What Do We Aim At When We Believe?

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ABSTRACT

It is often said that belief aims at truth. I argue that if belief has an aim then that aim is knowledge rather than merely truth. My main argument appeals to the impossibility of forming a belief on the basis of evidence that only weakly favours a proposition. This phenomenon, I argue, is a problem for the truth-aim hypothesis. By contrast, it can be given a simple and satisfying explanation on the knowledge-aim hypothesis. Furthermore, the knowledge-aim hypothesis suggests a very plausible account of what it takes for evidence to be sufficiently good to make belief possible. I offer several further considerations in favour of the knowledge-aim hypothesis, and deal with objections. Although the main point of the paper is not to defend the view that belief has an aim, but to adjudicate between accounts of what that aim is, my argument nevertheless requires some attention to the motivation for attributing an aim to belief in the first place. In particular, I will explain an important advantage that this view has over the view that belief is not aim-directed, but only subject to a constitutive norm.

It is often said that belief aims at truth. In this paper I argue that if belief has an aim then that aim is knowledge rather than merely truth. My main argument appeals to the impossibility of forming a belief on the basis of evidence that only weakly favours a proposition. This phenomenon, I argue, is a problem for the truth-aim hypothesis. Not only does it constitute prima facie evidence against that hypothesis, but any attempt by the defender of the truth-aim hypothesis to accommodate the phenomenon would undermine the most powerful motivation for attributing an aim to belief in the first place. By contrast, the phenomenon can be given a simple and satisfying explanation on the knowledge-aim hypothesis. Furthermore, the knowledge-aim hypothesis suggests a very plausible account of what it takes for evidence to be sufficiently good to make belief possible. I offer several further considerations in favour of the knowledge-aim hypothesis, and deal with objections. The main point of the paper is not to defend the view that belief has an aim, but to adjudicate between accounts of what that aim is. Nevertheless, my argument requires some attention to the motivation for attributing an aim to belief. In particular, I will explain an important advantage that this view has over the view that belief is not aim-directed, but only subject to a constitutive norm.

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1. Teleology about belief

The framework for this paper is a teleological conception of belief – a conception according to which it is part of the nature of belief that it has an aim. To say that it is part of the nature of belief that it has a certain aim is to say that, given a state \( M \) with a propositional content \( p \), it is part of what it is for \( M \) to be a belief, rather than being an instance of some other attitude-individuated type of state, that it have that aim. I will take it that a state aims, in the relevant sense, to satisfy condition \( C \), when it is the state’s nature to be regulated, either through conscious reasoning or through non-conscious cognition, by processes that have as an aim or function that \( C \) be satisfied.¹

The teleological conception thus takes the notion of an aim literally: there really is an aim, a telos, a function, that is constitutive of belief. However, many philosophers, in trying to make sense of Bernard Williams’s famous remark that “beliefs aim at truth” (1973, 136), have understood the notion of an aim in this context as metaphorical. These philosophers often take it that truth (or whatever) is not (or not only) something that believers must literally be aiming at in regulating their beliefs, but rather is a norm that beliefs (and believers) are subject to.² The authority of this norm, according to these philosophers, does not derive from some constitutive aim of belief. False beliefs are normatively defective, but not because they constitute failures to do what the believer was aiming to do. The view that belief is subject to a constitutive norm, a norm that is not derivative from a constitutive aim, can be called the ‘normative conception of belief’.

The choice between a teleological and a normative conception of belief is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. One may have a hybrid view, according to which belief is both teleological and normative in character, with the normativity not derivative from the teleology.³ Or, one may hold that belief is neither constitutively aim-directed nor constitutively normative, and thus reject both conceptions.⁴

¹ This way of construing the idea of belief having an aim is owed to Velleman (2000). See also McHugh (2011, forthcoming).
² For the distinction, see in particular Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005).
³ Thus, Shah endorses the normative conception, but in his sole-authored paper does not deny (Shah 2003), and in his co-authored paper positively claims (Shah and Velleman 2005), that there is a sense in which believing involves aiming at truth. Owens (2003), by contrast, denies that belief has an aim. Philosophers who have claimed belief is subject to a constitutive norm include Wedgwood (2002), Boghossian (2003), Shah (2003), Gibbard (2005), Shah and Velleman (2005) and Engel (2007).
⁴ Note that this view is perfectly compatible with the existence of norms to which our beliefs are subject. It merely denies that being subject to these norms is part of the nature of belief. Functionalist accounts of belief that focus on the output side of belief’s functional role would tend to fall into this category. The teleological conception can be understood as endorsing a certain sort of (teleo-)functionalist account of belief, that focuses in part on the input side of belief’s causal profile. See Velleman (2000); see also Millikan (1986) on the idea of types of mental states having a function.
Why endorse a teleological conception of belief? The main point of this paper is not to defend the teleological conception; rather, it is to consider the dispute between two versions of the conception. Nevertheless, I want to take some care over this question of why one would endorse the teleological conception in the first place. The answer will prove important later.

It is sometimes pointed out that attributing an aim to belief may help to account for belief’s being subject to epistemic norms of evidence and justification. Aims are often associated with rules or standards conducive to achieving the aims. Epistemic norms, it might be said, are rules or standards conducive to achieving the aim of belief. Since the aim is constitutive, these norms will apply to any believer and any belief.

While this explanatory potential is a virtue of the teleological conception, it does not seem to favour the teleological conception over other conceptions. For example, a normative conception seems just as well placed to account for epistemic norms. If belief is subject to a norm of truth, for example, then it seems plausible that this norm would generate secondary norms of evidence and justification – prescriptions or rules conducive to meeting the more fundamental norm, truth. These secondary norms need not derive their authority from any aim. Once the more fundamental norm is in place, the secondary norms will plausibly follow.5

A better motivation for the teleological conception, it seems to me, has to do with the regulation of belief. There seems to be a necessary role for (what we take to be) evidence in the regulation of belief – in the forming, maintaining, modifying and extinguishing of beliefs. For example, we cannot form beliefs that we take to be evidentially unsupported, no matter what incentives we are offered to do so. Or, at least, we cannot do this by our normal means of belief-regulation, without employing self-deception and the like (I will say more about this ‘no funny business’ condition below). Equally, we have a very strong tendency to believe those propositions for which we take ourselves to have compelling evidence (if we consider them at all). The teleological conception appears to offer a straightforward explanation of all this. A constitutive aim governing belief-regulation would constrain the ways in which we can normally be motivated to believe. Suppose belief aims at truth. Because of the internal relation between evidence and truth,

5 It might be said that the normative conception provides a better explanation of epistemic norms than does the teleological conception. While aims are (often) associated with standards of conduct conducive to meeting those aims, these standards are not thereby categorically normative. For example, if you aim to commit genocide, there are courses of action that will serve your aim well, but it doesn’t seem as though you are subject to a norm requiring you to pursue these courses of action, or even that you have any reason to pursue them. So why should the aim of belief leave us open to categorical epistemic norms (see Kelly 2003)? I think that this challenge to the teleological conception can be met by saying something about the significance of the aim for our nature as rational agents (McHugh under review a). A discussion of this issue, however, would be beyond the scope of the present paper.
this will require you to be moved by (what you take to be) evidence in your belief-regulation. To fail to be moved by evidence would be to fail to aim at truth, and thus to fail to be regulating belief.

