

Belief as Commitment to the Truth

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Introduction¹

To believe a proposition is to regard it as true. This is a helpful starting point in trying to understand the nature of belief, but it doesn't take us very far by itself. To give an account of what belief is from this starting point, we need to investigate in what sense belief involves regarding a proposition as true, such that this distinguishes it from other attitudes.² For example, we might say that to regard some proposition p as true is to have an attitude with the content p , where the nature of the attitude is that it represents p as true. But this still wouldn't distinguish belief from other, similar attitudes that also represent p as true, such as accepting, assuming, or imagining that p . If we are to get anywhere from the idea that to believe p is to regard it as true, we need to be much more specific.

Here is a natural way of distinguishing between believing p , and accepting, assuming, or imagining that p : while each of these attitudes involves representing p as true, only in the case of belief does this representation rise to a *commitment* to the truth of p . My goal in this essay is to develop and defend this approach to understanding the nature of belief. On my account, to believe p is to represent p as true by way of committing to the truth of p . To commit to the truth of p , in the sense I am interested in, is to exercise the normative power to subject one's representation of p as true to a normative standard

¹ Thanks to Aliosha Barranco Lopez, Jonathan Jong, Eric Marcus, Ram Neta, Eric Schwitzgebel, Daniel Wodak, and an anonymous reviewer for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² This is a common point; see, e.g., Velleman (2000) and Shah and Velleman (2005).

of truth. This entails that there is a kind of voluntary activity involved in forming and holding beliefs.

As I'll argue, my account of belief as commitment to the truth can explain a variety of features of belief that separate it from other *regarding-as-true* attitudes. For example, unlike assumptions and imaginings, beliefs are distinctively responsive to evidence. I don't need any evidence that p is true for it to be appropriate for me to use the assumption that p in an argument, or to imagine a world in which p is true. But if I *believe* p , it's standardly thought that I should do so on the basis of good evidence that p is true. On my account, the fact that belief is constituted by a commitment to the truth explains the unique connection between belief and evidence.

The structure of the essay is as follows. I devote §1 to explicating the notion of commitment to the truth operative in my account. In §2, I with the main machinery of my account on the table, I explain how it captures the unique features of belief that distinguish it from other *regarding-as-true* attitudes. In §3, I discuss how the commitment-based account can help us solve three further puzzles about belief, regarding doxastic voluntarism, the aim of belief, and Moore's paradox. I conclude by briefly considering an objection to my approach.

1. Commitment

The idea that belief involves commitment to the truth of a proposition has been endorsed in passing, but rarely explored in any detail. For example, Alston (1996, 24) writes that "in making statements and holding beliefs we commit ourselves to the propositional content's being true." Alston doesn't elaborate on what he means by this, instead relying on an intuitive sense of commitment. But the notion of commitment is

invoked by epistemologists with related but distinct meanings, so I must explain the notion of commitment I take to be operative in belief.

First, I must distinguish the operative notion of commitment from what epistemologists have in mind when they say that holding some attitudes commits us to holding certain other attitudes, whether or not we actually have the latter attitudes. This is the sense Wedgwood (2002) has in mind when he discusses commitment in relation to the aim of belief: believing one thing commits one to believing other things. For example, we might say that believing both p and $p \rightarrow q$ commits one to believing q . According to Wedgwood, what this means is that, given one's beliefs that p and $p \rightarrow q$, it would be irrational for one not to believe q .

Shpall (2014) terms this sense of commitment *rational commitment*. As he helpfully points out when discussing rational commitment:

Such commitments cannot be analyzed purely in terms of the actual attitudes one has... An agent's actual attitudes constitute the ground of his rational commitments—that is, what makes it the case that he has the commitments that he does—but not the commitments themselves. The commitments themselves are normative, in the sense that they put genuine pressure on the committed agent to form the attitude to which he's committed; and this pressure obtains independently of how he thinks about it. Thus rational commitment is, on the face of it, a normative relation. (149)

Though it is a useful notion, rational commitment can't be what is operative in the thought that belief involves commitment to the truth. Talk of what we are rationally committed to picks out facts about structural rationality – for example, what I am rationally required to believe given my other beliefs. While it may follow from the nature of belief that having some beliefs rationally commits one to having other beliefs, these normative facts can't tell us what belief is. Plausibly, what makes me rationally committed to believing q when I believe both p and $p \rightarrow q$ is that I am committed, in some more basic sense, to the truth

of both p and $p \rightarrow q$, from which the truth of q follows. Only this more basic sense of commitment can be operative in an account of what it is to believe.

1.1. Hieronymi on commitment-constituted attitudes

This more basic sense of commitment can be drawn out by considering Hieronymi's (2005) notion of a *commitment-constituted attitude*.³ Hieronymi argues that a range of attitudes are commitment-constituted when there is some question the settling of which amounts to forming that attitude. According to Hieronymi, the sense in which such attitudes are commitment-constituted is that "if one has the attitude, one is answerable to certain questions and criticisms—namely, those questions or criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on the relevant question(s)" (450). And belief is one such commitment-constituted attitude: "if I believe p , then I am committed to p as true, that is, I am answerable to questions and criticisms that would be answered by the considerations that bear on whether p " (450).

This seems right. It does seem like committing to the truth of p results in my being answerable to questions and criticisms related to whether p is the case. But this doesn't tell us what it is to commit to the truth of p . For it seems like committing to the truth of p is precisely what makes answerable in the ways Hieronymi describes. Thus, in order to understand the nature of the commitment that constitutes belief, we must ask: what happens when I believe p , which makes it the case that I am answerable in these ways?

So, while I agree with Hieronymi's picture of belief as a commitment-constituted attitude, I don't think she tells us what it is to commit to the truth of p . Instead, she gives

³ See also Hieronymi (2006, 2008, 2009).

us a helpful characterization of the relevant kind of commitment: it's something that makes one answerable to questions and criticisms related to whether p is the case. But this answerability is itself a normative relation. For the same reasons discussed above in relation to rational commitment, identifying a normative relation grounded in an attitude may shed light on that attitude, but it doesn't tell us what the attitude *is*.

Nevertheless, we've made some progress here. We can now ask the question: what could be going on psychologically when I commit to the truth of p , such that I somehow make it the case that I am answerable to questions and criticisms related to p ? It seems that in committing to the truth of p , I somehow alter the normative landscape. But how?

