

Comments to Piller: 'Desiring the Truth and Nothing But the Truth'
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These brief remarks concern only some of the interesting claims and arguments advanced in the paper. Piller's main concern is the standard view of our epistemic aims: that we should know the truth, and avoid error. In Piller's formulation it reads as follows (p. 3):

- Part 1: Des ($p \Rightarrow \text{Bel } p$)
Part 2: Des ($\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p$)

Piller advances two important claims about Part 2. First, that Part 2 has implausible implications, and should be rejected as it stands. Second, given certain further plausible assumptions, Part 2 follows from Part 1, which means that Part 1 is afflicted with all the same problems. However, given a *proper* interpretation of Part 1, these difficulties are avoided. In sum, we should accept Part 1 under a certain interpretation, but reject Part 2.

1. The implausibility claim. Part 2 is implausible, Piller claims, because of the following problem:

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| (1) Des ($\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p$) | (Part 2) |
| (2) Des ($A \Rightarrow B$) & $A \Rightarrow_R \text{Des } B$ | (transition) |
| (3) $\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow_R \text{Des } p$ | (implausible) |

Where ' \Rightarrow_R ' symbolises what one is somehow rationally committed to. (2) is an independently plausible 'rational transition rule' (p. 5). Now, it clearly seems that (3) is quite implausible: believing something to be so is not a proper reason to desire that it be so. Believing that the house is on fire does not commit one to desiring that it is. Piller therefore claims that Part 2 must go.

However, this raises an issue, which at least should be discussed. Clearly, believing that p is not a reason to desire that p . Intuitively, however if you believe that p , and consider the possibility that p is false, then one should rationally desire that you do not believe that p in that situation. By contraposing we get the following from (1):

- (4) Des ($\text{not-}p \Rightarrow \text{not Bel } p$)

From this we may plausibly infer (with the help of (2)):

- (5) $\text{not-}p \Rightarrow_R \text{Des } (\text{not Bel } p)$.

Clearly, (5) doesn't seem as implausible as (3), so perhaps this is one step towards a more plausible interpretation of Part 2. This, however, doesn't settle the issue, because we haven't shown why Part 2 doesn't commit us to (3) as well as (5). I shall return very briefly to this. My suggestion will essentially be that the evaluative attitude we should have to our beliefs that they be true should support something like (5), but not (3). A certain other qualification of (5) is necessary as well, and I shall return to that.

2. The redundancy claims. Piller discusses the possibility that Part 1 and a desire not to hold inconsistent beliefs (Part2*) gives us what we want (the discussion p. 12-13). This strategy is rejected, however, because Part 1 and Part 2* implies Part 2, and thus inherits all its problems. Or, so Piller argues at least. As it stands, Piller's argument relies on a principle of transitivity of desires (p. 12-3), which may be stated as follows (my formulation):

$$(TD) \quad \text{Des}(a \Rightarrow b) \ \& \ \text{Des}(b \Rightarrow c) \Rightarrow_R \text{Des}(a \Rightarrow c)$$

(TD) is implausible as a general principle, however. Suppose I desire that if my house is on fire, I shall leave the house, and suppose I desire that if I leave my house, I shall lock the door. It certainly does not seem that I am then compelled to desire that if the house is on fire, then I shall lock the door.

Now, this may not matter too much for Piller, as there seems to be another way of deriving Part 2 from Part 1 for a restricted class of propositions without relying on the dubious (TD). This is for the following reason. Without a restriction to relevant propositions, Part 1 is quite implausible. There is no sense in which, for any proposition p , should should believe p , or desire that you believe p . Consider now a restricted class of relevant propositions. Assume that these propositions are relevant in the sense that for each proposition, it matters prudentially for some believer whether this proposition or its negation is true (call it a prudentially symmetric relevant proposition). For the class of symmetrically relevant propositions p :

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| (1) | $\text{Des}(p \Rightarrow \text{Bel } p)$ | (Part 1) |
| (2) | not- p is relevant | (assumption about relevance) |
| (3) | $\text{Des}(\text{not-}p \Rightarrow \text{Bel not-}p)$ | (from 1 and 2) |
| (4) | $\text{Des}(\text{not Bel } p \Rightarrow \text{Bel not-}p)$ | (assumption about relevance) |
| (5) | $\text{Des}(\text{not Bel } p \Rightarrow \text{not } p)$ | (contraposition, (1)) |
| (6) | $\text{Des}(\text{Bel not-}p \Rightarrow \text{not-}p)$ | ((5), (6)) |
| (7) | $\text{Des}(\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p)$ | ((6), (2) and various substitutions) |

But (7) just is Part 2 for this restricted class of propositions. But the idea that believing something commits one to desiring that it be so is implausible even for this restricted class. To exemplify: it may be very important for you to know whether or not you are genetically disposed to develop a terrible disease. If you are, should should know it, and if you are not, you should know that. And, if you do not believe that you are afflicted, then you should believe that you are not afflicted, and vice versa. Still, under these assumption, believing that you are afflicted is not a reason to desire that you are. Hence, given the class of relevant propositions is not empty, the problem affecting Part 2 also affects Part 1.