The normative conception, by contrast, does not on its own offer any straightforward explanation of these facts about the regulation of belief. Even if belief is subject to a constitutive norm of, say, truth, it does not follow that we will always, or even often, be motivated by that norm. In general, we can deliberately violate constitutive norms, without thereby ceasing to be engaged in the activities constituted by those norms. Consider assertion. It is now held by many philosophers that assertion is subject to one or more constitutive norms. Some of these philosophers hold that the constitutive epistemic norm of assertion is knowledge: that is, it is constitutive of assertion that assertions whose contents are not known by the speaker are epistemically inappropriate or defective. Supposing this is true, it wouldn’t follow that we cannot deliberately make assertions whose contents we take ourselves not to know. If the view entailed this, it would constitute a reductio of the view, because it is obvious that we can and do deliberately assert things that we don’t know, and that we are fully aware we don’t know, and even things we don’t believe. What the view entails is that such assertions violate the constitutive norm of assertion, not that they are impossible.

So, the claim that belief is subject to a constitutive norm of (say) truth does not entail that we will have any difficulty forming beliefs that are evidentially unsupported even by our own lights, nor that we will usually be inclined to believe strongly evidentially supported propositions when we consider them. The normative conception of belief does not explain salient facts about the regulation of belief.

Now, there are certain meta-normative views according to which, roughly, it is impossible to make a normative judgment without thereby being motivated by the judgment. It might seem that the normative conception of belief can explain the role of evidence in the regulation of belief, if it is combined with such a meta-normative view. The idea would be that belief is subject to a norm of (say) truth,

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6 Steglich-Petersen (2006) makes much the same point.
7 The most influential defence of this thesis is Williamson (2000, ch. 11). In much of the subsequent literature it is simply taken for granted that assertion is subject to a constitutive, or at least uniquely fundamental, epistemic norm; the question then becomes which norm it is that has this role. Williamson himself is careful to point out that this is a substantive and non-obvious assumption.
8 It might be said that there is an important difference between the truth-norm of belief and the (supposed) knowledge-norm of assertion, namely that the former, unlike the latter, is a norm of correctness. But this wouldn’t affect the present point. Suppose, plausibly, that assertions are correct iff true. It doesn’t follow that we can’t deliberately make untrue assertions. Likewise, we can knowingly utter grammatically incorrect sentences without ceasing to speak the language whose grammar we are violating. If we weren’t speaking that language, then the sentences wouldn’t be incorrect after all (see Williamson 2000, 240).
and you could not judge a prospective belief to be likely to violate that norm without thereby being motivated not to adopt that belief. What indicates whether a prospective belief is likely to violate that norm is, precisely, evidence for and against the prospective belief’s content. Thus, it is impossible for the believer to be unmoved by evidence.

But this won’t work. The problem is that this meta-normative claim comes in strong and weak versions. The strong version is much too strong to be plausible as a general meta-normative claim, whereas the weak version is too weak to deliver the promised explanatory payload.

Take a norm $N$. The strong version of the meta-normative claim is this: if you make the judgment that $\Phi$ing would violate $N$, then (barring self-deception, etc.) your overall motivation will be not to $\Phi$, and so you will not $\Phi$. This is false of constitutive norms in general: you can judge that an assertion would violate the (supposed) constitutive norm of assertion, but make the assertion anyway. It is false of judgments of moral wrongness: you can judge that $\Phi$ing would be morally wrong, but go ahead and $\Phi$ anyway. And, as akrasia shows, it is false even of judgments of something’s being such that you ought all-things-considered not do it. So it would be ad hoc to claim that it is true of judgments about the norm of belief, without some further explanation. The normative conception of belief won’t itself provide this explanation.9

9 It might be said that the constitutive norm of belief has a status such that the judgment that a prospective belief is likely to violate that norm is, in effect, a judgment that the belief is one you all-things-considered ought not form. A judgment to the effect that you all-things-considered ought not $\Phi$, it might be said, does entail that your overall motivation will be not to $\Phi$, provided you are not akratic. But, it might be added, akrasia is possible in the doxastic case as well as the practical case. So a constitutive norm of belief can, after all, explain the salient facts about the regulation of belief.

First, it’s not clear why the constitutive norm of belief should give rise to all-things-considered oughts in this way. Other constitutive norms do not behave in this way, as we can see from the case of assertion: even those who defend a constitutive epistemic norm of assertion accept that sometimes what you ought to do all-things-considered is violate that norm. Note that linking the norm to correctness will not help here (see previous note). Second, even if the norm of belief does behave this way, it’s another matter to claim that a subject must recognise that it does so. Couldn’t a subject (perhaps mistakenly) judge that, all things considered, she ought to believe something that is not supported by her evidence, if doing so would save the world? Third, and crucially, doxastic/epistemic akrasia seems to differ importantly from practical akrasia. If the former is possible at all, which some doubt (e.g. Owens 2002), it nonetheless seems to be much closer to being pathological than is practical akrasia. In the practical case, it is possible to deliberately, non-pathologically, albeit irrationally, act in defiance of your all-things-considered judgment of what you ought to do. In the doxastic case, forming a belief in defiance of your own assessment of your evidence does not seem to be something you can do deliberately, or by the normal exercise of control of belief. Such a belief would tend to indicate pathology, or some failure of mental control (I will qualify this slightly in n. 15 below). So, even if the judgment that a prospective belief is likely to violate the norm of belief does amount to a judgment that you ought not, all-things-considered, form the belief, this would not explain the extent to which belief-regulation is constrained by evidence.
The weak version of the meta-normative claim is this: if you make the judgment that \( \Phi \)ing would violate \( N \), then you will have some motivation not to \( \Phi \). This version allows that you can judge that \( \Phi \)ing would violate \( N \), and yet go ahead and \( \Phi \), because the motivation not to \( \Phi \) is outweighed by stronger motivations to \( \Phi \). It is thus much more plausible than the strong version. However, when we apply it to judgments about the putative norm of belief, it does not deliver the result we wanted. The point about the regulation of belief was not just that evidence gives you some motivation to conform your beliefs to it, but rather that ordinarily you cannot go against what you take your evidence to be. You cannot, without self-deception or other funny business, form a belief in a proposition for which you take yourself to lack evidential support, no matter what incentives you are offered. If it comes to your attention that a belief of yours lacks evidential support, you will normally cease straight away to have the belief. The weak meta-normative claim does not explain this.

So it seems that the defender of the normative conception cannot plausibly explain the regulation of belief by appealing to some general meta-normative view that links normative judgments to motivation.