1.2. Volitional commitment

In taxonomizing commitment, Shpall helpfully distinguishes rational commitment from what he calls *volitional commitment*. His example of a volitional commitment is "Jacky is committed to Joan" (2014, 148). While he doesn't say all that much about volitional commitments, Shpall makes clear that volitional commitments are not normative facts, but psychological items. They are voluntary exercises of agency that alter the normative landscape. To say that Jacky is committed to Joan is to say that Jacky has engaged in some sort of voluntary activity that has altered the normative landscape, among other things making herself answerable to treating Joan in certain ways.

In her work on normative voluntarism, Chang (2013) sheds light on this volitional sense of commitment. In the volitional sense, "commitments are exercises of our *normative powers*, the power to confer reason-giving force on something through an act

of will” (75, emphasis original).⁴ Chang likens this exercise of the will to stipulating the meaning of the word, another exercise of a power to make something the case just by willing it be so. It might also be likened to promising, at least on some conceptions thereof. The important thing is that, for Chang, commitments in the volitional sense are exercises of a power to make something normative the case. This explains how committing to others (like Jacky commits to Joan) alters the normative landscape: our commitments to others are exercises of a normative power to generate special reasons for action that we didn’t have before.

Now, it might be thought that commitment, as Chang describes it, couldn’t possibly be involved in belief, for the will is on the side of the practical, and belief is on the side of the theoretical. Especially given that I want to hold on to the idea that belief is uniquely connected to evidence, it may seem that I’m playing with fire here. But bear with me. While the will is sometimes identified with *practical* reason in particular, I interpret Chang as having something broader in mind here. In characterizing acts of will, Chang describes them as “active attitudes” and as “engaging our volition” (2009, 244-245). There need not be anything essentially practical about the will, so characterized. On the voluntarist conception of commitment, the important thing is that it involves the exercise of normative powers to alter the normative landscape, which is an exercise of agency that is not obviously on the side of the practical or theoretical.

To further bring this out, consider how similar the above description of Jacky’s commitment to Joan is to a commitment to the truth of a proposition. Both cases involve

⁴ See also Chang (2009) and Chang and Tadros (2020).

an exercise of agency that alters the normative landscape, making the agent answerable to certain normative standards. Even if the term ‘will’ is to be reserved for the practical case, the similarities between these cases suggest that there is a broader kind of exercise of agency that covers both practical and theoretical cases of commitment in the operative sense. Indeed, when Hieronymi argues for an identification of the will with practical reason, she recognizes *judgment* as analogous capacity on the theoretical side and writes that “theoretical reasoning involves an activity very much like willing” (2009, 218). Moreover, she cites Descartes as having “something similar in mind, in saying that judgment requires an assent of the will.” So, the idea that belief is volitional in a more general sense is not so far-fetched. Though I recognize that some reserve the term ‘will’ for a narrower sense that is distinctively practical, I’ll continue to invoke the notions of will and volition in a broader sense to describe the kind of exercise of agency I argue is involved in believing.

It is this volitional sense of commitment that explains how it could be that we become answerable in the ways Hieronymi claims we do when we commit to the truth of a proposition. But surely, when I form a belief, such as the belief that it’s 65 degrees Fahrenheit outside, I don’t directly will that I become answerable in all these ways. So, how does committing to the truth involve an exercise of will? The answer is that when I form a belief, I represent p as true by exercising the normative power to subject that very representation to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true.

Think again about what Jacky does when she commits to Joan. In committing to Joan, understood volitionally, she exercises the normative power to subject herself to certain normative standards for how she treats Joan. She thus alters the normative

landscape, bringing into being normative relations, such as those between Joan's interests and her (Jacky's) reasons for action. This is how she becomes answerable to questions and criticisms regarding how she treats Joan. These questions and criticisms concern whether she is living up to the standards she has subjected herself to in committing to Joan.

Again, we can say something strikingly similar about committing to the truth of p . In committing to the truth of p , I exercise the normative power to subject my representation of p as true to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. I thus alter the normative landscape, bringing into being normative relations, such as those between evidence for the truth of p and my reasons for representing p as true. This is the sense of commitment I have in mind when I say that to believe p is to commit to its truth. This isn't the sense of commitment epistemologists usually invoke. Instead, surprisingly, I think it's the very same volitional sense of commitment at play when we talk about things like committed relationships.

1.3. Belief as commitment to the truth

Indeed, one might pithily summarize my account of belief by saying that it characterizes belief as a kind of committed relationship with the truth. On my account, belief consists in a kind of *self-binding*, in roughly the same sense action does on a voluntarist interpretation of Kant. In believing, I give the law to myself, where the law is the normative standard that my belief is correct if and only if it is true. This approach has some things in common with a range of views that epistemologists call *normativism* about belief. But my account is importantly different. Normativists hold that it's constitutive of belief that it's subject to certain norms. For example, Wedgwood (2002, 2007) argues that

it's constitutive of belief that a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true.⁵ For Wedgwood, this normative standard of correctness is just a primitive truth that can't be further explained.

By contrast, I think the normative standard of correctness *can* be explained, and that's precisely what my account does by appealing to our normative power to subject ourselves to such standards. So, I take things a step further than the normativist. The normativist tells us that what makes an attitude a belief is that it is subject to this norm of correctness. But again, while this tells us something important about belief, it doesn't tell us anything about what the psychological state of belief *is* such that it would be this way.⁶ My account discharges this burden and explains *why* a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. It's because what it is to believe is to exercise our agency in a particular way such that we subject our representations to this standard of correctness. The normativist is right that it's constitutive of belief that a belief is correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. But on my account, this is because it's more fundamentally constitutive of belief that it involves subjecting ourselves to this standard.

We now have on the table an answer to the question: in what distinctive sense does the belief that *p* involve regarding *p* as true? The answer is that the belief that *p* involves representing *p* as true by making it the case that that very representation of *p* as true is

⁵ See also Engel (2013, 2018), Nolfi (2015), Shah (2003), and Shah and Velleman (2005).

