# Should I Believe the Truth?[*]

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## 1      Introduction

It is a platitude that beliefs can be correct or incorrect. The most obvious candidate for belief's correctness condition is *truth*. This suggests that the following principle holds:

(1)      For any *p*: the belief that *p* is correct if and only if it is true that *p*

Krister Bykvist and Anandi Hattiangadi (hereafter, B&H) argue that (1) might not be platitudinous when 'correct' 'is interpreted as a normative term' and when 'belief' is taken to concern 'the psychological act of believing not the proposition believed' (2007: 277).

According to B&H, (1), so understood, is false. In this paper, I shall argue that their case rests on a particular way of capturing the alleged normative dimension to (1), namely as concerning what one *ought* to do. It is at the very least not obvious that one must formulate the normative interpretation in these terms and a certain alternative—which B&H do not consider[1] and which generally receives little attention—is available. Using B&H's discussion as a springboard, I shall articulate that neglected way of reformulating (1) and defend it against objections parallel to those that B&H offer. In closing, I shall consider in brief what bearing all of this has

on certain important questions one might want to ask about the natures of believing and of truth, including the question that provides the title for this paper.


## 2 Ought

In bringing out (1)'s normative dimension, as they understand it, B&H restate it as follows:

(2)     For any $S, p$: $S$ ought to believe that $p$ if and only if it is true that $p$

As B&H immediately point out (2007: 278-9), (2) 'is ambiguous, since the "ought" can take wide or narrow scope'. According to the narrow scope reading, on which I shall focus:

(3)     For any $S, p$: $S$ ought to (believe that $p$) if and only if it is true that $p$

In turn, B&H continue, (3) 'can be broken down into two conditional statements':

(3a)     For any $S, p$: if it is true that $p$, then $S$ ought to (believe that $p$)

(3b)     For any $S, p$: if $S$ ought to (believe that $p$), then it is true that $p$

With respect to (3a), B&H remind us that there are infinitely more true propositions than a person can believe, and equally many that are too complex to be believed by finite subjects. Insofar as *ought* implies *can*, then, (3a) is false.[2]

With respect to (3b), B&H highlight that, if $p$ is true, nothing follows from it concerning what $S$ ought to believe. And if $p$ is false, all that follows is that it is not the case that $S$ ought to believe that $p$, rather than that $S$ ought not to believe that $p$. Thus, they conclude, (3b) 'is not normative in any interesting sense—it does not imply that a subject is under any obligation under any circumstances whatsoever' (2007: 280; cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 43).

On behalf of their normativist opponents, B&H explore various ways of modifying (2) so as to deflect their criticisms, but find none successful. While no

doubt one might challenge B&H's arguments,[3] I shall grant them for present purposes and instead suggest that (2) is the wrong way of capturing the normative interpretation of (1). Indeed, one might take B&H to have demonstrated precisely that (2) is an inaccurate reading of (1)'s normative dimension, as opposed to having established that it has no normative dimension whatsoever. In the next sections, I shall substantiate this claim, offer an alternative restatement of (1), and show that it is not open to the kinds of problems B&H raise with respect to (2).

## 3    Correct

As quoted above, B&H assume that to take 'correct' as it occurs in (1) to express a normative notion is to take it to concern 'what one ought to do'. However, not all normative matters concern what one ought to do; some concern what one *may* do. What one may do is just as normative an issue—in particular, equally action-guiding and bound up with evaluation—as what one ought to do. Moreover, as I shall now suggest, it seems that what is correct is more closely related to what may be done than what ought to be done.

To say, for example, that moving a rook horizontally when playing chess is correct is, surely, not to say that one should move it horizontally—perhaps one should move it vertically or not at all—although it is certainly to imply that it is permissible to do so. Likewise, to say that to play certain notes in a particular way is to perform Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* correctly is, surely, not to say that one ought to play it in that way—perhaps there are indefinitely many suitable renderings of the piece—but it is to suggest that it is okay to do so.[4] Again, suppose that in the course of constructing a proof, one correctly derives '$p$ v $q$' from the assumption '$p$'. One might well be prepared to judge that it is alright to do so—the move accords with the rules

of inference—but reluctant to judge that one should do so—there might be other, equally good ways of reaching the desired conclusion. Finally, to hammer the point home, consider political correctness. While the claim that a certain epithet as politically incorrect certainly implies that you ought not to use it, the claim that another is politically correct surely does not imply that you ought to employ it but, at most, that one may do so. Judgements of political correctness and incorrectness serve principally to license and prohibit certain forms of behaviour, rather than to mandate them.

