

Research Statement

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My work has tried to address these questions at the intersection of epistemology, the philosophy of mind and language, and ethics:

- What is it about belief, as opposed to other attitudes like desire or admiration, that makes epistemology so much as possible or worthwhile?
- What unifies epistemology, and is there a distinction within it like there is between ethics and decision theory?
- How does work on these other issues constrain what we can or may say to one another?

I'll explain what I mean by these questions, and what my answers to them have been so far. Toward the end I'll describe some projects I'm working on now.

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Belief and the Foundations of Epistemology. From my earliest published paper, [Drucker \(2016\)](#), I have tried to work out what belief is that makes sense of how epistemologists think about it. There, I argued that while there can be rational requirements to believe and to desire, since these are necessary for rational action, there cannot be rational requirements to have other, affective attitudes like anger or hatred. That explains, among other things, why “reflection” principles, roughly to bear an attitude *A* to *o* when you think you will, are plausible (suitably qualified) when *A* is belief or desire but not anger or hatred. In [Drucker \(2019a\)](#), I found a difference between belief and other (I'll say ‘non-doxastic’) attitudes, including desire. It's easiest to see in language:

(1) If I hurt your feelings at the party, I seriously regret that I did.

There I argued on the basis of conditionals like these for a radical kind of externalism about the non-doxastic attitudes, according to which, roughly, first, we can bear our non-doxastic attitudes to objects because they're *F*, when we have no idea that they are *F*; and, second, that we *should* do this. Central to my argument, I interpret conditionals like (1) as ordinary conditionals, susceptible to *modus ponens*. Not everyone has agreed with me about that.¹ Beyond disagreement, I wasn't able to answer a question there to my own satisfaction: why should belief behave so differently from the other attitudes? It's clear that it has to; otherwise, we would be able to believe all truths, and epistemology—conceived of as advice about how to believe well—would be completely useless.

I tried to answer this in [Drucker \(forthcoming\)](#) (and give a more complete semantic theory). To make the problem vivid, consider the “Homeric question” of whether there was one person, Homer, who uniquely wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The answer to it is, I think, unknown, and certainly I don't have enough evidence to rationalize a belief in an answer. Call the proposition

¹ See, e.g., [Blumberg and Holguín \(forthcoming\)](#).

that there was ‘Homerism’, and the proposition that there wasn’t ‘anti-Homerism’, and call the true element of {Homerism, anti-Homerism} ‘*H*’. It seems to me that I know that *H* is true, based on how I defined it, but also that I cannot believe it rationally, since I can’t believe either that there was or wasn’t a Homer rationally. There are different ways of putting this. The following are false, e.g.:

- (2)
 - a. If there was a Homer, I believe there was; but if there wasn’t, then I don’t.
 - b. I believe whichever of {Homerism, anti-Homerism} is true.

Roughly, the object of a person’s belief can’t differ across possible worlds without the person themselves differing (physically) in some way. Strangely, that doesn’t seem to be true of attitudes like hope and admiration. Someone can perfectly appropriately say:

- (3)
 - a. If having children would make me happiest, I hope that I have children; but if it wouldn’t, then I don’t.
 - b. I hope for whichever of having children and not having them would make me happiest.

Here’s a sketch of my explanation of the difference. A structurally similar phenomenon as with belief arises with choice, and I propose a principle, CLARITY, to account for the normative facts there. I then argue that we should conceive of the formation of all the attitudes I’ve considered, belief, hope, and admiration, e.g., as choices. The differences between them that I note arise because the option sets involved in belief-formation are different from those involved in hope and admiration—belief has to be a possibly good answer to a question, which *H* (so specified) cannot be. This idea can also make sense of certain ideas in the relevant alternatives literature. Admiration, on the other hand, can be toward *properties*, e.g., admiring someone’s altruism. The differences in these option sets generates the differences in the phenomena. Epistemology is worthwhile because in forming our beliefs, we can only rationally believe things that answer some questions we have well.



Epistemic Options, Decisions, and Duties. Given that explanation of the possibility, or at least usefulness, of epistemology, you might then wonder what epistemology’s relation to “epistemic decision theory”, by which I mean the project of trying to derive norms of epistemology by appeal to a person’s epistemic values and coherence constraints on those values and how we may pursue them, is. I argue for non-reductionism, but also for the centrality of the concept of epistemic options even for substantive, first-order epistemology.