⁶ One exception is what Barranco Lopez (ms) calls *commitment normativism* about belief. Because she also sees commitment as a kind of self-binding, her account is closer to mine than it is to what she calls *conventional normativism*. But she focuses less than I do on the precise nature of commitment, and more on the norms generated by our commitments. Another similar view, which Barranco Lopez draws on, is found in Neta (2018). Neta gives a general account of *rationaly determinable conditions*, including belief, in terms of commitment. Both he and Barranco Lopez focus on commitment as committing to act, think, and feel in certain ways. While I agree that commitment generates output-side norms, I discuss in §2.1 why conceiving of commitment in these terms is insufficient.

correct if and only if p is true. Shortly, I'll show how this commitment-based account of belief both distinguishes belief from other cognitive attitudes and explains its unique connection to evidence.

But first, an important clarification is in order. I wrote above that on my account, we might see belief as a committed relationship with the truth. It's part of the nature of (volitional) commitments that some are exclusive and others are not. For example, it might be constitutive of a committed friendship that I subject myself to certain normative standards with regard to my friend. This is compatible with my similarly committing to other friends, subjecting myself to similar or identical normative standards with regard to them. The commitment involved in friendship isn't generally understood as exclusive (or at least not very exclusive).

Now, contrast friendship with a monogamous romantic relationship: a monogamous commitment to my spouse *can't* be constituted by an exercise of agency to subject myself to the same normative standards with regard to her as I do with anyone else. The commitment to another person that's constitutive of a monogamous relationship is exclusive; it rules out making the same commitment to anyone else. We should view the commitment to the truth that constitutes belief as similarly exclusive. A commitment to the truth involves subjecting one's representation of p as true to the standard that it is correct if and *only if* p is true. This 'only if' makes the commitment incompatible with subjecting my representation of p as true to other normative standards, such as ones tying its correctness to maximizing utility or advancing my ends.

This is such an important clarification because it shows why the volitional aspect of my account doesn't render it completely absurd. If one could will one's representation

to be subject to other, non-truth-related norms, then belief could be any old thing. But belief is constituted specifically by willing one's representation to be subject to a norm of truth. In other words, belief is not just a committed relationship with the truth, but a monogamous one too. I'll build on this point when I discuss how my account explains the unique relationship between belief and evidence.

2. The Distinctiveness of Belief

As stated before, the challenge for any account of belief that starts from the idea of 'regarding as true' is that there are other attitudes that seem to involve regarding a proposition as true. Accepting, assuming, and imagining are all plausibly characterized as regarding-as-true attitudes in some sense. One way of distinguishing these other regarding-as-true attitudes from belief is to point out that belief involves not just regarding a proposition as true, but regarding it as true based on evidence of its truth.

We might thus try to distinguish belief from other cognitive attitudes in terms of the inputs to belief: what makes a regarding-as-true a *belief*, as opposed to an acceptance, assumption, or imagining, is that it is formed in response to evidence. The problem with this strategy is that it conflates a consequence of the difference between belief and other regarding-as-true attitudes with the difference itself. To understand what about the fundamental nature of belief distinguishes it from these other attitudes, we need to know what in the nature of belief makes it uniquely responsive to evidence. That must be what ultimately distinguishes belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes.

One common way of explaining why belief is uniquely responsive to evidence is to argue that this relationship falls out of the fact that belief has truth as its standard of

correctness.⁷ I will pursue a related strategy. But my explanation goes deeper, because the commitment-based account explains *why* belief is governed by this correctness condition as its fundamental normative standard.⁸ I'll now turn to explaining how the commitment-based account gives us the resources to distinguish belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes, not just by pointing to distinct features of belief, but by pointing to its distinct nature.

2.1. Believing vs. accepting, assuming, or imagining

Accepting, assuming, and imagining that *p* all seem to involve in some way regarding *p* as true. When a lawyer accepts that his client is innocent, he regards that proposition as true, at least in the context of the courtroom. When I assume there are objective moral facts for the purposes of some normative ethical argument, I regard the proposition that there are objective moral facts as true, at least in the context of making that argument. And when I imagine that I have a million dollars, I regard that proposition as true within the bounds of the imaginative episode. But belief is different from all of these other regarding-as-true attitudes.

One conclusion we might draw, following Bratman's (1992) discussion of acceptance in a context, is that the difference between belief and these other regarding-

⁷ Normativists often explain things in this way. This includes at least Engel (2013), Shah (2003), and Shah and Velleman (2005). An alternative normativist strategy is that of Nolfi (2018), who argues that evidence-responsiveness is ultimately explained not by belief's connection to truth, but instead by the role of evidence-responsiveness in guiding action.

⁸ This isn't to say that normativists never try to explain why beliefs are correct if and only if they are true. Shah (2003) and Shah and Velleman (2005) argue that it's because this norm is part of the concept of belief. So, to conceive of one's own attitude as a belief requires subjecting it to this correctness norm. But this is ultimately a thesis about the concept of belief. Even if Shah and Velleman are right about this, I want to know what it is about the attitude belief itself that would give the concept it picks out this feature.

as-true attitudes is that to believe p is to regard p as true independently of any context, whereas all of these other attitudes involve regarding p as true within some restricted context. To accept p , according to Bratman, is to “take it for granted...in the background of one’s deliberation” (2). Acceptance differs from belief partly because “what we reasonably take for granted, in contrast with what we believe, can vary across different contexts and be in part shaped by various practical considerations” (4).⁹ These practical considerations fix the context within which one takes p for granted. For example, practical considerations fix that the lawyer takes his client’s innocence for granted only within the context of the courtroom.

The commitment-based account of belief can complement Bratman’s story by saying something about what belief and acceptance each are that explains why they have these contrasting features. On my view, to believe p is to commit to the truth of p in the particular sense of subjecting one’s representation of p as true to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. As acceptance is commonly characterized, it isn’t plausible that it involves a commitment to the truth of p in this way. This is because I can represent p as true by way of taking it for granted in further reasoning, without subjecting my representation to the standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. The lawyer who accepts that his client is innocent while in the courtroom doesn’t fail to satisfy a normative standard if his client is guilty, precisely because he hasn’t bound his representation of his client as innocent to the normative standard of correctness as truth.