On the other hand, it can hardly be claimed that the norm of belief has a special kind of motivational inescapability not possessed by other norms. As an explanation of the regulation of belief, that would have all the appearance of a virtus dormitiva. One way to give such a claim some genuine explanatory content would be to interpret it as saying that we are bound to aim at satisfying the norm of belief. But now the explanation is appealing to an at least partly teleological conception of belief.

No doubt there is plenty more to say about this. Let me emphasise that this argument purports to put pressure only on those conceptions of belief that involve no teleological element at all. And even then, it is not decisive: it shows only that a fully or partly teleological conception enjoys an explanatory advantage over these other conceptions (albeit an important advantage). My aim has been merely to outline what I think is the most powerful motivation for an at least partly teleological conception of belief.10

10 Interestingly, the foremost proponent of the normative conception, Nishi Shah (2003), argues that the normative conception (or the normative element of a hybrid conception) does a better job than the teleological conception of explaining central aspects of the regulation of belief.

For responses to Shah’s objections to the teleological explanation of the regulation of belief, see Steglich-Petersen (2006, 2009) and McHugh (forthcoming, under review b).

In sketch, Shah’s normative explanation of the regulation of belief goes as follows (see Shah 2003, 465 ff.). It is part of the concept of belief that a belief is correct iff its content is true. This standard of correctness is prescriptive. Thus, possession of the concept of belief entails acceptance of a prescription to believe \( p \) only if \( p \). Therefore, when you engage in deliberation framed by the question whether to believe a proposition \( p \), you take the question framing your
I now move on to the central question of the paper: given such a conception, what is it that belief aims at?

2. The truth-aim hypothesis and the demandingness problem

It is usually supposed that if belief has an aim, then that aim is truth. Call the hypothesis that belief aims at truth ‘the truth-aim hypothesis’. Bearing in mind the earlier clarifications of what it means for belief to aim at something, we can give an initial formulation of the hypothesis as follows:

(TAH1) The belief that \( p \) aims to satisfy the condition \( \text{that you believe } p \text{ iff } p \).

I claimed that the strongest motivation for a teleological conception of belief is its promise to explain the role of evidence in the regulation of belief. Of course, whether and how that explanatory job is done depends on how the conception is filled out. (TAH1) would seem, on the face of it, well placed in this regard. After all, evidence is truth-conducive; aiming at truth requires being responsive to evidence.

However, the role of evidence in the regulation of belief has a feature that is in tension with the idea that (TAH1) states the fundamental aim of belief. I call this feature ‘demandingness’.

Demandingness is this: you cannot, deliberatively and in full awareness, form a belief in a proposition if you regard your evidence for that proposition as less than sufficient, where sufficiency involves more than having better or stronger evidence for the proposition than for its negation. You require what you take to deliberation to be settled entirely by the question whether \( p \). So, in deliberating about whether to believe \( p \), you are responsive only to considerations that you take to be relevant to whether \( p \).

I think that this explanation fails for reasons along the lines that I have given in the text. Exactly how it fails depends on what is meant by ‘acceptance of a prescription’. If acceptance of a prescription is something that guarantees being motivated by the prescription, to the exclusion of other considerations, then it is implausible that possession of any concept involves acceptance of a prescription. No other normative concept (supposing the concept of belief is indeed normative) exhibits this feature. (This corresponds to the point made above about the strong meta-normative claim.) On the other hand, if acceptance of a prescription does not guarantee being so motivated, to the exclusion of other considerations, then the explanation does not go through. (This corresponds to the point made above about the weak meta-normative claim.)

Finally, let me note that Shah’s normative explanation of belief-regulation applies only to regulation through doxastic deliberation, not to the non-deliberative regulation of beliefs; it is to account for this latter that Shah and Velleman retain a teleological element in their account of belief. Thus, even if Shah’s normative explanation were correct, the argument of this paper would speak to the teleological element of Shah and Velleman’s position.

11 This feature is pointed out, though not in exactly my terms, by Owens (2000, 2003). It is also noticed by Adler (2002) and Nickel (2010). Adler and Nickel use the term ‘adequate’ rather than ‘sufficient’. Owens (2003) puts demandingness to work in an argument against the teleological account. The argument of this section draws heavily Owens’s work (including his 2000) although I am hesitant to attribute to him the argument as I formulate it here.
be some high degree or strength of evidence, or some particular kind of evidence, for the proposition. For example, suppose that you wish to form a belief about whether it will rain today. You have consulted all the available meteorological evidence, and it seems to you that the probability of rain is .6, while the probability of a dry day is .4. Can you then go ahead and believe outright that it will rain? It seems not. You can believe that it will probably rain, but not, simply, that it will rain.

Note that the claim here is about outright belief (the teleological conception of belief is a conception of outright belief). On finding that the evidence marginally favours rain, you can increase your credence in, or subjective probability for, the proposition that it will rain. But this will not amount to having an outright belief that it will rain.

What does this distinction between outright belief and subjective probability amount to? A full answer to that question would be beyond the scope of this paper. Let me just say this. Believing a proposition \( p \) outright involves a kind of unqualified commitment to the truth of the proposition. This commitment plausibly involves your having a policy, disposition, or preparedness to use \( p \), unqualified, as a premise in practical and theoretical reasoning, in a wide range of contexts. For example, if you believe outright the proposition that it will rain today, you will be prepared to reason: ‘It will rain today; therefore I should call off the tennis match’. If you merely have a subjective probability of .6 for that proposition, you will not be prepared to reason in that way.

Indeed, even very high subjective probabilities can fail to amount to outright belief: you can have a very high subjective probability for the proposition that you will not win a lottery you have just entered, without thereby being committed to the truth of the proposition that you will not win, and therefore without believing it outright.\(^{12}\)

In the example above, you cannot simply go ahead and commit to the truth of the proposition that it will rain today, and thus believe it outright, while aware that there is a .4 probability of its being false (you cannot do so deliberatively and in full awareness – see below). This kind of evidence is not sufficient, by your lights.

What is it for evidence to be sufficient, in this sense? This is a difficult question. It requires (significantly) more than a proposition’s being more likely than not to be true. But it does not require certainty – you can go ahead and believe a proposition despite your evidence falling short, by your lights, of providing a

\(^{12}\) For more on this difference between outright belief and subjective probability, see Williamson (2000, 98–99) and Frankish (2009). I will return to lottery propositions in section 5 below.
guarantee of the truth of the proposition. I will return later to the question of how, more precisely, to characterise sufficiency. For now, I use the term ‘sufficiency’ as a placeholder; the important point is that such a phenomenon exists.

I characterised demandingness in terms of what you can do ‘deliberatively and in full awareness’. By ‘deliberatively’ I mean ‘as a result of, or in a way that is appropriately sensitive to, deliberation about whether to believe \( p \)’. I do not deny that you can believe propositions for which you lack sufficient evidence, and even propositions for which you lack sufficient evidence by your own lights. But you cannot, within deliberation, and in full awareness, form a belief on the basis of evidence that you regard as less than sufficient. And, if you become aware that a belief of yours is one for which you lack sufficient evidence, then you will inevitably, if your belief is sensitive to your own deliberation, withdraw the belief.

