

# RESEARCH CONNECTION

## Epistemic judgment and motivation

By Cameron Boulton, Ph.D., & Sebastian Köhler, Ph.D.



### Why this research is important

While expanding, the field of metaepistemology is still young, and there remain many unanswered questions about the meaning and function of epistemic discourse. Our research has implications for a central question: What sorts of fundamental similarities and differences might there be between moral and epistemic discourses? What does it really mean to say that they are both “normative?” Gaining a better understanding of this is important because it can lead to a better understanding of the meaning and function of normative vocabularies more generally, as well as differences between them.

### How the research was conducted

One standard answer to the question of what it means for moral discourse to be normative, is that moral judgments are in some way deeply connected to our desires, or what we *want* to be the case.

### What you need to know

Metaethics is an area of philosophy that examines the meaning and function of moral vocabulary. For example, can terms such as “right,” “wrong,” “good” and “bad” be used to state truths about the world? Or do we use them to do something more akin to expressing our feelings? Recently, a growing body of research has turned its attention to *metaepistemology*. This research parallels metaethics in that it examines the meaning and function of an area of normative discourse. However, metaepistemology differs in that it focuses on epistemic discourse—on the language that we use to evaluate our intellectual lives, including terms such as “rational,” “wise,” “knowledgeable,” and “reasonable”.

When we judge that we morally ought to do something, typically we tend to feel at least some degree of motivation towards doing that thing (even if this might be overridden by other concerns). We approached our research by investigating whether epistemic judgments might also, somehow, be deeply connected to motivation (to our desires, inclinations). For example, if someone judges that

it is *irrational* to believe that climate change is a hoax, does this imply that they are motivated to do anything in particular? If so, what might that be? Epistemic judgments typically concern our beliefs, or what to think about the world around us. People are not normally capable of believing things about the world around them, simply because they want to. Try it now: If you had the opportunity to win \$1,000 by sincerely believing that Brandon is the capital of Canada, could you do it? These issues intersect in fascinating ways with the question of the potential connection between epistemic judgment and people's motivation. How might we spell out the idea that there is a deep and interesting connection between epistemic judgment and motivation while doing justice to the intuitive idea that people don't normally form beliefs just because they *want* to?

### What the researchers found

Our main finding was that the parallel between the moral and epistemic domains is more complex than is commonly assumed. This is mainly because attempting to spell out a connection between epistemic judgment and motivation presents us with a dilemma. Either we end up implying that people have some sort of voluntary control over their beliefs, or we end up implying that the connection between epistemic judgment and motivation is much more tenuous than it is between moral judgment and motivation. The upshot is that there is still work to do in understanding what makes our epistemic discourse "normative."

### How this research can be used

This research can be used to support and develop further foundational research at the intersection of

the theory of knowledge and metaethics. It can also be used by researchers working at the intersection of philosophy and psychology; for example, it can help connect work being done on the psychology of belief-formation with questions about the meaning and function of normative discourse.

### About the researchers

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### Keywords

Metaethics; metaepistemology; normativity; motivation

### Publication based on this research

Boulte, C., & Köhler, S. (2020). Epistemic judgment and motivation. *The Philosophical Quarterly*, *o(o)*, 1–21. [doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa007](https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqaa007)

### Acknowledgements

Research Connection is a periodical publication intended to provide information about the impact of Brandon University's academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary is supported by the Office of Research Services and by the Centre for Aboriginal and Rural Education Studies, Faculty of Education.

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