⁹ Certain defenders of pragmatic encroachment may take issue with this claim, arguing that belief too varies across different contexts and is in part shaped by practical considerations. This seems like it would make the distinction between acceptance and belief more difficult to sustain. It would be interesting to explore whether this is so, and whether it poses a problem for proponents of pragmatic encroachment.

Importantly, the volitional conception of commitment to the truth does work here that can't be done by an unspecified conception of commitment. Consider Cohen's characterization of acceptance as "commitment to a policy of premising that p " – that is, relying on p in further reasoning (1989, 368). With an unspecified conception of commitment in mind, one might wonder why this shouldn't count as commitment to the truth of p . When one accepts p , one regards p as true in the sense that one commits to a range of things that seem paradigmatic of treating p as true. Why not think of this as commitment to the truth of p within the context of the acceptance? If we did, this would take us back to distinguishing belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes only on the basis of context-dependence.

Here's how my conception of commitment to the truth avoids this problem. An unspecified conception of commitment might lead us to think of committing to the truth of p as subjecting us only to output-side norms – norms that involve acting, thinking, and feeling *as if* p is true. If commitment only implicated output-side norms, it would be difficult to deny that accepting p also involves committing to the truth of p . The only difference would be that acceptance would involve acting, thinking, and feeling *as if* p is true in more restricted contexts.¹⁰

By contrast, I understand commitment to the truth of p primarily in terms of subjecting oneself to the *input-side* norm of representing p as true if and only if p is true. This is an input-side norm because it regulates how and when we represent p as true,

¹⁰ This is part of why I prefer my conception of commitment to Neta's and Barranco Lopez's (see fn 5). Because they understand commitment primarily in terms of output-side norms that involve acting, thinking, and feeling *as if* p is true, it seems their views would run into this problem.

rather than what happens as a result of our representing p as true.¹¹ Even if belief and acceptance are subject to similar output-side norms, with the only difference being context-dependence, the commitments involved in the two attitudes impose different input-side norms, on my account.

Consider what input-side norm acceptance would be subject to if we plugged my conception of commitment into Cohen's characterization of acceptance. Say that to accept p is to commit to using p as a premise in further reasoning. Interpreted volitionally, to commit to using p as a premise in further reasoning is to exercise the normative power to subject one's representation of p as true to some input-side norm for when it would be correct to use p as a premise in further reasoning. And thinking about any example of acceptance within a context, it becomes clear that that correctness norm is going to be a norm regarding the practical utility of representing p as true in that context, *not* a truth norm. Since we have already established that commitment to the truth of p generates an exclusive input-side truth norm, it follows that the commitment involved in accepting p can't be the same commitment as the one involved in believing p . Thus, my account explains how belief and acceptance are distinct attitudes.

Here's what we have so far. Belief and acceptance each involve regarding a proposition as true, but in very different ways. In the case of belief, one represents p as true by way of willing that one's representation of p as true is correct if and only if p is true. In the case of acceptance, insofar as it involves commitment, one represents p as

¹¹ I borrow the helpful terminology of input- vs. output-side norms from Nolfi (2015). Nolfi also has a helpful discussion of how what she calls *truth-privileging normativism* gives us input-side norms for belief but not output-side ones.

true by way of willing that one's representation of p as true is correct if and only if some practical conditions are met. This dovetails with Bratman's contention that unlike belief, acceptance is directly responsive to practical considerations.

Other regarding-as-true attitudes, like assuming and imagining, can be handled similarly. If I assume the truth of p for the purposes of a proof or argument, I represent p as true within the context of that proof or argument. But do I commit to the truth of p ? No. I don't will that my representation of p as true is correct if and only if p is true. If I did, then anytime I assumed something false for the sake of argument, I would fail to satisfy the relevant normative standard. If in assuming, I will my representation to be bound by any standard, it's some standard involving the fruitfulness of the assumption in advancing the proof or argument in question.¹² This entails that belief and assumption can't be the same thing, for again, they're constituted by different commitments.

Imagining that p is an interesting case, because it isn't clear that imagination has any constitutive normative standards. While I might imagine certain things for certain purposes, I could also just idly imagine different scenarios while letting my mind wander. In such a case, while I might be representing what I imagine as true within the context of the imaginative episode, it doesn't seem like this representation is bound by any normative standards at all. I can simply let my imagination wander. Once again, we have a principled difference between the nature of belief and imagination. While belief is

¹² This is why, when I assume (incorrectly), I make an ass out of you and me.

constituted by a commitment to the truth of a proposition, imagining doesn't seem to be constituted by any commitment.^{13,14}

2.2. *Belief and evidence*

One of the most important ways in which belief is distinct from other regarding-as-true attitudes is that there seems to be a uniquely tight connection between belief and evidence. Intuitively, this connection is both psychological and normative. On the psychological side, it seems like belief is standardly formed in response to considerations the believer takes as evidence. On the normative side, it seems like there's a corresponding evidential norm roughly of the form that the believer should hold a belief only on the basis of sufficient evidence. As alluded to in §2.1, other regarding-as-true attitudes aren't like this. There's no psychological barrier to my accepting, assuming, or imagining that p on the basis of considerations that I take to be irrelevant to its truth. In fact, these attitudes seem to be paradigmatically responsive to practical considerations, broadly construed. Nor have I made any normative mistake if I accept, assume, or imagine on the basis of practical considerations.

¹³ On a related note, we might wonder how the commitment-based account of belief handles 'edge cases' like delusions or implicit biases. Both delusions and implicit biases plausibly involve representations on the part of the agent. However, they will only count as beliefs if they are constituted by a commitment to the truth of a proposition. Whether or not it's plausible to construe delusions and implicit biases in this way will depend on how we understand these phenomena. For example, if we understand them as kinds of recalcitrant representations that are contrary to an agent's commitments, then they won't count as beliefs. Thinking about mental states we might be *alienated* from on my framework raises interesting questions about the possibility of being alienated from our own wills, which I don't have space to address in this essay.

¹⁴ Another attitude distinct from belief that might involve regarding as true is perception, at least on some propositional accounts. My account also provides the resources to distinguish belief from perception, so understood, because perception does not plausibly involve commitment. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I consider this.

