

## On the Generality Argument for the Knowledge Norm

We assess beliefs according to a variety of epistemic standards. We judge true beliefs as right or correct and false beliefs as wrong or incorrect. We criticize as unjustified beliefs that are not sufficiently supported by evidence or unreliably formed. We regard as defective beliefs that are unsafe or that fall short of knowledge. Contemporary epistemologists tend to agree that these various standards are not independent from each other. A more fundamental norm governing belief explains and grounds other derivative epistemic assessments. This has been traditionally identified with a norm enjoining us to believe only what is true (e.g., Boghossian (2003), Engel (2004, 2013), Gibbard (2005), Millar (2004), Shah (2003), Shah & Velleman (2005), Wedgwood (2002, 2007, 2013), Whiting (2010)). In recent years, an alternative view has grown in popularity. According to this view, knowledge, rather than truth, constitutes the fundamental norm of belief (e.g., Adler (2002), Bird (2007), Huemer (2007), Littlejohn (2013, forthcoming), Sosa (2010), Sutton (2007), Williamson (2000, 2005, forthcoming)). More precisely:

(KN) For any subject  $S$  and proposition  $p$ ,  $S$  should believe  $p$  only if  $S$  knows  $p$ .

A prominent argument for the knowledge norm is that this norm can provide an easier and more straightforward explanation of all epistemic assessments of belief compared to other candidate norms.<sup>1</sup> Call this the *generality argument*. The argument relies on the claim that knowledge is the most general condition of epistemic assessment of belief, one entailing all other conditions under which we assess beliefs: if someone knows that  $p$ , then her belief that  $p$  is supported by sufficient evidence, safe, reliable, true, and so on. Therefore, if one should believe  $p$  only if one knows  $p$ , one should also believe  $p$  only if one's belief that  $p$  is supported by evidence, safe, reliable, true, and so on. While the knowledge norm seems to be able to

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<sup>1</sup> Variants of this argument have been put forward by Bird (2007: 94-95), Littlejohn (2013: §6), Smithies (2012: 283) and Williamson (forthcoming). Williamson has also recently defended a version of the argument in the 2017 Whitehead Lectures, a recording of which is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bw2xiKE42A0>.

provide a straightforward explanation of all assessments of belief, norms requiring weaker conditions do not provide equally easy, direct and straightforward explanations.<sup>2</sup>

This talk argues for two claims. First, I argue that the generality argument for the knowledge norm is ultimately unsuccessful. If anything, the premises of the argument support the opposite of the desired conclusion: that is, the norm of belief is a condition weaker than knowledge. My argument relies on the observation that in general we should never expect from a norm governing an  $X$  that it requires conformity to the most general conditions of assessment of  $X$  – viz., those entailing all other conditions under which we assess  $X$ , and thus which are sufficient to grant maximal defensibility of  $X$ . On the contrary, there are good reasons to think that the latter conditions are always stronger than the conditions required by norms governing  $X$ . It follows that if knowledge is the most general condition of assessment of a belief, the condition required by the fundamental norm governing belief is necessarily weaker than knowledge.

Second, I argue that if we grant the assumption that knowledge is the most general condition of epistemic assessment of belief, the fundamental norm governing belief requires a factive condition. Such a norm doesn't permit believing a proposition  $p$  if it is false that  $p$ . The truth of  $p$  would be a necessary condition for being permitted to believe  $p$ . Note that this argument reaches a merely hypothetical conclusion. The conclusion that the norm of belief is factive is conditional on the premise that knowledge is the most general condition under which we assess belief. This conclusion is thus fully compatible with views holding that the norm of belief requires a non-factive condition, such as reliability, evidential support or reasonability (e.g., Feldman (2002), Gibbons (2013), Hughes (forthcoming), Madison (forthcoming), McHugh & Way (forthcoming), Simion, Kelp & Ghijsen (2016)). However, philosophers endorsing non-factive norms must reject the assumption that knowledge is the most general condition under which we assess belief and endorse the claim that there is nothing *per se* defective in not knowing what one believes.

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the most pressing problems for such accounts see, for example, Gibbons (2013) and Littlejohn (2013).

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