If epistemic decision theory could derive the intuitive epistemological norms we recognize, it would be an incredibly successful project; it would be like deriving intuitive ethical norms from practical decision theory. But in [Blackwell and Drucker \(2019\)](#), we argue that one of the central “coherence” norms proposed, that the function representing a person’s epistemic values be (strictly) improper—roughly, that it regard a person’s own credences as, in expectation, the ones most likely to get the agent the most of what they want, epistemically—is not really a coherence requirement. Rather, it is a norm of substantive epistemology, and must be argued for one as such. It is in this way like the requirements of consequentialism, as opposed to decision theory itself. We conclude that the reductive project I described can’t work, given how many important derived norms in the research program depend on the requirement of impropriety.

Turning, then, to substantive epistemology, I have also applied the option framework to the question of whether, for example, we epistemically ought to form beliefs using *modus ponens* when we can. Many excellent philosophers have doubted we ought to do this.² Consider:

² See, e.g., [Harman \(1986\)](#) and [Friedman \(2018\)](#).

Mizoguchi and Kurosawa. Helena has a standing belief: anyone who likes Mizoguchi likes Kurosawa. Rushing for a train she overhears someone declare that they like Mizoguchi. But intuitively Helena is never rationally required to form the belief that this stranger likes Kurosawa—she’s just focused on which platform her train is at!

Intuitively, Helena is not required to use *modus ponens* (or universal elimination). So in general, it may seem, there are no rational requirements to employ them—unless, perhaps, we add some qualification like that we care about the conclusion of the potential inference.

Against this, I argue we can get an epistemic requirement out of the inference rule *modus ponens* by restricting its application only to our epistemic options. This falls out of a general and, I think, correct view about *all* (diachronic) rational requirements: they can only tell us to choose to do something that is one of our options (an epistemic option, if the requirement is epistemic). This requires me to say much more about what our epistemic options are. Joining this work up with the work I mentioned above, I argue that a significant subset of our epistemic options will be believing, disbelieving, etc., the alternative propositions we are presented by the questions we have. This conception, combined with a natural view about what it is to have a question as wanting to know the answer to the question, can account for **Mizoguchi and Kurosawa** without being *ad hoc*.

In future work on these issues, I hope to investigate in more detail what, exactly, our options are *in general*; there is some good recent work on this question, but there’s still a lot to be done. And then I would like more specifically to work out in more detail a theory of our epistemic options.

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Finally, I have old and new work on how the normative dynamics of our attitudes constrains what we may appropriately say. In [Drucker \(2019b\)](#), I gave a *general* norm constraining the attitudes we may communicate to one another through speech, including belief but also applying to, e.g., hatred, anger, and amusement. The idea was, one shouldn’t communicate an attitude if there’s a similar attitude one can convey that does better by all the conversational goals. Using this, one can “simulate” norms for the communication of specific attitudes, like of belief (e.g., the knowledge norm), without generating implausible analogues of those norms for attitudes like amusement.

More recently, I’m in the middle of work on *rational persuasion*, the presentation of evidence *e* for some proposition *p* as evidence for *p* in with the aim of getting the interlocutor to believe that *p* at least partly on the basis of *e*. I think there’s a communicative phenomenon similar to [Kripke \(2011\)](#)’s “dogmatism” puzzle, where when someone knows something, they may appropriately conclude any evidence against it is misleading and thereby intend to avoid it. Communicative dogmatism would occur when we know something and give only supporting evidence for it, rather than evidence that causes even some experts to reach a different conclusion. I argue that there’s a similar wrong in both cases, and they ought to be treated similarly. Specifically, I argue that in both cases, our perspectives are limited in ways that makes it irrational to rely on them for everything we may do. The problem is, if we do, we will often forego chances to improve our perspective or the perspectives of our interlocutors. So it’s a good policy *not* to be dogmatic, either in the individual case or when speaking to others. So when we try to persuade our interlocutors of something, we ought to give them all the evidence we have that we know affects the views of experts on the issue.

In my most recent work, I am investigating *conditional speech acts*, roughly speech acts that are performed only if some further condition is met. Most philosophical discussion of the matter has focused on conditional assertion, especially because it has seemed to some to provide an illuminating account of what it is to assert a conditional. But, against this, I will argue that conditional assertion is impossible, even though other conditional speech acts, including conditional commands and questions, *are* possible. The argument will turn on the work I described under the first questions here, of the kinds of belief we can have versus the kinds of desires, admiration, and so on.

References

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