The commitment-based account of belief is well-placed to explain the relationship between belief and evidence. First, consider the normative side. On my account, when one believes some proposition p , one subjects one's representation of p as true to the norm that it is correct if and only if p is true. From here, the commitment-based account can give a similar story to the one given by normativists. On a standard normativist account, evidential norms on belief are derivative from the fundamental norm that the belief that p is correct if and only if p is true.

The basic idea is this: evidence for p is, *ipso facto*, evidence for the truth of p . Why? Because evidence is the subjective shadow of objective truth. Given our epistemic limitedness, we can only follow the fundamental truth norm of belief by looking for indicators of truth – pieces of evidence.¹⁵ As Wedgwood puts it, the point of conforming to evidential standards of rational or justified belief is “to ensure that one believes the proposition in question if and only if that proposition is true” (2007, 154). The normative connection between belief and evidence in this way depends on the normative connection between belief and truth.

The commitment-based account of belief explains how the standard of truth for belief is genuinely normative: we make it so by exercising the normative power to subject our representations to this standard. But I haven't said anything about subjecting our representations to any normative standard of sufficient evidence. So how, on my account,

¹⁵ It's far beyond the scope of this essay to give an account of what evidence for a proposition is, besides something that indicates the truth of it. One way of looking at it is that evidence for a proposition probabilifies its truth – the probability of the proposition is higher given that piece of evidence than without it. Whatever the precise relation is, pretty much everyone agrees that evidence for p is a guide to or indicator of the truth of p . So, it's very natural to think of a norm of sufficient evidence as derivative from a norm of truth.

do evidential standards get to be normative? Consider again the analogy between committing to the truth of p and committing to another person. Presumably, if I sincerely commit to another person, I make myself answerable not just to compliance with the normative standard I directly impose on myself, but also to compliance with a range of derivative standards. It would be patently absurd if Jacky were to say to Joan, “well, I committed to you, but I never committed to doing x , y , and z ,” where doing x , y , and z is understood by Jacky to be what it takes to live up to her commitment.

Thus, we can conclude that exercising the normative power to subject oneself to some normative standard also makes one answerable for complying with whatever standards are derivative, in the sense of being necessary for compliance with the fundamental standard. Given our epistemic limitations – i.e., our lack of direct, infallible access to the truth with regard to most beliefs – complying with evidential norms is the only way to attempt to comply with the fundamental truth norm of belief. This is why, though we don’t directly will ourselves to be subject to evidential norms, those standards are still normative for us on my account.¹⁶

Now to the psychological side of the relationship between belief and evidence. As a matter of psychological fact, our beliefs seem to be generally (though imperfectly) responsive to what we take as evidence. Even though this connection is imperfect, it still distinguishes belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes that lack it. But how do we

¹⁶ An interesting implication of this is that if there are beliefs such that it’s *not* constitutive of complying with the truth norm that we comply with the norm of sufficient evidence, we wouldn’t be subject to the latter norm in such cases. This seems to me like the correct result. Indeed, it allows us to account for the tight normative connection between belief and evidence while allowing that certain kinds of beliefs (e.g., basic beliefs) are not subject to evidential norms. This may help deal with Barranco Lopez’s (ms) pressing objection to input-side evidential norms that they can’t apply to hinge-proposition beliefs.

explain this connection? It won't do to merely point to the normative authority of belief's standard of correctness. After all, there are lots of genuine norms we seem to have little trouble self-consciously flouting.

The most obvious answer is that something in the nature of belief must explain why this norm has not just normative but also psychological purchase on us. For Shah and Velleman, it's that the standard of correctness is part of the concept of belief such that "one is forced to apply the standard of correctness...in situations in which one exercises the concept of belief" (2005, 501). Shah (2006) argues that because deliberation about what to believe exercises the concept of belief, it necessarily involves applying the standard of correctness. In asking the question whether to believe p , one recognizes that one's belief is correct if and only if p is true. This in turn "sets the standard for what can count as a reason for or against believing that p " (493). So, insofar as one is answering the question whether to believe p , one must answer it by bringing to bear considerations one takes to be relevant to the truth of p – i.e., evidence.

While I'm sympathetic to Shah's (and Velleman's) approach, I think my account of belief can better explain the psychological side of evidence-responsiveness. For Shah and Velleman, the standard of correctness is part of the *concept* of belief, so it binds our representations only insofar as we deploy the concept of belief. Moreover, even if I deploy the concept of belief and thereby recognize what can and can't count as a reason for believing p , why can't I just flout this requirement? The answer must be that if I flout it, my attitude doesn't count as a belief. But it doesn't seem like anything about the concept of belief could get us that result; at best, it could get us the result that if I flout this requirement, I'm not competent with the concept of belief.

On my account, by contrast, belief's standard of correctness is binding because in believing, one wills it to be so. If I will my mental activity to be bound by a certain standard, I place my agency behind that standard in a way that makes it impossible for me to self-consciously flout it. I might fail to comply with it, just like we might generally fail to live up to our commitments. But insofar as I am committed to the truth of p , it isn't psychologically possible for me to be completely indifferent to what I take as evidence for or against the truth of p . Moreover, insofar as I am deliberating about whether to make this commitment, I similarly must be responsive to what I take as evidence. If I were not, the resulting commitment wouldn't be a sincere commitment to the truth. This gets us exactly what we need: that belief has a tight but imperfect psychological connection to evidence. I can fail to live up to my commitment to the truth by, say, engaging in wishful thinking or other cognitive biases. But I can't, while retaining this commitment, flout it by representing p as true on the basis of considerations I take to be wholly irrelevant to its truth.

The above discussion should also assuage any lingering worries from evidentialists and other epistemic purists that the involvement of the will in my account of belief is a gateway to pragmatism. On the contrary, if believing involves subjecting one's belief-constituting representation to a fundamental truth norm *and thereby* any evidential norms it gives rise to, the commitment-based account of belief seems to push us toward evidentialism over pragmatism. On my account, believing on the basis of considerations I take to be purely practical would be incompatible with my commitment to the truth, so any attitude I formed on that basis would fail to be a belief. This is exactly the kind of tight connection between belief and evidence evidentialists tend to endorse.