Importantly, I am not claiming that what is correct is equivalent to what one may do; there are many things that one may do—cross one's legs when sitting, for example—that one would not ordinarily deem correct. Moreover, I am not claiming that in saying that such-and-such is correct one is saying no more than that it may be done. For all that I claim here, describing an act as correct might convey much more besides. The suggestion is only, first, that the statement that an act is correct implies without further ado that one may perform it (but not that one ought to do so) and, second, that the statement that an act is incorrect implies without further ado that one ought not to perform it (and not merely that it is not the case that one ought to do so).[5] This reflects the fact that, in general, to judge that something is correct is to judge that it meets a certain standard, that it is free from error.

It is not my aim here to provide an exhaustive analysis of correctness. The point, rather, is that what is correct does not have immediate consequences for what one ought to do, and so B&H's reformulation of (1) is inappropriate. This, in turn, motivates an alternative way of bringing out its normative dimension, namely:

(4)     For any $S, p$: $S$ may believe that $p$ if and only if it is true that $p$[6]

For reasons already stated, this is not intended as equivalent to (1) but, at least, as capturing one aspect of its normative import. Moreover, whatever its relation to (1), it is an independently interesting question whether (4) is true. In what follows, I shall defend the claim that it is.

## 4        May

Like (2), (4) involves a scope ambiguity. For present purposes, I shall focus on its narrow scope reading:

(5)        For any $S, p$: $S$ may (believe that $p$) if and only if it is true that $p$

In turn, (5) can be broken down into two conditional statements:

(5a)        For any $S, p$: if it is true that $p$, then $S$ may (believe that $p$)

(5b)        For any $S, p$: if $S$ may (believe that $p$), then it is true that $p$

At first glance, it might seem that each conditional is vulnerable to criticisms exactly parallel to those facing their counterparts derived from (3). Examination, however, reveals that those criticisms do not get a grip in this instance and so, I shall argue, they are in fact not effective in undermining (5).

Is (5a) open to an objection that appeals to a version of the principle that *ought* implies *can*, as (3a) is? It might appear to be since, recall, there is an indefinite number of propositions too complex to be believed. According to (5a), one may believe such propositions. This is apt to sound strange. In what respect may I do something that I am unable to do? This suggests a principle according to which *may* implies *can*, in which case (5a) must be false.

There is, however, no such principle.[7] The claim that a person may $\varphi$ can be parsed as the claim that it is not the case that a person ought not to $\varphi$. Thus, (5a) is equivalent to:

(5a\*)    For any *S*, *p*: if it is true that *p*, then it is not the case that *S* ought not to

(believe that *p*)

It should not worry us at all that, for some unbelievable proposition, it is not the case

that one ought not to believe it.

Is (5b) open to the objection, facing (3b), that it 'is not normative in any

interesting sense'? Admittedly, if it is true that *p*, nothing follows from (5b)

concerning the normative status of believing that *p*. However, if it is *not* true that *p*, it

follows from (5b) that it is not the case that one may believe that *p*, which is to say

that one ought not to believe that *p*.

B&H might point out that, so understood, (5) does not capture the thought

behind the slogan, 'belief aims at the truth' (cf. B&H 2007: 280). Many put forward

the suggestion that believing is normatively regulated by a standard of truth as a way

of cashing out the aiming metaphor or as motivated by it.[8] It seems, then, that (5) does

not provide what many are after.

Of course, that (5) does not correspond to the suggestive but hazy idea that

belief aims at the truth does not show it to be false. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that

(5) does provide a way of spelling out a closely related intuition, namely that belief

aims to avoid falsity. Indeed, many who talk of belief's aim talk interchangeably of

aiming to believe the truth and of aiming to believe *only* the truth (see, for example,

Millar 2004: 43-4). Evidently, however, these are distinct aims—one would only

achieve the former by believing *everything* true, while one could achieve the latter by

believing *nothing* whatsoever. And to say that belief aims only at the truth—which is

surely preferable at least insofar as that aim is attainable—is another way of saying

that it aims to avoid falsity. So, I contend, (5) does correspond to one way, indeed the

more promising way, in which some construe belief's aim.