We mostly regulate our doxastic states without actually engaging in such deliberation, but our ordinary control of our doxastic states nevertheless involves dispositional sensitivity to deliberation.\(^{13}\) A belief that would remain in place, even were deliberation about what to believe to come down against it, is a belief that is not under your control in this sense – it is not being regulated by the normal means of belief-regulation.\(^{14}\)

Demandingness is thus a feature of how beliefs can be motivated from the perspective of the deliberating subject, and is a feature our ordinary control of our doxastic states. Failures of demandingness involve funny business – self-deception, failure of ordinary control of your beliefs, pathology, or the like.\(^{15}\)

I say that demandingness is in tension with the claim that (TAH\(_1\)) states the fundamental aim of belief. Why? The problem is that this claim would lead us to expect a rather different pattern in the regulation of belief, and it is not clear that (TAH\(_1\)) can be supplemented in such a way as to explain demandingness, without

\(^{13}\) It might be objected that we don’t control our beliefs at all. If one doesn’t like the term ‘control’, one can replace it with ‘regulation’. But in fact I think it is clear that we enjoy a mode of control over our doxastic states – albeit a mode that is different from the voluntary control that we enjoy over our bodily actions. Our doxastic states are not like headaches, or compulsions. They are our responses to (certain kinds of) reasons. See McHugh (2011), Hieronymi (2009).

\(^{14}\) This modal condition on control of belief must be qualified to take into account Frankfurtian cases of the following sort: you have some quite ordinary belief that \( p \), but some external agent is ready to intervene should you show any sign of deliberation that might lead you to give up the belief.

\(^{15}\) How funny must the funny business be? I am not sure. Perhaps there can be cases of epistemic akrasia in which demandingness fails. Epistemic akrasia is quite funny – it seems funnier than practical akrasia – but it perhaps doesn’t amount to full-blown pathology, or loss of control, when it consists merely of belief on the basis of (by your own lights) insufficient evidence. It seems closer to pathology or loss of control when it consists of belief in a proposition that the evidence overall counts against (by your lights) (see n. 9 above). What’s crucial, as I will point out, is that if (TAH\(_1\)) stated the aim of belief, no funny business at all – not even something as relatively unfunny as akrasia – should be required for failures of demandingness. Such failures should be routine.
the motivation for endorsing a teleological conception in the first place thereby being undermined.

Consider ordinary deliberation about what to do in pursuit of an aim. You will typically conclude such deliberation by taking the course of action that you seem to have most reason to take, given your aim and the available information. In particular, you will take the course of action that seems most likely, on your information, to satisfy or promote the aim. For example, you are deliberating about whether to go to the department today, and your aim is to go to the department iff the seminar will be interesting. On the basis of your evidence, it seems to you that there is a .6 probability that the seminar today will be interesting, and a .4 probability that it will be boring. In this scenario, other things equal you will choose to go to the department. This is the course of action that, so to speak, maximises expected utility. Thus, you will decide, in pursuit of your aim, to go to the department, while being aware that there is a significant chance of failing to achieve the aim. No funny business is required.

Things are different in the case of belief. Suppose your evidence gives \( p \) a probability of .6. And suppose that you aim at is to believe \( p \) iff \( p \). It seems that you should then, in order to pursue that aim, go ahead and believe \( p \), even while recognising that there is a significant chance of thereby forming a false belief.16 After all, believing \( p \) is more likely to promote that aim than not believing it, on your information. Believing \( p \) would maximise expected utility. But, by demandingness, you will not go ahead and believe \( p \), in this scenario – not without funny business, at any rate. What’s more, demandingness obtains even when no other aim of yours, extrinsic to belief, would be compromised by your believing \( p \), and even when your other aims would be positively promoted by believing \( p \) (e.g. if you have been offered a reward to believe it). So the regulation of belief doesn’t work as we would expect it to if (TAH1) stated the aim of belief.17

16 It has been argued that if justification is to be explained by the aim of truth, then only true beliefs can be justified (Maitzen 1995; David 2001). It might be thought that such arguments run contrary to my claim that aiming at truth would allow for taking the risk of falsity. However, these arguments appear to construe the truth aim as a general aim of having true and not false beliefs, rather than as a specific aim instantiated in each belief. In any case, even if the arguments establish their normative conclusion, it surely can’t be the case that a fallible thinker who aims (merely) at truth would only ever be motivated to believe propositions that are in fact true, nor should such a thinker be motivated only to believe propositions that she has very strong (sufficient) evidence for. Motivation or regulation by aims just doesn’t work like that.

17 Indeed, we might expect that, if (TAH1) stated the aim of belief, we should be able to go ahead and believe propositions that are, on our evidence, no more probable than their negations, as William James seems to suggest we can in ‘The Will to Believe’ (1896/2006). After all, in such a scenario you are as likely to satisfy the aim stated by (TAH1) by believing the proposition as by not believing it (by withholding on it). In the practical case, we can deal with ‘Buridan’s ass’ situations by simply choosing one of the two available, equally instrumentally valuable options.
It might be said that this shows merely that (TAH₁) doesn’t explain everything about the regulation of belief – not that it doesn’t state the aim of belief. However, it seems to be, if not an essential feature of aim-directed behaviour, at least a characteristic feature, that such behaviour comes with the tendency to choose a course of action that is the most aim-promoting of the available courses of action, even if it still has a significant chance of failing to achieve its governing aim. After all, part of what aims do is to direct our behaviour in such a way that we promote them; and we often face situations where all available courses of action run some risk of failure. If you systematically fail to behave in ways that, given your information, would promote the aim A, even when no other aim would be compromised by doing so, then we should doubt that A is the aim governing your behaviour. So the fact that you cannot form a belief while recognising that there is a significant chance of the belief’s being false, constitutes evidence that belief-formation is not a piece of behaviour governed by the aim of mere true belief (the aim of believing \( p \iff p \)).

The defender of (TAH₁) may try to appeal to some further resources, external to the aim of belief, in order to explain why you cannot form a belief on the basis of weak evidence. After all, sometimes you are prevented by some feature of your situation from pursuing the course of action that would best serve an aim. Perhaps it is some other feature of belief, besides its aim, or perhaps it is something else about your predicament, that inhibits you from going ahead and believing a proposition on the basis of insufficient evidence.

But this would be problematic.

First, as mentioned above, demandingness obtains even when there is nothing to stop you believing \( p \) – nothing, that is, besides the fact that you regard your evidence for \( p \) as insufficient. And this fact alone wouldn’t prevent you from believing \( p \), if the role of evidence in the regulation of belief was to promote the aim stated by (TAH₁).