Indeed, my account is particularly congenial to arguments by Kelly (2002) and Shah (2006) from the impossibility to believing on the basis of non-evidential considerations to the truth of evidentialism. The basic idea behind this form of argument is that, if it's impossible to believe on the basis of some type of consideration, that consideration can't constitute a normative reason for belief. Since we can only believe on the basis of evidential considerations, only evidential considerations can constitute normative reasons for belief (i.e. evidentialism is true). Insofar as the commitment-based account explains the impossibility premise in such arguments, it provides even more support for evidentialism over pragmatism.¹⁷

3. Three Puzzles about Belief

So far, I have provided a case for the commitment-based account by showing how it distinguishes belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes and explains belief's unique connection to evidence. One of the greatest virtues of the account, I think, is that it shows how all of this falls out of the fundamental nature of belief itself, rather than the concept of belief, or some derivative feature of belief. But it has another significant virtue, which is that it helps solve several puzzles about belief. I'll discuss three such puzzles in this essay: doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology; the aim of belief; and Moore's paradox.

¹⁷ Crucially, though, the commitment-based account only delivers the result that it's impossible to believe *p* on the basis of considerations that one *takes to be* irrelevant to the truth of *p*. This can come apart from what actually is or isn't evidence. Worsnip (2021) argues that because of this gap, the Kelly-Shah argument for evidentialism falls apart. I'm optimistic that it can be salvaged, but I don't have space to argue for that here.

3.1. Doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology

I've claimed that to believe p is to commit oneself to the truth of p , which is to subject one's representation of p as true to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. This means belief involves an exercise of volition, something that much of orthodox epistemology would see as anathema to belief. Many epistemologists would hold that belief is, in contrast to action, paradigmatically non-voluntary. Action and practical reasoning involve the will, but belief and theoretical reasoning cannot. That's why we can't 'believe at will.' As Williams famously argues:

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality. (1973, 148)

As Williams illustrates, the problem with the idea of believing at will is that it would mean being able to decide to believe anything at all, regardless of its connection to truth. And that is incompatible with the very idea of belief.

Doxastic voluntarism is the thesis that agents can form beliefs voluntarily. Because voluntariness is generally understood in the way Williams describes above, doxastic voluntarism is generally thought to be false. This might be seen as a problem for a view like mine, on which belief is voluntary. However, the sense in which belief is voluntary on my account is different from the sense Williams had in mind. On my account, though belief involves volition, one can't believe by willing to acquire a belief. Rather, one's representation of a proposition as true *constitutes* a belief only if the representation is itself constituted by an exercise of the normative power to subject that very representation to the normative standard of truth. Thus, the will in belief involves not a will to believe,

but a will to truth. Far from implying that we can acquire beliefs irrespective of their truth, my account explains why it's impossible to voluntarily acquire a belief in this objectionable sense.

To think of something as voluntary, we need not think of it as something that can be done arbitrarily, or willy-nilly. There are certain kinds of activities that can be voluntary, and yet if we don't do them in a certain way, it doesn't count as an instance of that activity. For example, I doubt anyone would argue that sincere assertions are involuntary. But sincere assertions are like beliefs in precisely the way Williams describes: if I thought I could sincerely assert p regardless of whether I took p to be true, it would be reasonable to question whether sincere assertion was really what I had in mind. The fact that I can only sincerely assert p if I am committed to the truth of p does not suggest that sincerely asserting p is involuntary. Similarly, the fact that I can only believe p if I am committed to the truth of p does not suggest that believing p is involuntary.

But perhaps the problem with doxastic voluntarism isn't really that it allows for 'believing at will.' Perhaps the problem is that it is supposed to allow for believing something irrespective of its truth in the sense of believing on the basis of truth-irrelevant practical reasons. For example, Bennett argues that beliefs are not voluntary because "take ϕ ing to be voluntary if one's ϕ ing depends upon inducements, that is, if one can ϕ or not depending on whether one thinks one has practical reasons to ϕ " (1990, 90).¹⁸ But again, this is not the sense in which belief is voluntary on my account. I mean voluntary

¹⁸ Hieronymi (2006) rejects doxastic voluntarism based on Bennett's understanding of voluntariness but argues that we nonetheless have *evaluative* control over our beliefs. My disagreement with Hieronymi (and Bennett) here is more about how to understand voluntariness than it is the nature of belief. See also Shah (2002) for important commentary on different ways of understanding voluntariness and voluntarism.

in the simple sense of involving volition, understood broadly as the agential power to subject ourselves to normative standards. Bennett's rejection of doxastic voluntarism is based on an identification of volition with practical reason that I have already addressed in §1.2.

Now that I've clarified the sense in which belief is voluntary, I can explain how my account solves the puzzle of doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology. The puzzle stems from an argument originally made by Alston (1988), which goes roughly like this:

1. If our beliefs are subject to deontic evaluation, then doxastic voluntarism is true.
2. Doxastic voluntarism is false.
3. Therefore, our beliefs are not subject to deontic evaluation.

This argument has been taken to generate a puzzle because the conclusion denies something that seems quite plausible. It makes good sense to talk about what we ought or ought not believe, among other forms of deontic evaluation. But each of the two premises is widely accepted by epistemologists. So, something must have gone wrong.

The problem with the argument is that premise 2 is most plausible if we interpret doxastic voluntarism as requiring something like 'believing at will' in the objectionable sense. But if we interpret doxastic voluntarism in that way, then premise 1 is false. It isn't necessary to be able to believe at will for our beliefs to be subject to deontic evaluation. That only seems necessary if we erroneously identify the lack of ability to believe at will with belief's being a merely passive state over which we have no control. Of course, if we have no control over our beliefs, then deontic evaluation seems inappropriate. But as both Shah (2002) and Hieronymi (2006) persuasively argue, despite not believing 'at will,' we

control our beliefs by forming them in response to the right kind of reasons. Moreover, this is the very same kind of control we have over our intentions.

Indeed, Shah argues that it's precisely in this sense that doxastic voluntarism is true, and thus rejects Bennett's narrow conception of voluntariness. I agree, and I think the commitment-based account of belief explains *why* we should think of this kind of control as true voluntariness. I understand voluntariness more broadly as involving the exercise of volition. The sense in which belief is voluntary is that it involves a commitment to the truth that is undertaken voluntarily, but where only *that* commitment could constitute that belief. Thus, if we accept my account, the puzzle of doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology vanishes.

