On the dictum “The aim of belief is truth”.

**Abstract.** In this paper I argue that we do not yet have an interpretation of the dictum that the aim of belief is truth that satisfies both of the following: (a) it is substantial enough to support a putative epistemic norm and (b) we have sufficient reason to believe it.

1

Quite often in epistemological discussion it is said that the aim of belief is truth. This dictum sounds like a truism. But what does it mean, strictly and literally? The answer is not obvious, and divergent answers have been given. We seem to be sure that the dictum is true but not sure what it means! Worse still, it is sometimes used as a premiss on which to base a substantial epistemological view. For example, one might use it to support the view that a mode of belief-acquisition is rational only if it is truth-conducive.¹ To serve that purpose what is meant by the dictum would have to be a non-trivial claim. Perhaps it is a substantial claim masked by a triviality that makes it sound obvious, for example, that to believe a proposition is to believe it true. As the dictum is interesting and useful only if it is not trivial, we should try to find a clear substantial proposition that the dictum might plausibly be used to express and then see whether we have sufficient reason to believe it. That is the aim of this paper. In what follows I will examine various candidates.

2

Chris Peacocke expands the dictum as follows:

A mental relation to a content \( p \) is judgement that \( p \) only if the thinker aims to make this the case: that he stands in that relation to \( p \) only if it is the case that \( p \).² Acquiring a belief is not a mental action. If, seeing some apples in a bowl, I thereby come to believe that there are apples in that bowl, this is something that happens to me, not something I do, let alone something I do with an aim. But Peacocke’s

¹ A mode of belief-acquisition is truth-conducive if and only if likely to lead to true beliefs (given true antecedents, if the mode is a type of inference.)
account talks of judgement rather than belief, and there is a distinction to be drawn between acquiring a belief and making a judgement. If I want to know whether there are enough apples in the bowl to make an apple pie for six people, I may have to exercise my judgement to reach an answer, that is, to perform some mental action (calling on memories and making comparisons) that results in a belief. To judge that $p$ is to believe that $p$ as a result of exercising one’s judgement. Strictly speaking, then, judging that $p$ is not something one does; it is being in a state as a result of something one does. Nonetheless, it is quite plausible that exercising one’s judgement is something one does with the aim of getting a true belief. If this is right, one judges that $p$ only if in reaching that belief one aims to believe it only if it is true, as Peacocke says.

But if we were to rely on the distinction between judging and mere belief-acquisition to save the dictum, it would have no bearing on a vast swathe of rational transitions to belief, including not only perceptual beliefs but also generalisations that we arrive at without any self-directed mental activity. For the sake of relevance, then, we must consider both kinds of belief-acquisition: those achieved by exercising one’s judgement and those resulting from involuntary subpersonal processes. While believing something need not result from something one does in order fulfil an aim, it may still be the case that it is always accompanied by an aim. So the dictum can be construed as claiming that when I believe something I have the accompanying aim to believe it only if it is true.

How plausible is this? Having an aim is itself having a mental state of a certain kind with some content. Must it really be the case that when I think there are apples in that bowl that belief must be accompanied by another mental state, namely, that of aiming to believe it only if it is true? This aim has a higher-order content in the sense that it is a content-bearing state about a content-bearing state. It is well known that children come to have such states, e.g. beliefs about another’s beliefs. But prior to this stage of development, children already acquire beliefs. So if it were true that belief aims at truth, it would also be true (a) that children can form aims with higher-order contents as soon as they can form any beliefs at all, and (b) that children can form aims about their own beliefs before they can form beliefs about another’s beliefs. Neither of these is so plausible that we should accept it without empirical
backing. The first is especially doubtful, and doubt must therefore spread to the claim that belief aims at truth, in the sense now under consideration.

In writing about rationality or reasons in forming judgements, there is a large temptation to over-intellectualise the matter.\(^3\) Some of John McDowell’s writing, for example, suggests that a transition from an experience to a belief can be rational only if the subject can exercise self-critical control over what she thinks, where that involves a capacity to reflect on whether the experience is a sufficient reason for the belief.\(^4\) What renders this kind of view implausible is the case of very young children. Surely, they can and sometimes do acquire beliefs in epistemically rational ways, even though they are not yet able to engage in the kind of evaluative practices to which McDowell alludes. Peacocke is very clear about this:

A thinker may be entitled to make a judgement without having the capacity to think about the states which entitle him to make the judgement. A child may be entitled to make an observational judgement by his perceptual experience without his having the concept of perceptual states.\(^5\)

But it would still be over-intellectual to hold that beliefs must be accompanied by higher-order aims. When a child acquires a belief as a result of a perceptual experience, she may be entitled to the transition from the experience to the belief even if she did not aim to make it the case that she believes it only if it is true.