Second, if some other feature of belief, or of your predicament, explained demandingness, then the motivation for having a teleological conception of belief in the first place would be very largely undermined. The motivation for the teleological conception, I suggested, is precisely that it promises to explain the role of evidence in the regulation of belief. But now the suggestion is that we appeal to something outside the aim of belief in order to explain demandingness. Demandingness on its own entails many of the other important truths about the role of evidence in the regulation of belief (e.g. the impossibility-without-funny-business of believing what is by your own lights evidently false, or of being indifferent to evidence). Thus, if demandingness is explained by something other than (TAH₁), there will be not much left for (TAH₁) to explain. So why bother with the teleological conception at all? At any rate, a teleological conception of belief

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that can explain demandingness, such as the one I will offer later, would clearly be preferable.\(^{18}\)

So far I have been supposing that for the belief that \(p\) to aim at truth is for it to aim at a biconditional state of affairs: that you believe \(p\) iff \(p\). But there is an alternative possibility:\(^{19}\)

\[(TAH_2)\] The belief that \(p\) aims to satisfy the condition that you believe \(p\) only if \(p\).

The aim articulated by \((TAH_2)\) is one of not believing falsely, rather than an aim of believing truly; nevertheless, the slogan that belief aims at truth has sometimes been understood in this negative way. It might be said that \((TAH_2)\) offers a straightforward explanation of demandingness. If you are aiming to believe \(p\) only if \(p\), then it is to be expected that you will withhold belief when there is a significant chance that \(\sim p\). After all, if you withhold belief then you will certainly satisfy the aim of believing \(p\) only if \(p\), whereas if you form the belief you thereby run a significant chance of failing to satisfy it.

Unfortunately this will not work.

First, if belief has an aim that explains the role of evidence in the regulation of belief, then I think it is not plausible that it is the merely negative aim of not believing falsely. This negative aim is indifferent between believing truths and not believing them. You can satisfy this aim in any particular case simply by withholding belief; thus, it will never positively motivate you to believe anything. So, if \((TAH_2)\) states the aim of belief, then whenever you do form beliefs there must be something else that explains why you form them. Presumably, what motivates you will typically be some independent practical reason for forming that particular belief, or for forming a true belief on the question whether \(p\). Now, practical reasons, including reasons of mere curiosity, do play an important role in determining what questions we turn our minds to, and thus what beliefs we end up with. But it’s not the case that whenever you form a belief there is some practical reason that explains why you do so. Consider the case where some proposition happens to be before your mind and strikes you as obviously true. For example, you can just plainly see that there are some leaves on a branch in front of you. You might not care at all whether there are leaves on that branch.

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\(^{18}\) This objection applies to previous work of mine (McHugh 2011), in which I tried to reconcile the idea that judging aims at truth with the phenomenon of demandingness, by claiming that judging is an act of question-settling, and that insufficient evidence will leave the subject in a state of doubt, and thus unable to settle the question. I would now say that judging and belief aim at knowledge (there are constitutive connections between judgment and belief) and that the notion of question-settling need not be invoked to explain demandingness, but otherwise, a few details aside, I endorse what I wrote in that previous work.

\(^{19}\) The availability of this alternative has been made clear to me in exchanges with Daniel Whiting.
Nevertheless, if you consider that proposition, you cannot decline to believe it on the grounds that, even though it is obviously true, you have no reason to believe it. Its being obviously true is a reason to believe it. If belief had a merely negative aim, then it should be possible to consider whether to believe that proposition and decline to do so, for lack of any reason to believe it. A positive aim, on the other hand, can explain why evidence will positively motivate you to believe the proposition, if you consider it, even in the absence of any other consideration that speaks in favour of believing it.

Perhaps this point is not fatal. But there is a more pressing problem for the claim that (TAH₂) states the aim of belief.

The problem is that this claim is still in tension with demandingness. Suppose you aim to believe \( p \) only if \( p \). Well, you are prepared to take some risk of failing to achieve that aim in particular cases. Whenever your evidence for \( p \) falls short of providing certainty, you take some risk, in forming the belief that \( p \), of failing to achieve that aim – a risk you could avoid by withholding belief. So, again, it seems that non-evidential considerations must be playing a role in motivating you to take the risk. But, if non-evidential considerations can motivate you to take some risk, why can they motivate you to take so little risk? This is not what the ordinary mechanisms of aim-directed behaviour would lead us to expect. In general, we can run significant risks of failing to achieve our aims (positive and negative). How much risk we are willing to run will depend on the weights we assign to different aims, their compatibility, the relative difficulty of achieving them, and so on.

For example, suppose you aim to eat only free range eggs. You typically take measures to assure yourself that any eggs you are considering consuming are free range. Sometimes this is easy, and does not interfere with any other goals of yours – for example, when you are in the shop it is straightforward to check the labelling of the eggs and make your choice accordingly. In other situations, you have to weigh the risk of accidentally consuming battery eggs against other considerations. You might, for example, be a dinner guest served a delicious-looking pasta carbonara. You think your host would only use free range eggs, but you cannot be sure. You could ask about the provenance of the eggs in the carbonara, but this would compromise your goal of remaining in the host’s good books. In this scenario you might go ahead and consume the dish, taking your background knowledge about the host’s food-buying habits as assurance enough in the circumstances, even while aware that there is some chance of thereby failing to achieve your aim of eating only free range eggs. There is no need for funny business.

Forming beliefs isn’t like that. You can’t take your weak meteorological evidence as assurance enough, given the circumstances (perhaps you will be punished for not having a firm view about the weather), to go ahead and believe that it will
rain today, while aware that there is a significant risk of forming a false belief – not without funny business.\textsuperscript{20}

So, (TAH\textsubscript{2}) does not, after all, explain demandingness; indeed, it would lead us to expect a different pattern in the regulation of belief. Perhaps demandingness can be explained in some other way, compatibly with (TAH\textsubscript{2}), but parallel points apply here to those made above: such a strategy would undermine the motivation for adopting a teleological conception in the first place.

In sum, it seems to me that demandingness poses a problem for the truth-aim hypothesis, however exactly that hypothesis is cast. I do not claim to have shown that the problem is insurmountable. However, as I will show in the next section, there is an alternative teleological hypothesis that is not only compatible with demandingness, but also offers a satisfying explanation and a fuller characterisation of demandingness. This gives us strong reason to prefer the alternative hypothesis.

3. The knowledge-aim hypothesis, demandingness and sufficiency

According to the knowledge-aim hypothesis, belief aims not merely at truth but at knowledge:\textsuperscript{21}

(KAH) The belief that $p$ aims to satisfy the condition that you believe $p$ if $p$ and only if you know $p$.

Equivalently, the aim is that you know $p$ if $p$, and you believe $p$ only if you know $p$.\textsuperscript{22} That is, you aim to know $p$ if it’s true, and not to have a belief that falls short of knowledge.

(KAH) promises to explain everything that (TAH\textsubscript{1}) and (TAH\textsubscript{2}) can explain. Evidence is conducive not only to truth but also to knowledge. So, (KAH) seems as well placed as (TAH\textsubscript{1}) or (TAH\textsubscript{2}) to explain why we are motivated by evidence and why we are subject to norms of evidence and justification. Indeed, the suggestion is not that belief does not aim at truth, but that the truth-aim is derivative from the more fundamental aim of belief: knowledge.