3.2. The aim of belief

It's commonly thought to be a constitutive feature of belief that it aims at truth.¹⁹ But this is a puzzling claim to try to unpack. The first instance I know of a philosopher claiming that "beliefs aim at truth" is Williams (1973, 136-137). Williams writes he has in mind three things by this: (1) that truth is distinctively a dimension of normative assessment for beliefs, (2) that to believe *p* is to believe that *p* is true, and (3) to assert "I believe that *p*" is to claim that *p* is true. But these are three different claims, and "beliefs aim at truth" can't mean all three of them. Indeed, Williams writes further that these three claims are "vaguely summed up" in the slogan that beliefs aim at truth (173). So for Williams, perhaps the slogan is just a vague metaphor.

¹⁹ The arguments in this section build heavily on material from Singh (2022).

Many have taken the idea that belief aims at the truth to be more than just a slogan or metaphor, though. In earlier work, Velleman famously argued that in believing, we literally have the aim of believing the truth: “believing involves regarding a proposition as true with the aim of so regarding it only if it really is. Thus, to believe a proposition is to accept it with the aim of thereby accepting a truth” (2000, 251). For the early Velleman, this is an aim in the teleological sense, one that could be realized by the believer’s executing an intention to accept the truth in regarding a proposition as true. This aim could also be realized more implicitly by some kind of causal regulation of the believer’s cognitive systems for truth, which Velleman argued still counts as attempting to accept the truth.

This broadly teleological conception of the aim of belief has the advantage of making it more than just a vague metaphor. However, it’s been widely rejected, including by Velleman himself, on account of what Shah (2003) calls the *teleologist’s dilemma*. Briefly, the teleologist’s dilemma arises when we try to explain why truth-related considerations play an exclusive role in doxastic deliberation by appealing to the fact that belief aims at the truth. The teleologist must take the aim of belief to consist in belief’s being either weakly or strongly causally regulated for truth. If belief is weakly causally regulated for truth, then it is possible for non-truth-related considerations to play a role in causally regulating our beliefs. So, truth-related considerations would fail to play an exclusive role in doxastic deliberation. If belief is strongly regulated for truth, this yields the result that truth-related considerations play an exclusive role in doxastic deliberation, but at the cost of entailing that wishful thinking and other cognitive biases are impossible.

Partly on this basis, teleologism has largely been rejected in favor of normativism about the aim of belief.²⁰ According to normativists, the idea that belief aims at the truth is ultimately a metaphor after all, for the normativist thesis that belief has the constitutive norm of being correct if and only if the proposition believed is true. As Wedgwood puts it, “Beliefs are not little archers armed with little bows and arrows: they do not literally ‘aim’ at anything” (2002, 267). So, talk of constitutive aims is just an evocative, metaphorical way of invoking constitutive norms.

This way of thinking about the aim of belief renders the ‘aim’ language puzzling, though. Why would we use language that so much suggests we’re talking about something psychological, if the aim of belief really refers to something purely normative? At least for teleologists like the early Velleman, the aim of belief is something about what it is, psychologically speaking, to hold the attitude of belief. To be fair to Shah and the later Velleman, they do connect the aim of belief to psychology, with the arguments I discussed in §2.2 about the correctness norm being a conceptual truth, and the necessity of deploying the concept of belief in doxastic deliberation. But I find this connection unsatisfyingly indirect, for it only goes by way of our application of the concept of belief.

I think the commitment-based account of belief can provide a good middle ground between teleologism and normativism, one that avoids the teleologist’s dilemma while preserving the idea that the aim of belief picks out a psychological fact about the truth-directed nature of the attitude. On my account, the sense in which belief aims at the truth is that one’s representation of a proposition as true is normatively regulated by the

²⁰ See Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005), and Wedgwood (2002).

standard of correctness in virtue of the psychological fact of one's willing that it be so. So, in believing, we direct our representations toward the truth in a very literal sense. This bridges the gap between the teleologist's psychological interpretation and the normativist's normative interpretation of the aim of belief. Thus, the commitment-based account provides a more satisfying explanation of what it means for belief *qua* psychological attitude to aim at the truth.

Moreover, the commitment-based account avoids the teleologist's dilemma because it explains how truth-related considerations play an exclusive role in doxastic deliberation, without entailing that cognitive bias is impossible. Indeed, I have already provided this explanation in §2.2. If my beliefs are influenced by cognitive bias, I fail to fully live up to my commitment to the truth. This is compatible with my retaining that commitment. However, flouting my commitment by representing p as true on the basis of considerations I take to be irrelevant to its truth is not compatible with retaining that commitment, and an attitude formed in this way would not be a belief.

3.3. Moore's Paradox

Our sincere assertions express our beliefs. If I sincerely assert both p and $\sim p$, I'm expressing both a belief that p and a belief that $\sim p$. It's fairly straightforward to explain what seems off about this. In asserting a contradiction, I express two incompatible stances on whether p is true. Moore-paradoxical assertions, by contrast, are of the form " p , but I don't believe p " (omissive) or " p , but I believe $\sim p$ " (commissive). Because it could be true that p , but also true that I don't believe p (or believe $\sim p$), Moore-paradoxical assertions don't seem obviously contradictory in the way asserting both p and $\sim p$ is. The two conjuncts of such assertions appear to express beliefs of different orders: a first-order

belief about whether p is true, and a second-order belief about what I believe about p . Because we can believe falsehoods, and fail to believe truths, what we believe and what is the case can obviously come apart. So why do Moore-paradoxical assertions seem just as absurd as asserting contradictions? That's the paradox.

One type of solution invokes the claim that believe is *self-intimating* – if I believe p , then I believe that I believe p . So, if by asserting p , I express the belief that p , the belief I directly express intimates that I believe that I believe p , then, by asserting the other conjunct “I don't believe that p ,” I express the belief that I don't believe p , thereby contradicting something intimated by the first conjunct. On this way of accounting for the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertions, there is only an indirect contradiction between the conjuncts of the assertion. Thus, whereas asserting p and $\sim p$ would be an instance of a first-order conflict in one's assertion, Moore-paradoxical assertions would be instances of an inter-level conflict created by the self-intimating nature of belief.