Adults may sometimes have such an aim. But do adults have such an aim in every case of belief? I believe that Leinster beat Ulster at rugby on Sunday 31 December 2006. (I read it on the web.) Do I or did I ever have the aim to believe this only if it is true? I probably have many false beliefs and I really would not care if this is one of them: in case of countervailing evidence I would make no effort whatsoever to check its truth. Contrast my belief that my savings bank is not about to collapse. Such examples are easy to find. They make it doubtful that, for each and every proposition one believes, one aims to make it the case that one believes that proposition only if it is true. It is certainly not a compelling basis for any general principle of epistemology.

\(^3\) Tyler Burge makes this point forcefully in his “Perceptual Entitlement”, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 2003, 505–548.


\(^5\) Peacocke, Realm, 7.
In place of a plethora of aims, one for each belief, we might propose that one has a single aim that governs all believing: one aims to make it the case that for any proposition $p$, one believes $p$ only if $p$ is true. Perhaps Descartes had this aim. But does everyone? If so, we would surely be searching for a way to fulfil the aim. Since we clearly cannot hope to do this by trawling through our beliefs serially to throw out the false ones, we would need some general method, such as an argument by way of God’s beneficence. But seriously, how many of us are engaged in such a project?

A less implausible claim would be that one wants it to be the case that for any proposition $p$, one believes $p$ only if $p$ is true. But this is doubtful, because one may not care about a whole lot of trivia (crumbs of sporting history, for example). It is more likely that one has a more restricted desire: that for any proposition $p$ about a subject one has an interest in, one believes $p$ only if $p$ is true. But even this can have exceptions. Pascal had an interest in the question whether God (as conceived of by Christians) exists. But he wanted to believe that God exists whether or not it is true, and famously gave reasons for that attitude.6

3

The dictum that belief aims at truth has been interpreted without alluding to aims of the believer. In this section I will briefly discuss two interpretations of this sort. Here is one. In believing, as opposed to desiring, we tend to adjust contents believed to actual situations. In desiring it is the other way round: we tend to adjust situations to contents desired. This disposition to adjust contents believed to actual situations may be what it is for belief to aim at truth.7 But do we in fact have this disposition? We tend to adjust contents believed to truth for those contents which we have a pretty direct means of checking, such as everyday observational beliefs. But where there is no way of checking, for example in theology, we may lack a disposition to adjust contents believed to truth. In the case of certain memory beliefs we may even tend to adjust them away from the truth in certain respects. A tendency to conform socially or to reduce emotional dissonance may wipe out any such disposition, and it is hardly controversial that belief acquisition in the realms of politics, sociology and

7 Miguel Fernandez mentioned this interpretation, off the cuff in discussion, as an exploratory suggestion.
psychology is particularly prone to follow the tune of ideology. So it is doubtful that we have an unrestricted disposition to adjust beliefs to truth. It is sometimes said that it is constitutive of belief that belief aims at truth. That is clearly wrong if the dictum that belief aims at truth is given this dispositional interpretation, as there are pathologies of belief formation and in these cases the patient has a disposition to adjust away from truth. But even in the absence of any pathology it is plausible that in certain realms of thought a disposition to adjust beliefs to truth is absent; so we do not have sufficient reason to accept the dictum, given this interpretation.

But even if it were true, it could not serve the dialectical purpose of the dictum, which is to support some normative epistemic principle. For possession of a mere tendency or disposition, even if universal, provides no entering wedge for considerations of rightness: the prevalence of a disposition to do something hardly makes it right to do that thing. With this in mind, we might do better to seek a frankly normative interpretation of the dictum. Here is one proposed by Ralph Wedgwood.

A belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true.

This may sound tautologous, but it is not. “Correct” here is not synonymous with “true”; it is a normative term that can be applied to other mental states, such as choices and decisions, as well as to belief states. A rewording suggested by Wedgwood’s clarifications might be:

A belief-state is appropriate if and only if the proposition believed is true.

This seems to have counter-examples in both directions. In the absence of defeaters it is appropriate to believe things to be as represented in a visual experience, even if they are not; and if, as sometimes happens, one believes something true on the basis of fallacious reasoning, the belief-state is not appropriate. These points are so obvious that Wedgwood must be using the normative term (“correct” or “appropriate”) in a way that escapes me. But however the normative term is to be understood, it seems to me unlikely that the resulting universal proposition will be both uncontentious and able to bear epistemic weight.

