true.

Now the concepts of 'reason', of 'good reason', or of 'justification' are certainly normative concepts, if there are any. They are relevant to whether it is *correct* to believe something. So we can try to cash it out in terms of conditionals of the preceding form. But (to use only deontic concepts of the first type) the correct form of the conditional should not be (2) or (5) but the following :

(6) For any P, one ought to believe that P only if P.

And this makes perfectly respectable sense. The claim is not, like (5), that if something is true then one ought to believe it, but that one ought to believe only what is true. This does not have the implication that we should believe everything that is true. This imperative, in a sense, is quite obvious, for it amounts to saying that claims to belief are claims to *true* beliefs. It is in this sense that truth is the fundamental norm of belief, since some-

one who would not recognize the truth of this imperative would not understand the very concept of belief.

But here again, one may object that it is not right. May it not be the case that someone can find it valuable, desirable, or even pressing or obligatory, to believe something that is false and that he recognizes as such? After all, cases of self-deception, as they are analyzed by Davidson (1985) are precisely cases where an agent believes that P is false but nevertheless believes that P, as a result of his desiring or wanting to believe that P. And the self-deceived person seems to reach the latter belief on the basis of some action that he performs. We could add, in the vein of James' *Will to Believe* that there are cases where it may be desirable to believe things that one believes to be false, if it is otherwise desirable, or useful to believe such things, in spite of all the evidence that one has against their truth, or in spite of having insufficient evidence for believing them. And a 'pragmatist' of the Rortyan stripe would certainly press this point.

Such cases, or such *prima facie* exceptions, might well be exceptions to the claim that truth is the goal of belief, or that, in *this* (intentional) sense belief 'aims at truth'. If we agree with James that truth in itself may sometimes not be valuable, or that the epistemic value of truth may be overridden by other personal or subjective values that an agent happens to have, or that epistemic reasons alone may not be sufficient for belief, or that there may be advantages to willful belief, then certainly one will not agree that truth is a norm of belief in the sense of an exceptionless goal. So I grant to Rorty, and to Davidson – if such considerations underlie his claim – that *in this sense* truth is not uncontroversially a norm of belief or of assertion.

But once again, this is not the sense in which I want to claim that truth is a norm. The fact that truth is a constitutive norm of belief, in the sense that I intend to promote, is in no way refuted by the fact that we may sometimes (and possibly justifiably so) want to believe what is not true, and succeed in doing so. The point is familiar from discussions about the possibility of believing 'at will'.<sup>8</sup> Suppose that someone wants to believe that, say, the Dalai Lama is a Living God, because he has a special interest in believing this (he praises the value of religious belief, or he is paid a large sum of money for believing this), and moreover that he succeeds in acquiring this belief (admittedly not immediately, 'just like that', but by some indirect means, such as a drug or self-indoctrination). But he could not at the same time want to believe that the Dalai Lama is a Living God *and* succeed in performing an action which would result in his believing this, for the very fact that he wants to believe this shows that he *does* not believe

---

<sup>8</sup> I have reviewed these arguments, which stem from Williams 1971, in Engel 1999a.

it in the first place. Hence, if he succeeds, he would be in a state both of believing that the Dalai Lama is not a living God and (as a result of his success in realizing what he wants) of believing that the Dalai Lama is a Living God. The situation is reminiscent of Moore's paradox and of the case of self-deception (although I am not saying that wishful thinking and self deception are the same). Whether or not someone can succeed in being in such states, and whatever is their proper etiology, the reason why they are paradoxical and the reason why we hesitate to attribute to the agent both the belief that P and the belief that not P is that when someone has a belief that P, he thereby has the belief that P *is true*. If he comes to believe (consciously, at the same time) that his belief that P is false, then either he does not have either one belief, or he is not really, with respect to these contents, in a state of belief. So even someone who, for any reason, is not moved by an interest for truth, or who rejects the idea that it can be a goal for his beliefs, has to recognize that truth is what his beliefs are aiming at, *in virtue of their being beliefs*. Otherwise he does not understand the very concept of belief, or us, the ascribers, are at a loss in attributing to him such a state. Deciding to believe what is false is to undermine the very possibility of believing.

This is the sense in which we are entitled to say that truth is a norm of belief, and that 'beliefs aim at truth'. Although it can be formulated in terms of 'oughts' like in (6) this norm is not a norm in the deontic or in the evaluative sense: rather it is definitional of the state of belief and of our concept of this state. The same point is often put by saying that beliefs have a certain 'direction of fit' ('mind to world') and that desires have an opposite direction of fit ('world to mind'). This is why there is no corresponding norm for desires: having a desire carries no implication that the desire should be satisfied. I am claiming that it is what grounds the truth of conditionals such as (6). And the important point is that this norm is in place even when one does *not* take truth to be a goal of our inquiries, or of science, or whatever. It is essential to what we understand by the notion of belief. It is a *conceptual* norm.