Unlike its competitors, (KAH) predicts and explains demandingness. At least, it does so when combined with the following plausible thesis:

(SK) To believe $p$ on the basis of evidence you regard as insufficient would be to have a belief that, by your own lights, doesn’t amount to knowledge.

\textsuperscript{20} This point is emphasised by Owens (2003). See also McHugh (forthcoming, under review b).

\textsuperscript{21} Versions of this claim are defended by Owens (2000) and by Bird (2007). (Owens rejects it in his 2003 paper.) It parallels claims made by Peacocke (1999), Williamson (2000), Adler (2002), Sutton (2007), Hattiangadi (forthcoming) and Smithies (forthcoming). Some of these latter authors use the language of ‘aiming’. However, I don’t think they intend to make a teleological claim, in my sense, but rather a normative one.

\textsuperscript{22} I assume that knowledge entails belief.
(KAH) and (SK) together entail that a belief based on what you regard as insufficient evidence will be one that, by your own lights, fails to achieve its aim. But this aim is constitutive: you don’t count as regulating beliefs if you are not aiming at it. And you cannot coherently pursue an aim by doing something that, in your view, will fail to achieve that aim. Hence demandingness.

This explanation incorporates an account of sufficiency: evidence is sufficient iff it is good enough for knowledge. (Strictly, all that is required for the explanation is the ‘only if’ direction.) Thus, the corresponding characterisation of demandingness is:

\[(D) \quad \text{You cannot, deliberatively and in full awareness, form an outright belief in a proposition, if you regard your evidence for that proposition as not putting you in a position to know it.}\]

This seems to accord with the data. Evidence that favours a hypothesis, but only weakly, does not put you in a position to know the hypothesis. And, as I will argue further below, there is something very funny about the idea of believing a proposition while taking yourself not to know whether it is true.

When is evidence good enough for knowledge? Here is a partial suggestion: knowledge that \(p\), based on certain evidence, requires that you would not easily have that evidence and yet \(p\) be false.\(^{23}\) That this is a condition on knowledge is strongly suggested by cases involving lottery propositions. These are propositions to the effect that you will not win or have not won some fair lottery that you and very many other people entered. It is widely agreed that, intuitively, you cannot know, before hearing what the result of the lottery has been, that you will not win or have not won – even if the probability of your not winning is extremely high.\(^{24}\) What stands out about lottery propositions is that, while your evidence for them is probabilistically very strong, nevertheless you could easily have that evidence and yet win the lottery. The suggested modal condition on knowledge thus explains why you lack knowledge of lottery propositions. It also provides an attractive diagnosis of standard Gettier cases: these are cases in which, although your evidence justifies you in believing the target proposition, your evidence is detached from the truth of the proposition in such a way that you might easily have had that evidence and yet been wrong.\(^{25}\)

On this suggestion, evidence for \(p\) is sufficient only when you would not easily have it and yet \(p\) be false. Accordingly, a further characterisation of demandingness is:

\(^{23}\) Requirements of this sort are defended by Dretske (1971), Sosa (1999), Williamson (2000) and Pritchard (2005). See also Millar (2010). Obviously the term ‘easily’ in my formulation is vague. See especially Dretske and Pritchard for discussions of how to spell this out.

\(^{24}\) See Hawthorne (2004) for discussion.

\(^{25}\) See Dretske, Sosa and Pritchard (all loc. cit.) for discussion of lottery- and Gettier-based arguments for the suggested modal condition on knowledge.
You cannot, deliberatively and in full awareness, form an outright belief in a proposition, if you regard your evidence for that proposition as being such that you might easily have that evidence and yet the proposition be false.

This is, I submit, a plausible characterisation. The degree of ease that constitutes ‘easily’ here is, of course, the degree that rules out knowledge.\(^\text{26}\)

I pointed out in the previous section that you can take a course of action in pursuit of an aim, even while aware that there is a significant risk of failing thereby to achieve or promote the aim. This observation caused trouble for the truth-aim hypothesis, since we do not seem to be able or prepared to run a significant risk of falsity in our individual beliefs. This observation does not create a problem for (KAH). If there is, by your lights, a significant risk that \(p\) is false, given your evidence, then by your lights you don’t know \(p\). The mere risk of falsity makes it the case that you in fact lack knowledge; this is what the condition on knowledge stated above says. So, to believe a proposition that by your lights might (too) easily be false is not merely to run a risk of failing to achieve the aim of knowledge – it is to guarantee by your lights that you will fail to achieve it. But you cannot coherently pursue an aim by doing something that you take to guarantee your not achieving it.\(^\text{27}\)

If belief aims at knowledge, why have philosophers so often been misled into thinking that it aims at mere truth? One reason is that it does aim at truth, though not as its unique or fundamental aim. A second reason, I suggest, is that aiming at knowledge and aiming merely at truth are hard to distinguish both third- and first-personally. Considerations that bear on how best to pursue the aim of knowing will be truth-relevant considerations.\(^\text{28}\) It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that aiming at the truth and aiming at knowledge amount to the same thing. If the aim of belief is knowledge, we should expect to find a phenomenon like demandingness. If the aim of belief is merely truth, then we should expect no such phenomenon, in the absence of some further explanation (which, if what I have argued is right, will be hard to come by). Knowledge is a more demanding aim than truth.

\(^{26}\) The reader will have noticed that my characterisations of ‘sufficient’ and ‘easily’ are less than fully informative, in the absence of a statement of how easily is too easily for knowledge. To answer this question is a task beyond the scope of the present paper (see n. 23 above). I take it that our judgments about particular cases are good enough to be getting along with in working out the implications of (KAH).

\(^{27}\) This does not entail that you cannot hold a belief that you take to be at risk of failing to amount to knowledge. It is one thing for there to be a risk that \(p\) is false, and another thing for there to be a risk that your belief that \(p\) fails to amount to knowledge (see Williamson, 2000, 123 ff.). However, it is arguable that there is limited scope for these two things to come apart from your own point of view, given that your own assessment of the connection between your evidence and \(p\) has immediate rational implications for your doxastic attitude to \(p\) (see McHugh 2010).

\(^{28}\) This point is made by Williams (1978). See also McHugh (2010).
4. Further defence of the knowledge-aim hypothesis

In this section I want briefly to offer some further considerations in favour of (KAH). This will take the form of pointing out phenomena that are neatly explained by (KAH) but not by the truth-aim hypothesis (TAH) in either version. They do not form part of my main argument because it is not clear that (TAH) is obliged to explain the phenomena I will point out, nor are the phenomena in obvious tension with (TAH). They are merely unexplained by it. Nevertheless, it is nice for a hypothesis to explain as much as possible.