Moreover, I venture, one might view the aim of avoiding falsity as reflecting a more fundamental aim of belief, namely that of enabling one to act in such a way as to realize one's goals, an aim which is typically thwarted by false belief.[9] While it is certainly not implausible to suggest that belief has this aim, and while appealing to it provides a promising rationale for (5), adequately exploring this idea is beyond the scope of this discussion. The important point for present purposes is that (5b) is normative in a sufficiently 'interesting sense'.

Since as yet there appears to be no reason to reject the conditional statements that together make up (5), there is as yet no reason to reject it. While at first glance it might seem that (5a) and (5b) face problems analogous to those facing (3a) and (3b), closer inspection reveals appearances to be misleading in this instance.


## 5      Blindspots

B&H might reply that I have so far overlooked the problem that propositions which are logically, rather than psychologically, impossible to believe truly pose (2007: 281). Consider, for example, a 'belief blindspot' such as:[10]

(BS)    It is raining and nobody believes that it is raining

Suppose that (BS) is true. By (5a), one may believe it. But if one were to believe it, (BS) would be false. By (5b), therefore, one may not believe it. But if one were not to believe it, (BS) would be true. And so on.

Granting that the situation envisaged here is genuinely possible,[11] I shall argue that it does not anyway cast doubt on (5). The problem with replacing $p$ as it occurs in the relevant statements with a blindspot is evidently not that a contradiction results. (5a) only says that, when true, one may believe (BS), which is not strictly inconsistent with what (5b) says, namely that, when false, one may not believe (BS). It would be

misleading, then, to characterise the situation as one in which supposedly one simultaneously both may and may not believe (BS).

What exactly is the problem then? Considering an analogous difficulty facing variants of (3), B&H characterise it as follows (2007: 280-1). When faced with a blindspot, it is impossible for a subject to 'satisfy' (3). With respect to (BS), for example, discharging (3a) would require one to believe it but, having done so, discharging (3b) would in turn require one not to believe it. And so on. Since *ought* appears to imply *can satisfy*, B&H conclude that (3) must be false.

In light of these considerations, the phenomenon of blindspots might provide further ammunition against (3). Parallel reasoning does not, however, apply in the case of (5). When faced with (BS), it is easy to satisfy (5), namely by not believing (BS). This is simply a reflection of the fact that, while (5b) imposes a requirement, (5a) does not. Hence, it follows straightforwardly that they cannot each impose requirements that together cannot be discharged. Thus, B&H's diagnosis of the problem blindspots pose for (3), which seems accurate, only serves to suggest that they do not pose a similar problem for (5).

That said, there is admittedly something rather fishy about the notion of a permission which, when acted upon, results in one's doing something one is not permitted to do. While an account that not only explains in what that fishiness consists but does so in a way that casts doubt on the truth of (5) is pending, it is worth considering restricting the domain to which the relevant principle applies.

Accordingly, I shall consider a principle that is restricted to propositions that can be *believed truly*, namely:

(6)     For any *S*, believable truly *p*: *S* may (believe that *p*) if and only if it is true that *p*

Since (BS) and propositions like it are not believable truly, they will not be able to serve as counterexamples to (6). Moreover, it is important to note that the above reformulation does not appear to be especially strained or merely to be a transparently ad hoc attempt to avoid an otherwise fatal objection. Indeed, it is independently plausible that only what is *truly* believable should figure in the conditions on believing laid down by a norm of *truth* putatively governing that attitude.

With respect to this proposal, B&H might complain—as they do concerning an analogous reformulation of (6)—that it is 'too weak, for it tells you absolutely nothing about what you ought to do when faced with these peculiar [blindspot] propositions' (2007: 282). Specifically, (6) 'does not tell you that you ought *not* to believe' (BS) when, 'intuitively, this is precisely the right response'.

Grant, with B&H, that (BS) is actually believable and that, when true, one ought not to believe it. This hardly shows (6) to be false. Indeed, it was specifically formulated so as to be silent with respect to (BS) and its kin. Moreover, (6) continues to provide guidance with respect to believing an indefinitely large number of propositions—all those which can be believed truly—in which case its 'weakness' is relatively slight.