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The most promising kind of interpretation of the dictum would be a substantial non-normative claim with high initial credibility and normative entailments. Is this possible? Can one get an “ought” from an “is” that is not a matter of social convention? Tyler Burge has given an interpretation of the dictum that belief aims at truth that I think delivers the goods. The idea is that it is a function of any system for the production, retention and discarding of beliefs, to produce and retain only true beliefs. Thence one might hope to argue that epistemically acceptable ways of getting a belief must be truth-conducive:

I think it a priori that a representational function of a psychological system of belief is to form true beliefs. Understanding what a belief is suffices a priori to warrant the view that such a system has a function to represent truths. Beliefs aim at truth, and are defective in a certain way if they are not true.

This functional claim is, I think, plausible as an interpretation of the dictum; it is also initially plausible in itself, independently of any relation to the dictum. But do we have sufficient reason to believe it? It is not absurd to think that a belief producing system has a variable function depending partly on types of content, with the production of true beliefs as the functional goal for contents about the immediate environment on a size scale appropriate for human action, and the production of emotionally supportive or socially cohesive beliefs (whether or not they are true) as the function for some other types of content.

That objection can be easily dealt with. A system may have more than one kind of function. Even if belief systems have functions that vary with types of content, they may always have the representation of truth as a function. Burge claims that it is a representational function of a belief system to produce true beliefs; and surely what counts for epistemic evaluation are representational functions, rather than emotional or other functions.

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10 J. Searle argued persuasively that making a promise has normative entailments. “How to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’”, *The Philosophical Review*, 73, 1964, 43-58.
11 Burge, “Perceptual Entitlement”, 511.
12 I have picked up Burge’s use of the word “system”, but this is a broad-brush term as I am using it here; I do not want to exclude mechanisms or modes.
13 A system’s operating this way might have to be masked from its possessors, but that is psychologically possible.
We might also think that representational functions are primary. When there are several goals, or several functions, there can be conflicts. We may prepare a meal both for nutrition and for gustatory pleasure, and in some circumstances one of these goals can be achieved only at the expense of the other. Similarly, special circumstances may prevent the simultaneous fulfilment of emotional and representational functions of a belief system. And when circumstances promote an emotional function of a belief system over any representational function, it seems right to regard the belief system as subverted, even if in the prevailing circumstances dominance of emotional over representational functions benefits the believer. So it is at least plausible that representational functions are primary. But this is a substantial empirical assumption, as a belief system might have evolved to favour emotional over representational functions in special circumstances, in which case the system is not subverted when in those circumstances its representational functions lose out to emotional functions.

But even if representational functions are not always primary, the dictum remains plausible given a functional interpretation. As only representational functions of a belief system are in the running to give us epistemic dimensions of evaluation, we can set aside non-representational functions. Accordingly, we can take the dictum that belief aims at truth to mean that any system of belief acquisition and regulation has as a representational function the acquisition and retention of only true beliefs, and among its representational functions this true-belief function is primary.

This interpretation of the dictum has high initial credibility and yet it is a substantial proposition. Moreover, it can support normative claims. Possession of a function brings with it natural norms, as Burge has explained, and this is already reflected in our language.\(^\text{14}\) If a person’s heart is not fulfilling its function of pumping blood around the body, or it is doing this in an abnormally inefficient or irregular way, we say that the heart is not performing as it should, or it is not working properly; otherwise, we say that it is working well. Evaluative language is also appropriate in the case of standards of operation for fulfilling or helping to fulfil the function. As regularity of heartbeat helps the circulation of the blood, we count regularity of

\(^{14}\) Burge, “Perceptual Entitlement”, section 1. In what follows I cover briefly terrain that Burge maps out in more detail.
heartbeat as not merely a good thing but also a norm of correct operation.\textsuperscript{15} In the same way, goodness or correctness arises for systems of belief acquisition and their operations. Consider for example our perceptual belief system. This includes a mechanism for producing beliefs from sensory experiences with representational content (with a sub-mechanism that inhibits belief-production when experiences have incompatible contents and certain other circumstances). Burge has argued cogently that the function of this mechanism is to produce beliefs that are true given veridical perceptual experiences. If the mechanism operates as it should, it will fulfill its function except perhaps in circumstances that are very rare or significantly different from those in which the mechanism evolved. So the mechanism operates correctly only if in standard circumstances it produces beliefs that are true given veridical perceptual experiences, in other words, only if it is truth-conducive. The interpretation of the dictum under consideration concerns not just perceptual belief systems but all our natural belief systems: all of them have the true-belief function. Thus interpreted the dictum supports the normative claim that any belief system is working correctly only if it is truth-conducive.