The first consideration is that there are propositional attitudes distinct from belief that can guide behaviour and that appear to aim at truth. These other attitudes include conjecturing and guessing. Both conjectures and guesses aim to get it right, as evidenced by the fact that you can’t conjecture that \( p \) or guess that \( p \) when you know perfectly well that \( \neg p \). In this respect, conjecturing and guessing differ from, for example, supposing – you can suppose that \( p \) without any regard to whether \( p \) is true, and indeed while knowing that \( \neg p \). But conjecturing and guessing also differ from belief, in that you can conjecture or guess that \( p \) even though you are aware that \( p \) might well be false. (TAH) does not explain how belief differs from conjecturing and guessing. (KAH), by contrast, can account for the difference: belief aims at knowledge, whereas conjectures and guesses aim only at truth. That is why you can guess or conjecture, but not believe, something that by your lights might easily be false on your evidence.

The second consideration is that, as touched on above, there does seem to be an important internal connection between (outright) belief and taking yourself to know (as emphasised by Owens 2000 and Adler 2002). It would be too strong to say that, whenever a subject believes a proposition \( p \), the subject also believes that she knows \( p \). However, there is something incoherent (not merely irrational) about a stance in which you believe \( p \) and yet take yourself not to know whether \( p \). Suppose you ask yourself, of some proposition \( p \) that you then believe, whether you know it. Suppose you conclude that you don’t know \( p \). This conclusion seems already to amount to a withdrawal of belief that \( p \), in so far as your mental states are coherent.

A number of philosophers have appealed to the Moore-paradoxicality of sentences of the form ‘\( p \) but I don’t know \( p \)’, in order to defend a knowledge norm of assertion. However, it seems just as paradoxical to judge the content expressed by

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29 Owens (2003) defends the idea that guessing aims at truth.
30 You may of course retain some high subjective probability for \( p \). But you won’t continue to believe it outright, not if you are coherent. This incoherence helps us understand what is so funny about the various forms of funny business discussed in section 2 above (and see n. 15).
such a sentence, as it does to assert it.\(^{32}\) So, we might take this Moore-paradoxicality to tell us something about outright belief, the state expressed or manifested in judgment. The paradoxicality, we might say, results from the incoherence of the belief-state expressed by such a judgment. This interpretation need not undermine the argument for a knowledge norm of assertion. It may, in combination with plausible principles linking assertion and belief, bolster that argument.

If belief aims at knowledge, then all of this is easily explained. To take yourself not to know \(p\) is to take your belief that \(p\) to fail in its constitutive aim. To continue believing \(p\) would be to pursue an aim by doing something that you take not to achieve that aim. That is what is incoherent. (TAH), by contrast, offers no such explanation. After all, to take yourself not to know \(p\) is not yet to take your belief that \(p\) to be false. And there is nothing incoherent about pursuing an aim \(A\) by taking a course of action that you do not know will achieve \(A\).

The third consideration that supports the knowledge-aim hypothesis is that it promises to help explain the distinctive value, or valuing, of knowledge. The truth-aim hypothesis would seem to suggest that truth is our fundamental doxastic concern, and hence what we fundamentally value, epistemically.\(^{33}\) Philosophers have worried that, if our fundamental epistemic concern is truth, then there can be no explanation of why we value knowledge over mere true belief.\(^{34}\) On the present view, there is no need to derive a concern for knowledge from some more fundamental concern for true belief. Knowledge is doxastic success. Aiming involves concern for success. No wonder, then, that we have a concern for knowledge that is not derivative from some prior concern for truth. And this concern, arguably, constitutes or is the basis of our valuing of knowledge.

5. Objections and replies

In this section I want to consider a few objections to the hypothesis that belief aims at knowledge.

5.1 Lottery propositions

The first objection I want to consider is about lottery propositions. As mentioned earlier, it is widely agreed that we do not know these propositions. The objection is that we can, deliberatively and in full awareness (I will henceforth take this

\(^{32}\) As pointed out by Adler (2002). Adler defends at length the thesis that you cannot hold a belief while regarding your evidence for its content as inadequate. In ch. 1 section 4 he argues that ‘adequate’ means good enough for knowledge.

\(^{33}\) It’s not obvious that what comes after the ‘hence’ in this sentence follows from what comes before it. Nonetheless, positing an aim of belief is one way of trying to account for epistemic value or valuing.

\(^{34}\) This worry is developed in detail by Pritchard (2010).
qualification as read), believe lottery propositions, even while being aware that we do not know them. If that’s right, then belief can hardly aim at knowledge.  

However, it seems to me far from obvious that we can believe lottery propositions, while taking ourselves not to know them. Indeed, it seems to me false. It is important here to bear in mind the distinction, mentioned in section 2 above, between believing (outright) that you have not won the lottery, and having a very high subjective probability for that proposition. The latter plausibly commits you to believing outright that it is very very probable that you have not won the lottery. But it does not commit you to nor amount to believing outright that you have not won the lottery. You can believe outright that it is very very probable that you have not won the lottery, while taking yourself not to know that you have not won the lottery. You cannot believe it, I claim, while taking yourself not to know that it is very very probable that you have not won the lottery. Nor can you believe outright that you have not won the lottery, while taking yourself not to know whether you have.

Note also that we may sometimes fail to realise that we don’t know lottery propositions, and thus go ahead and believe them quite compatibly with aiming at knowledge.

There are considerations to suggest that we do not typically believe lottery propositions outright. Suppose you believe outright that you will not win the lottery if you buy a ticket. It then becomes mysterious why you would buy a ticket, since by your own lights you are thereby throwing your money away. You are intentionally buying a losing ticket! But people do in fact buy tickets for the lottery; and, while doing so may be irrational given the odds involved, the irrationality is not like that of throwing money away for nothing at all.

Suppose, now, that you already have a ticket for a lottery with an astronomically large prize, and someone offers to buy your ticket for 10 p. It seems that, if you believe outright that you will not win, and you have the slightest preference for having 10 p rather than nothing, your belief rationally requires you to sell your ticket. After all, you can reason: ‘My ticket will lose; therefore, if I sell it I will get 10 p instead of nothing’. But people are not, intuitively, straightforwardly
rationally required to sell their lottery tickets for 10 p. Again, perhaps they are ultimately required to do this, but the violation of this putative requirement is not as flagrant as the violation committed by intentionally holding on to a losing ticket instead of accepting something valuable for it.

If you merely have a high subjective probability, or what you believe is merely that you very very probably will not win the lottery, it may be quite understandable that you would buy a ticket – or, at any rate, you are not thereby doing something equivalent to intentionally throwing your money into a black hole. Furthermore, this belief does not rationally require you to sell your ticket for 10 p.\footnote{\textsuperscript{38}}

It seems, then, that we tend to believe that it is very very probable that we will not win the lottery, and not, simply, that we will not win the lottery. This, I suggest, is because we cannot clear-headedly believe lottery propositions outright, while taking ourselves not to know them. So there is no problem for the knowledge account here.\footnote{\textsuperscript{39}}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{38} It is sometimes said that knowledge is the norm for use of a proposition as a premise in practical reasoning (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008). On this view, it is inappropriate to use in practical reasoning the premise that your ticket is a loser. Might it be said, then, that people do typically believe lottery propositions, but are not rationally required to sell their tickets because they cannot appropriately use those propositions in practical reasoning leading to the intention to sell the ticket? I don’t think so. First, rational requirements do not seem to line up closely with norms for use of a premise in reasoning: the belief that \( F \) is a necessary means to some intended end rationally requires you to intend to \( F \), regardless of the belief’s epistemic credentials (Broome 2005). Second, the view that knowledge is the norm for use of a premise in practical reasoning is much more congenial to the idea that belief aims at knowledge than to the idea that belief aims at truth, given the very plausible assumption that part of the point of belief is to yield premises for practical reasoning (on this, see Bird 2007; Smithies forthcoming).}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{39} A superficially similar challenge, but in fact rather different, might be posed, based on a scenario analogous to the preface paradox. Thus, you write a book, all of whose assertions are well supported, but then discover that these assertions are jointly inconsistent. At least one of them is false, but you don’t know which! Does this mean that each individual assertion is such that it might easily be false, and so (KAH) entails that, to remain coherent, you must withdraw belief in it?