In any event, the claim that believing in general is subject to a norm such as (6) is entirely compatible with the claim that believing is subject, always or on occasion, to supplementary norms, which might provide guidance in cases where (6) does not, and even that the standards those additional norms impose might, in suitable circumstances, trump that which concerns us. It should, then, not be demanded of a candidate norm governing belief that it bear the burden of adjudicating all matters of propriety when it comes to believing. Even though (6) does not, with respect to (BS),

deliver the judgement that one ought not to believe it, there might other norms, with which believing engages, that do so.

Moreover, note that, intuitively, what is wrong with believing (BS) is not simply that, in doing so, one believes falsely. While I cannot attempt a full diagnosis here, believing (BS) involves a kind of incoherence or irrationality, and manifests a seriously alienated relationship to one's beliefs.[12] Since the problem with believing (BS) is not one of, and runs deeper than, mere falsity, it is not a case that one should expect a norm of truth to bear upon. Hence, one cannot reasonably complain of (6) and the like, which concern a quite different dimension along which believing is to be evaluated, that they are impotent with respect to such matters.

Despite the above reassurances, one might worry that the restriction to propositions that can be believed truly, embodied in (6), will not avoid but only postpone the problem that blindspots raise, for the following reason. While (BS) is not believable truly, it is a conjunction, the conjuncts of which individually *are* believable truly, as B&H point out (2007: 283). Suppose, then, that (BS) is true; it follows that each of its conjuncts is true. Thus, given (6), it is the case both that I may (believe that it is raining) and that I may (believe that no one believes that it is raining). It surely follows straightforwardly, then, that I may (believe that it is raining and believe that no one believes that it is raining). If so, and since intuitively it is *not* the case that I may believe this, (6) which seems to suggest otherwise must be false.

This line of attack is not, however, successful. In general, it is not valid to infer, from the fact that I may $\varphi$ and that I may $\psi$, that I may ($\varphi$ and $\psi$). For example, assuming, when at a particular point in a chess game, that I may (move a rook diagonally) and that I may (move a castle horizontally), it does not follow that I may (move a rook diagonally and move a castle horizontally). Likewise, supposing that I

may (hop now on my left foot) and that I may (hop now on my right foot), it does not follow that I may (hop now on my left foot and hop now on my right foot). Again, if Isabel may (marry Caspar) and may (marry Gilbert), it does not follow that Isabel may (marry Caspar and Gilbert). Thus, insofar as the above attempted *reductio* relies on an invalid form of argument, it is not cogent and (6) remains standing.

To summarise, I have suggested that it remains to be shown that blindspots pose a genuine and insurmountable problem for (5). Furthermore, if a convincing case were to be made that demonstrates that they in fact do so, involving a suitable diagnosis of just what the difficulty is, one might rest fully content with (6), which does not seem particularly contrived and is not open to the same problems.

## 6    Rationality

Philosophers often put the thesis that believing is in general governed by a norm of truth, typically understood as involving a commitment to (3), to explanatory work (see, e.g., Railton 1994: 75). Specifically, by appeal to it, they seek to explain (some or all of) the epistemic norms governing belief acquisition. One might wonder if the thesis—as I interpret it—can bear a similar explanatory burden.[13] While a full exploration of this issue would require a lengthy discussion beyond the scope of this paper, I shall suggest reasons for thinking that it can.

David Owens notes that, in addition to being governed by 'standards of correctness', beliefs are subject to other forms of 'normative assessment':

> Beliefs are rational or irrational, justified or unjustified. These too are
> normative assessments—rational belief is good belief, irrational belief is bad
> belief—but they are, to this extent, independent of judgements of correctness:
> a correct belief can be irrational and an incorrect belief can be rational. Call

the basis of this second form of doxastic assessment *epistemic norms* (2003: 283).

Owens continues:

> Many writers have thought that the standard for correctness for belief and the epistemic norms governing the acquisition of belief are connected as follows: the standard of correctness for belief sets a goal and epistemic norms are instructions about how to reach that goal (2003: 283).