Does the recognition of this norm entail, as Rorty thinks (1995:298), that truth itself is the 'fixed' goal of inquiry, and that we should subscribe to the metaphysical (realist) picture which underlies this view? No, for it is one thing to say that our concept of belief is such that they *purport* to be true, and quite another thing to say that there really *is* something in which their truth consists, a sort of real essence underlying all our belief claims.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Wright 1996:914: 'It is one thing for an expression to be used in the making of a distinctive kind of normative judgment; quite another matter for there to be such a thing as a bearer *really deserving* a judgment of that kind'.

In this respect I do not see why the notion of a norm of truth, in the sense defended here, would be inconsistent with a minimalist conception of truth. For a minimalist conception says that we cannot define truth through some explanatory or essential feature over and above the platitudes which characterize this concept. And the idea that truth is a norm of belief *is* such a platitude, although it is an important one.

The upshot of this is that there are, with respect to truth, two quite different notions of norm: a conceptual norm, which goes with the notion of belief, and perhaps with the concept of assertion,<sup>10</sup> and a cognitive norm, which has to do not with what belief is, but with the value or with the requirements of belief. I have claimed that there is no reason to think that admission of the first norm automatically entails admission of the second, in the sense in which truth would be the general goal of inquiry, and *vice versa*. But the fact that these notions are different should not lead us to think that they are unconnected, and that what I have called the conceptual norm of truth does not underlie the cognitive norm of truth. For suppose that one says, like Davidson, that what we aim at is not truth, but justification, whatever way we are to analyze justification (as evidential support, probabilistic nor not, or as coherence, or reliability, and so forth). If this is so, we ought to believe that P only if P is justified, or is believable to a high degree, etc. But I do not see how our grounds for taking P to be justified could not be also grounds for taking P to be true, even if it turns out that P is not true. Justification and truth are not the same thing, but it is difficult to see how aiming at the first would not be aiming at the second. More, of course, is needed in order to establish that truth is the main, or the only, cognitive value, and that a form of pragmatism which, like Rorty's, flatly denies this, is false. But this form of pragmatism seems to me to be self-defeating when it denies that truth is a norm of belief.

---

<sup>10</sup> I say 'perhaps' because I do not want to commit myself fully to Wright's view that truth is a norm of 'assertoric practice', and to the linguistic expression of belief, but only to the corresponding claim about belief and thought. It is not clear that there is a norm of asserting what is true in the same sense as the one in which there is a norm of believing what is true. Lying does not undermine the possibility of assertion as deciding to believe what is false undermines the possibility of belief. (I am here again indebted to Paul Boghossian).

## References

- Blackburn, S. and Simmons, K. eds. 1999. *Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boghossian, P. 2000. The Normativity of Content. Paper read at the Summer School on Normativity and reason, Parma, July 2000, unpublished.
- Davidson, D. 1985. Deception and Division. *Actions and events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, eds. E. Lepore and B. McLaughlin, 138-48. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Davidson, D. 1990. The Structure and Content of Truth. *Journal of Philosophy* 87:279-328.
- Davidson, D. 1996. The Folly of Trying to Define Truth. *Dialogue and Universalism* 6:39-53. Reprinted in *Journal of Philosophy* 94:263-78. Reprinted in Blackburn, S. and Simmons, K. eds. 1999, 308-22. Page references to the second reprint.
- Davidson, D. 1999. Reply to Pascal Engel. *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson* ed. L. Hahn. La Salle: Open Court 1999:460-61.
- Dummett, M. 1959. Truth. Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, LIX, 141-62. Reprinted in *Truth and Other Enigmas*, 1978m 1-24. London: Duckworth.
- Engel, P. 1991. *The Norm of Truth*. Hemel Hemstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf and University of Toronto Press.
- Engel, P. 1999a. Volitionism and Voluntarism about Belief. *Belief, Cognition and the Will*, ed. A. Meijers, 9-25. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Engel, P. 1999b. The Norms of the Mental. *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. L. Hahn, ed, 447-59. La Salle: Open Court.
- Engel, P. 2000. Wherein lies the Normative Dimension in Mental Content? *Philosophical Studies* 100:305-21.
- Engels, P. Forthcoming. Intentionality, Normativity and Community.
- Hornsby, J. 1997. Truth: the identity theory. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* XCVII:1-24.
- Horwich, P. 1990. *Truth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Horwich, P. 1998. *Meaning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rorty, R. 1986. Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth. *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. E. Lepore, 333-55. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rorty, R. 1995. Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Davidson vs. Wright. *Philosophical Quarterly* 45:281-300.
- Stich, S. 1990. *The Fragmentation of Reason*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Williams, B. 1973. Deciding to Believe. *Problems of the Self*, 136-51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, C. 1992. *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.