I don’t think it means that. Any individual assertion may still be based on evidence such that, by your lights, you would not easily have that evidence and yet the assertion be false – so that, looking at that individual assertion, you can say, ‘It couldn’t easily be that one that is false!’\’. Indeed, this might be the case for all of the individual assertions. In this respect the individual assertions in the book are unlike lottery propositions. Their evidential basis is importantly different.

Of course, you must acknowledge that at least one of the beliefs you express in the book is false and fails to amount to knowledge. But this doesn’t mean that, for any particular belief, you think that it might easily be false, or that it does not amount to knowledge. There are familiar difficulties here with regard to the principle of closure, but these difficulties don’t have anything specifically to do with (KAH).

Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.}
5.2 Correctness
The second objection is about the standard of correctness for belief. It seems that the standard of correctness for belief is truth: a belief is correct iff its propositional content is true. But it might be thought that the aim of belief, if it has one, should coincide with its standard of correctness. It might be thought that part of the point of positing an aim of belief is to explain its standard of correctness. Or, at least, it might be thought that it would be odd to suppose that a belief could fail to achieve its constitutive aim, and yet still count as correct qua belief. If belief aims at knowledge, but has truth as its standard of correctness, then this possibility is often actualised.

I made no appeal to belief’s standard of correctness in motivating the idea that belief has an aim, and I think it’s far from clear that belief’s aim, if it has one, must coincide with its standard of correctness. Compare intention. It is not implausible that intention has a standard of correctness: say, an intention is correct iff the intended action is right, or permissible, or satisficing. But the aim of intending is not merely to have a correct intention – it is also to ensure that you carry out the intended action. Intentions aim at their own execution. So the aim of an attitude need not be merely to satisfy its standard of correctness.

Indeed, the motivation for the idea that belief has an aim exerts pressure to deny that that aim coincides with belief’s standard of correctness. This standard, as noted earlier, is shared with guesses and conjectures. Guesses and conjectures are not subject to the same demanding psychological-motivational (or indeed normative) constraints as beliefs. You can conjecture or guess that \( p \) (and be justified in doing so) despite having little or no evidence for \( p \). So, if the aim of belief is what explains the regulation (and normativity) of belief, this aim does not coincide with the standard of correctness belief shares with guesses and conjectures.

Does this mean that the defender of (KAH) cannot account for belief’s standard of correctness? No it does not. Knowledge, after all, entails not only truth, but also a modally stable connection to the truth. So, if belief aims at knowledge, then it is not surprising that belief purports to represent things as they in fact are – that it puts forward its content as true. This feature of belief is shared with guessing and conjecturing, but not with certain other kinds of attitude, like imagining and hoping. There is a notion of correctness qua purported representation of how things are. A representation is correct in this sense if things are as it represents them to be. Correctness in this sense is truth (when the representation is conceptual

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40 This is part of what motivates Velleman (2000, 277–278) to defend a teleological conception of belief, and he defends, specifically, the truth-aim hypothesis partly on the basis that correctness for belief is truth.

41 For an idea along these lines, see Shah (2008). See also Wedgwood (2007, 101).

or linguistic). Thus, true beliefs, like true guesses and true conjectures, are correct *qua* such representations. My claim is that belief can satisfy this standard, and yet fall short of being successful *qua* belief.

5.3 Evidence
The third objection is that (KAH), unlike (TAH), cannot explain the normative and motivational significance of evidence. (TAH) seems to offer a simple explanation of why we should care about evidence and why we do so: believing (only) what the evidence indicates regarding *p* is a means to the end of truth, and as such has normative and motivational significance that derives from that end. But, according to the objection, (KAH) cannot offer the same explanation. That is because believing on the basis of good evidence is not a means to knowing, but rather is part of what constitutes knowing (in many cases, at least). This might seem to make the connection between the aim of belief and the role of evidence unexplanatory.43

There are various ways in which one thing can be a means to another. Something is a *constitutive means* to an end if it is part of what constitutes that end.44 Contrary to what this objection supposes, an end can explain the normative and motivational significance of its constitutive means. Suppose you aim to cycle the route of this year’s Tour de France. For any individual section of the route, cycling that section is a constitutive means to your end. You will therefore have reason and be motivated to cycle that individual section.45 You will have reason and be motivated to cycle that section *because* of its connection to your end of cycling the whole route. This explanatory connection between the end and the constitutive means will come out in the truth of certain counterfactuals. For example: you would not have the same reason or motivation to cycle that section, if you were aware that certain other necessary conditions for achieving your end of cycling the whole route were not met (for example, cycling has been strictly banned in other parts of the country, making completion of the route impossible). Indeed, it may be that in that counterfactual scenario you would have no reason or motivation to cycle that section. Imagine, for example, that you have no interest in a particular section for its own sake; it is an especially boring one, and your interest is in the achievement of cycling the whole route of the Tour, and not in cycling *per se*. In this case, the end explains the normative and motivational significance of its constitutive means. Likewise, I claim, the aim of knowledge can explain the normative and motivational significance of evidence.

43 Thanks to Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen and Anandi Hattiangadi for discussion here.
45 You may have no reason to cycle an individual section if your overall goal is worthless. But we can leave that point aside.
It might be said that evidence does have some normative and motivational significance independent of the aim of knowledge. Don’t we gather evidence on matters with respect to which we do not expect to acquire knowledge? Doubtless we do, but (KAH) does not entail otherwise. We may gather such evidence in order to form a belief about whether a proposition is probable on the available evidence, aiming to know whether it is so. Or, we may gather evidence in order to make a conjecture, which, as mentioned in section 4 above, aims at truth.

6. Conclusion

Demandingness is an overlooked feature of the regulation of belief. If I am right, then it has an important consequence: it suggests that if belief has an aim, that aim is knowledge and not merely truth. I have argued that the hypothesis that belief aims at knowledge is also supported by a number of other considerations.

The position defended here fits with a recent trend of taking knowledge to be a central and fundamental notion in epistemology, rather than as something that must be understood in terms of the more fundamental notions of truth and justification. I have tried to show that we have reason to apply this trend within a squarely teleological conception of belief.*

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