It is pretty clear to see how one might invoke principles such as (5) or (6) as part of such an explanatory strategy. According to such principles, if it is false that *p*, then it is not the case that one may believe that *p* (and, by implication, one should not believe that *p*). This, to borrow from Owens, sets a goal, namely the avoidance of falsity, and in light of it one might view epistemic norms as providing instructions about how to reach that goal. For example, one way to avoid falsity would be to abide by the following:

(E1)　For any *S, p*: if *S* has (sufficient) evidence that it is not the case that *p*, *S* may not believe that *p*

(E2)　For any *S, p*: if *S* has (sufficient) evidence that *p*, *S* may believe that *p*

Such principles might form the basis for assessments of believings as rational or irrational.

Of course, and while I am not suggesting that the above are the only epistemic norms one can extract from the relevant thesis, (E1) and (E2) do not exhaust the epistemic norms to which belief is subject. But it would, surely, be too much to expect (5) or (6) alone to carry the entire explanatory load.[14] In any event, it is a virtue of the

norm of truth governing belief interpreted in the way I recommend that it delivers the epistemic norms that it does, since the judgements they facilitate mesh nicely with our intuitions.

Consider, for example, a person who falsely believes that *p* on the basis of good evidence that *p*. While she has an incorrect belief, her arriving at it was rational. Consider now a person who truly believes that *p* on the basis of poor or no evidence that *p*. While she has a correct belief, her arriving at it was irrational. (E1) and (E2) respect these intuitions, and so capture principles central to our conception of the rationality of belief acquisition.

Of course, these remarks point to further issues that require examination. What, for example, counts as 'sufficient' evidence and what determines this? Again, in arriving at an all-things-considered normative assessment, how do we 'weigh up' or otherwise adjudicate the judgements that (5) or (6) might deliver with those that (E1) or (E2) might deliver in cases where these conflict (say, when a person has a correct but irrational belief)? The aim of this section, however, is not to resolve such matters—which any account that recognises both standards of correctness for beliefs and epistemic norms governing their formation faces—but only to show that the formulation of the norm of truth governing believing that I defend above bears on them, and that it (insofar as it) promises to make a contribution to the explanation of the rational constraints on the formation and retention of beliefs.

## 7      Closing remarks

Using B&H's discussion as a backdrop, this paper sought to motivate and defend a neglected version of the norm of truth governing belief, one formulated in terms of the conditions under which one *may* (rather than *ought* to) believe a proposition. A

rationale for understanding it in that way—broached but not fully explored above—is that it is does justice to the thought that believing aims to allow subjects to act so as to realize their goals. Beliefs might best achieve this aim if they were formed in accordance with a norm such as (5).

I have argued that (5) is not open to criticisms analogous to those B&H level against (3). Hence, pending further argument, there is no reason to think that (5) is false. And even if (5) turns out to be vulnerable to an especially forceful objection that appeals to the phenomenon of blindspots, its near relative (6) is not. Moreover, I hope to have shown that whether one opts for (5) or (6), both are closely connected, if not equivalent, to the platitude expressed by (1). In closing, I would like to consider briefly what the above tells us about the natures of the attitude of believing and of truth.

First, grant (as I have argued) that a norm of truth governs believing. Does it follow that *truth* is itself a normative or evaluative notion?[15] No, or at least not immediately. A proposition's being true is *what makes* the attitude of believing it correct; it is the property that a proposition possesses in virtue of which one may believe it. And one can accept that being correct is a normative or evaluative property without accepting that the feature in virtue of which something has the property of being correct is a normative or evaluative one (cf. Rosen 2001: 619-20).

Second, grant that a general norm of truth governs the attitude of believing. From this, does the thesis, which a number of prominent philosophers advance,[16] that *believing* itself is constitutively normative follow? Gideon Rosen is sceptical:

> The indisputable fact that belief is governed by norms is consistent with the
> following picture: The doxastic facts are constituted entirely from non-

normative materials. But once in place, they engage with an independent

body of cognitive norms (2001: 617).


While I allow that acceptance of (5) or (6) does not by itself commit one to the thesis that the attitude of believing is constitutively normative, that it is *part of what it is* for someone to believe that such-and-such that some normative fact obtain, it seems that the truth of (5) or (6) gives some reason to accept the normativity thesis with respect to believing. If it follows immediately and in the absence of additional considerations from the mere fact that a subject has a certain belief that a normative standard of truth is in force and applies to it, and if this does not appear to be a consequence of the nature of truth, it is a very short step to accepting that believing is *by its very nature* subject to such a norm; at the least, it establishes a presumption in favour of the normativity thesis with respect to believing.