Do we have sufficient reason to accept the dictum given this functional interpretation, namely, that any of our belief systems has as its primary representational function the true-belief function? Burge goes so far as to claim that we can know \textit{a priori} that a belief system has the true-belief function and that we can get this knowledge from an understanding of what a belief is. I doubt that. If a kind of system is functionally defined, such as a water pump or a barometer, then it is knowable \textit{a priori} that systems of that kind have the defining function. Similarly, we can know \textit{a priori} that a \textit{knowledge} system has the production and retention of knowledge as a function, because its having this function is determined by our concept of a knowledge

\textsuperscript{15} Goodness and correctness here relate exclusively to fulfilment of the function; consequences beyond that are entirely irrelevant. If a land mind fulfills its function of exploding under the weight of a person or vehicle after war has ended, the consequences are bad but the mine worked properly and it was a good mine, not a defective one. The fulfillment of biological functions too can have entirely bad consequences, as when the immune system kills the foreign tissue inserted into an organ-transplant patient. The goodness of operation involved in the fulfillment of a mechanism’s function may not even be good for the mechanism. This is obvious in the case of mechanisms designed to self-destruct in a damaging or spectacular way, such as land mines or fireworks, as well as in apoptosis, a biological cell’s internal mechanism for cell-suicide.
But it is not determined by our concept of a belief system that it has the true-belief function. It is not inconceivable that some of our systems of belief production and regulation lack the true-belief function and have instead a more restricted representational function. If this is right—I will try to make it plausible shortly—the question whether a given belief system has the true-belief function is likely to need empirical investigation. I take it that a given system has the true-belief function if and only if it tends in normal circumstances to result in true beliefs and we have that kind of system because it tends to have that result. For example, a strong case can be made that our perceptual belief system has evolved because that kind of system tends in normal circumstances to result in true beliefs. The argument is an inference to the best explanation from empirical grounds. How else could one come to know that a natural belief system has the true-belief function?

Let us grant that we have sufficient reason to accept that our perceptual belief system has the true-belief function. Can we say the same with regard to the innate system of inductive generalisation? One reason for doubt is that our inductive generalisations are very often false. But it does not seem to matter, because we quickly replace a generalisation once it is falsified, so that the particular consequences we draw from our inductive generalisations are overwhelmingly true. The generalising system is not just a mechanism for obtaining generalisations from collections of singular observations; it also enables us to modify or replace falsified generalisations with new ones. So the generalising system includes a mechanism for acquiring new categories based on finer discriminations; the benefit is that when we find a generalisation to be false we can easily find a new generalisation that has none of the falsified particular consequences of the refuted generalisation but has all of its verified consequences. No doubt there was a time when it was important to discriminate between edible and poisonous berries. Generalisations based on the size and colour of berries must have given way to generalisations based on the plants on which they grew; even some of the plant-based generalisations we make

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16 But we cannot know a priori which, if any, of our cognitive systems are knowledge systems.

17 Strictly speaking the relevant circumstances are those that were normal when the system was coming into being and spreading in the population through natural selection. For simplicity of exposition I will assume that those evolutionary circumstances are still normal.

18 This is slightly loose. What I have in mind are the particular conclusions we draw from the generalisation and particular observations. To illustrate, the belief that those berries are edible is a particular consequence one might draw from the generalisation that all red berries are edible given the observation that those berries are red.
today may turn out to have exceptions and when that happens we will replace them. For survival what is important is that most of the particular consequences we draw from our generalisations are true, and that is possible even if the generalisations themselves are mostly false. So our natural system of generalising might have evolved not because it produced generalisations that are mostly true, but because it combined with our observations to produce beliefs in particular consequences that are mostly true. Thus it is possible, perhaps even probable, that the representational function of our system of inductive generalising is not to produce true generalisations but to produce and update generalisations so that the particular consequences we draw from them are mostly true. This is a serious possibility, because the record shows that our inductive generalisations have often turned out to have exceptions. So we do not have sufficient reason to hold that all of our belief systems have the true-belief function; some may have a more restricted function, relating to the truth of particular predictions about our immediate situation.

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It follows that we do not yet have sufficient reason to accept the dictum that belief aims at truth, interpreted to mean that all of our belief systems have the true-belief function as a primary representational function. This is the only interpretation I have been able to find that has high initial credibility and yet is substantial enough to have normative epistemic entailments. Unless we can find grounds that warrant believing this interpretation (or a substantial alternative interpretation which we already have sufficient reason to believe), we should not use the dictum as a premiss in epistemological argument.