In fact, Piller offers a general solution to this. Since Piller's argument (that Part 2 follows from Part 1 and Part 2*) relies on contraposition, Piller recommends a reading of the conditionals which disallows that, e.g. some sort of subjunctive reading. My derivation of Part 2 from Part 1 depends on contraposition as well, so on this reading the derivation fails. I think this move is right, though I am not convinced about this way of motivating it. More importantly, however, I think that it doesn't solve the general

problem raised in the discussion. This problem, which I can only gesture at, concerns whether our epistemic goals and commitments are properly captured in terms of desires.

3. *Desiring that beliefs are true?*

If 'Des' is thought to refer to something like ordinary desires, the following principles

$$\begin{array}{ll} \text{Des } (p \Rightarrow \text{Bel } p) & \text{(Part 1)} \\ \text{Des } (\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p) & \text{(Part 2)} \end{array}$$

fail for similar general reasons. First, whether the principles hold in specific cases entirely depends on the propositions and beliefs involved, and how they fit into the prudential interests of an individual believer (example: you should not desire that if you are about to lose your game of tennis, then you believe that you are about to lose your game).¹ Second, if we accept transition, which at least seems plausible for desires, you also get that

$$\begin{array}{ll} (1) & p \Rightarrow_R \text{Des Bel } p \\ (2) & \text{Bel } p \Rightarrow_R \text{Des } p \end{array}$$

where (2) is quite implausible for the reasons already discussed. But so is (1), though this is perhaps less obvious. First, as already mentioned it is not generally the case that you should desire to believe a truth; it depends on the truth in question. Second, even for truths that you should believe, there is something wrong with the formalisation. The intuitively better way to put our epistemic commitment to truth would seem to be

$$(3) \quad p \Rightarrow_R \text{Bel } p$$

This principle just says that if p you are rationally committed to believe p . Given a properly restricted domain of propositions, this is plausible, provided we accept some sort of externalist interpretation of what one is epistemically committed to. But (3) is *not* what we get from Part 1 and transition, since these premises entail a layer of desirings to what seems to be a plausible normative constraint on believings. In other words, if p is true, there is a sense in which I should believe that p is true (given that p is relevant). But there is no sense in which I should *also* desire that I believe that p is true on top of that, contrary to what Part 1 and transition implies.

Note that we couldn't avoid using ' \Rightarrow_R ', since replacing this in transition with ' \Rightarrow ' would leave us with

$$(4) \quad p \Rightarrow \text{Des bel } p$$

¹ Similar remarks apply to the slightly different issue of valuing. It is simply not true that the state of (p & $\text{bel } p$) is more valuable than (p & $\text{bel not-}p$) or (p & $\text{not bel } p$), just as ($\text{bel } p$ & p) is not always more valuable than the state of ($\text{bel } p$ & $\text{not-}p$). The values or rational valuing entirely depend on the propositions at stake, and how the various epistemic attitudes fit into the prudential interests of the cognitive agent.

(4) doesn't specify an epistemic norm for believers. It merely states an implication, but a false one, unless we restrict it's application to a very artificial and narrow domain of propositions.

I think that the general lesson to be learned from this is that it is a mistake to try to capture our epistemic interests and commitments in terms of desires. There are senses in which if p , you ought to believe that p , and senses in which, if you believe p , then p should be true, but neither are captured in terms of ordinary desires.

This, I think, is also what reflection on cases supports. Suppose a terrible incurable genetic disease runs in my family. Having been tested, I sadly turn out to have that genetic disposition, and I firmly believe that ten years from now I will develop an invariably fatal disease. This belief of mine enters into my lifeplans: I decide not to have children and pension savings, and I do not engage in long term career planning.

Now, there is sense in which it really matters to me that this belief of mine is true rather than false, though of course I also wish that the truth were different from what I take it to be. But it is not that this belief of mine is an object of a desire. As we have in effect seen, there no plausible object that such a desire could be about: I do not desire (bel p & p) over (bel p & not- p). I may desire (bel p & p) over (not bel p & p), but this is not a desire that my belief is true, but rather a desire that some truths are believed by me. Nonetheless, the truth of my belief that I will die from a fatal disease matters indirectly to me because it is so consequential for the choices I make. The truth of the belief matters because of the role that belief occupies in my practical reasoning. So, I have, and properly have, in my view, a positive evaluative attitude of some sort towards my belief being true.

I don't know how to specify this evaluative attitude further. But at least the specification should include the observation that beliefs come with a direction of fit. Beliefs are meant to comply with the world, not the world to beliefs (unlike desires, of course). So if we let our hitherto unspecified evaluative attitude that our beliefs are true be

(5) $\text{eval}(\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p)$

then we should *not* accept anything like

(6) $\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow_R \text{eval } p$

In other words, we should find that no equivalent of the transition principle applies to $\text{eval}(\text{bel} \Rightarrow p)$. This is where the direction of fit comes in. As I see it, $\text{eval}(\text{Bel } p \Rightarrow p)$ is an evaluative attitude concerning the relation between a belief and what it is about. This relation includes a direction of fit: beliefs should comply with the world, not the world to beliefs. This is why (5) may be taken to imply

(7) $\text{not-}p \Rightarrow_R \text{eval}(\text{not Bel } p)$

but not (6).

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