Of course, this is hardly conclusive, and it is not intended as such. Typically, those sympathetic to the normativity thesis appeal to further arguments in its support. That said, perhaps the most prominent version of that thesis is understood as committed to (1), normatively interpreted. Hence, to the extent that I have provided a defensible formulation of such an interpretation, I have provided a partial defence of the thesis that implies it.[17]

If the notion of believing is indeed normative, it connects immediately with notions such as rationality and irrationality, as broached above, as well as those of responsibility and agency. In addition, the normativity thesis has important implications for the kinds of resources required for adequately characterising the attitude of believing and so the patterns of explanation, description and prediction in which attributions of that attitude figure. To put it grandly, if somewhat crudely, the

issue bears ultimately on the prospects of accommodating believing within a resolutely naturalistic account of the mind. Investigating these matters is, however, a task for future occasions.

Instead, in closing, I shall address the question that provides the title for this paper: should I believe the truth? If what I have said above is along the right lines the answer is: not necessarily, although I may do so. What I definitely should *not* do is believe the false.

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**Notes**

[*] Thanks to Simon Robertson, various referees and the participants of the 'Truth and Normativity' workshop at the University of Warwick for invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this material. As always, I have not been able to address all of their concerns here, though I hope to do so elsewhere.

[1] It is only fair to note, however, that B&H interpret (1) in the same way as the majority of their opponents.

[2] For defence of the principle that *ought* implies *can*, which for present purposes I shall not question, see Streumer 2003.

[3] For a response to several of B&H's objections, among others, see Engel 2007.

[4] Even if it emerges that playing the piece in that way is *the* (rather than *a*) correct way to do so, it does not follow that one ought to play it in that way but, at best, that one should play it in that way if one is to play it at all. In any case, (1) talks only of the conditions under which the attitude of believing such-and-such is correct, not the conditions under which believing such-and-such is *the* correct attitude to have.

[5] Of course, such statements about what one may or ought to do can, and in many cases should, be understood as *prima facie*.

[6] For the purposes of this paper, 'may' is roughly equivalent to 'is permitted to'. That a person may $\varphi$ is compatible with its being the case that she may not-$\varphi$.

[7] Contra Engel 2002: 133.

[8] See, for example, Boghossian 2003; Engel 2002; Millar 2004; Railton 1994; Shah and Velleman 2005; Wedgwood 2007. For a challenge to the idea that belief's aiming at truth implies a norm of truth governing belief, see Steglich-Petersen 2006. For a challenge to the very idea that belief has an aim, see Owens 2003. I hope to respond to these challenges elsewhere.

[9] Railton notes a connection between accounts of the 'aim' of belief and accounts of belief's 'distinct role, alongside desire, in shaping action' (1994: 74) but does not develop it in the way I do here.

[10] On blindspots, see Sorensen 1988.

[11] Arguably, it is not actually possible really to believe blindspots (see Sorensen 1988: 52-3). Whatever the merits of this view, which I cannot explore here, restricting the relevant norm to propositions that can be believed truly, as in (6) below, respects the suggestion.

[12] For a suggestive and extended discussion of these matters, see Moran 2001.

[13] I am grateful to two anonymous referees for *dialectica* for urging me to address this issue.

[14] (3) certainly does not do so—for example, alone it does not deliver (E1)—but this is rarely viewed as, on its own, constituting a problem with the principle. In any event, the important point is that considerations of explanatory potential do not decide between interpretations of (1) that seek to capture an aim to belief the truth and interpretations of (1), of the sort I recommend, that seek to capture an aim to avoid falsity.

[15] As Engel suggests (2002: ch. 5).

[16] See, for example, Boghossian 2003; Brandom 1994; Engel 2007; Gibbard 2003; Millar 2004; Shah and Velleman 2005; Speaks forthcoming; Wedgwood 2007.

[17] Of course, the normativity thesis with respect to believing faces other objections (see Steglich-Petersen 2007), as does the claim that belief is governed by a norm of truth, constitutively or otherwise (see Glüer and Wikforss 2009: 41ff). I leave tackling such objections for other occasions.