The problem with this solution, however, is that this seems to undersell the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertions. Such assertions seem just as absurd as asserting first-order contradictions. What the inter-level conflict solution misses is that, despite not appearing to express contradictory beliefs, Moore-paradoxical assertions do seem to express incompatible stances on whether p is true. But if the inter-level conflict solution is right, what we get instead, through the ascent from the expressed belief that p to the intimated belief that I believe that p , is incompatible stances on whether I *believe* p . I think this gets the nature of Moorean absurdity wrong.

Unlike the inter-level conflict solution, my account of belief provides the resources to explain how Moore-paradoxical assertions could express incompatible stances on

whether p is true. Recall the quotation from Alston earlier that “in making statements and holding beliefs we commit ourselves to the propositional content's being true.” I think Alston is right that assertions too (at least, sincere ones) involve commitments. Here's how that works: the relation between sincere assertion and belief is that, in asserting p , I express the very same commitment to the truth of p that I make in believing p . This is why I can't sincerely assert p without believing p .

Now, take the second conjunct of the Moore-paradoxical assertion. What happens when I assert that I don't believe p ? The surface grammar of the assertion may suggest that I express a second-order belief about what I believe, but this is misleading. Because to believe p just is to be committed to the truth of p , assertions about whether or not I believe p express whether or not I am committed to the truth of p .²¹ So, rather than expressing second-order beliefs, such assertions actually express first-order commitments. This illuminates the solution to Moore's paradox: each conjunct of the Moore-paradoxical assertion expresses incompatible first-order commitments with regard to the truth of p . When one asserts, “ p , but I don't believe p ,” one at once expresses a commitment to the truth of p and a lack thereof. When one asserts, “ p , but I believe $\sim p$,” one at once expresses a commitment to the truth of p and a commitment to the truth of $\sim p$.

Thus, both forms of Moore-paradoxical assertion express incompatible stances on whether p is true – in one case, both commitment and a lack thereof, and in the other,

²¹ This is why, as Williams (1973, 137) writes, “to say ‘I believe that p ’ itself carries, in general, a claim that p is true.” Indeed, Williams explicitly connects this feature of belief to the absurdity of Moore-paradoxical assertions.

opposing commitments. The conflict is wholly first-order. Indeed, on my account, the commissive version of the assertion expresses the same kind of contradiction expressed by asserting both p and $\sim p$. In this way, the commitment-based account provides a superior solution to Moore's paradox, one that makes clear how Moore-paradoxical assertions are just as absurd as asserting contradictions.^{22, 23}

Concluding Remarks

There's much more to say about belief as commitment to the truth than can fit in one essay. But I hope to have at least made a convincing case for the explanatory power of this approach. On my account, to believe p is to represent p as true by committing to the truth of p . I understand the relevant kind of commitment volitionally, as the exercise of the normative power to subject one's representation of p as true to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. I've argued that this account has great explanatory power when it comes to distinguishing belief from other regarding-as-true attitudes, such as acceptance, assumption, and imagination. It also has great explanatory power when it comes to both the psychological and normative aspects of the relationship between belief and evidence. Finally, it provides the resources to solve a variety of puzzles about belief, including doxastic voluntarism and epistemic deontology, the aim of belief, and Moore's paradox.

²² Marcus (2021, ch. 3) defends a similar solution to Moore's paradox, but he doesn't invoke the notion of commitment. On Marcus' account, in uttering "p but I don't believe that p," one simultaneously asserts that p and *disavows* the belief that p. This expresses two incompatible stances on the question whether p: belief and abstention. While I agree with much of what Marcus argues, his solution relies on certain claims about self-knowledge that mine doesn't.

²³ Woods (2018) defends a commitment-based solution to Moore's paradox. However, Woods has a very different sense of commitment in mind from mine. For Woods, commitments are not volitional or even psychological, but rather social facts about what we ought to do given particular systems of formal norms.

Despite all of this, I'm sure there will be strong opposition to my account of belief. The idea that belief involves volition may strike some as just too unorthodox to swallow. But I think it speaks in favor of it that a seemingly heterodox account of belief can account for so many of the features orthodox epistemology takes belief to have. Nevertheless, I wish I had more space to address the many pressing objections to the account developed here. I will conclude by briefly considering just one, which is perhaps the most obvious objection to its psychological plausibility.

I've claimed that each belief that p consists in a representation of p as true that subjects that very representation to the normative standard that it is correct if and only if p is true. We have a lot of beliefs. Isn't this a bit much to claim is going on in our minds when we believe, even on a representationalist framework? Wouldn't this provide an implausibly messy and cluttered picture of our psychology? It depends. The commitment-based account applies most plausibly and straightforwardly to our explicit, avowed beliefs – the ones we've at some point asserted, out loud or in our heads, and really thrown our agency behind. How far the account can be built out from there is a difficult question.

But here's a brief thought about how this might work. Aside from our explicit beliefs, we have lots of implicit, or tacit, beliefs.^{24,25} Representationalists generally hold that only explicit beliefs are stored in the mind. Implicit beliefs are those that are swiftly derivable from our explicit beliefs, but which we've never specifically thought about

²⁴ On this topic, see Harman (1986) and Lycan (1986), among others.

²⁵ Thanks to Andrew Moon for suggesting that I address the subject of implicit/tacit beliefs.

before, like the belief that I'm less than 143 inches tall.²⁶ Does the commitment-based view have anything interesting to say about this, over and above the standard representationalist line?

Perhaps it does. Harman (1986) uses the term "implicit commitments" to refer to things we don't explicitly believe but would be incoherent for us to deny given what we explicitly believe. Though Harman doesn't dwell on the notion of commitment, perhaps if an implicit belief is a belief that would be easily derivable from what we explicitly believe, an implicit commitment is a commitment that would be easily derivable from what we are explicitly committed to, insofar as we live up to those explicit commitments. This would fit with the commitment-based account. Moreover, it might shed light on the relationship between rational commitment and volitional commitment. Perhaps the things we're rationally committed to, like the easily derivable logical consequences of our explicit beliefs, are just the things we're implicitly volitionally committed to, in the sense that we would easily derive volitional commitment to them from our explicit volitional commitments, insofar as we were rational. If this is right, then volitional commitment is more fundamental than rational commitment.

²⁶ For an objection to the standard representationalist line on implicit/tacit beliefs, see Schwitzgebel (this volume).

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