

A. The argument: first pass.

1. Here is Vermaire's abstract of his *Nous* paper, "Judgment's Aimless Heart" (*Nous* 2025).

It's often thought that when we reason to new judgments in inference, we aim at believing the truth, and that this aim of ours can explain important psychological and normative features of belief. I reject this picture: the structure of aimed activity shows that inference is not guided by a truth-aim. This finding clears the way for a positive understanding of how epistemic goods feature in our doxastic lives. We can indeed make sense of many of our inquisitive and deliberative activities as undertaken in pursuit of such goods; but the evidence-guided inferences in which those activities culminate will require a different theoretical approach.

And here follows what Vermaire highlights as his core argument.

In inference, at the core of theoretical reason, we find an aimless heart.

My argument for this claim is organized around two premises and a conclusion to be drawn from them:

DOXASTIC CONSTRAINT:

If someone rationally aims, in ϕ -ing, at ψ -ing, then her ϕ -ing is based on a doxastic state that represents ϕ -ing as a means to ψ -ing.

(But he does not insist on this reading, as he explicitly allows readings such as "If someone rationally aims to ψ by ϕ -ing, then her ϕ -ing is based on a doxastic state that represents ϕ -ing as a means to ψ -ing.")

MEANS-END GAP:

When a reasoner infers that p , her inferring it is not based on a doxastic state that represents believing p as a means to believing the truth.

Therefore,

ALETHIC AIMLESSNESS:

When a reasoner infers that p , she does not rationally aim, in inferring it, at believing the truth.

(Alternatively, in keeping with the alternative reading of the first premise above:
When a reasoner infers that p , she does not aim at believing the truth by so
inferring.)

And, he adds: "The argument is valid."

2. But the argument is not formally valid. There is at least one formally valid argument in the neighborhood, which goes like this:

DOXASTIC CONSTRAINT:

If someone rationally aims, in ϕ -ing, at ψ -ing, then her ϕ -ing is based on a doxastic state that represents ϕ -ing as a means to ψ -ing.

REVISED MEANS-END GAP:

When a reasoner infers that p , her inferring it is not based on a doxastic state that represents INFERRING p as a means to believing the truth.

Therefore,

ALETHIC AIMLESSNESS:

When a reasoner infers that p , she does not rationally aim, in inferring it, at believing the truth.

3. And this would show at most the aimless heart of inference, and not yet the aimless heart of belief. But would it show even that much?

When you make an inference you make an argument. But arguments can have either of two main aims, in line with the familiar distinction between validity and soundness. So, in making your argument, in making your inference, in drawing your conclusion, you may be aiming at either or both of these objectives of argument-involving reasoning: *validity* and *soundness*.

If you are in a logic class, you may be aiming at mere validity. In an everyday setting, as you go about your business, you may still very often be aiming just at validity, as you try to figure out the consequences of various options that you may face. But, in none of those cases are you clearly aiming at truth. So, your immediate ends in such reasoning may be just validity, not soundness, and not truth. So, those contexts of reasoning, of inference, do not entail any immediate aim of truth. And such reasoning that you do may include lots of assumptions and lots of reasoning based on such assumptions with no aim at truth in any of the premises, or the lemmas, or even in the conclusion.

4. Nor do those who take belief to aim at truth think otherwise. They are surely aware of the distinction between validity and soundness, and thus aware of the sort of inference that can aim just at validity, and can hence detach from any aim of truth.

Compatibly, however, they can still also recognize how often our reasoning aims not just at validity but also at soundness. And here the aim of truth does seem constitutive of that sort of reasoning.

So, when we argue with the aim of validity, we can also aim not just at validity but also at soundness, in which case we do aim at truth. Constitutively so, since truth is so obviously an essential component of our aim when it is soundness that we are after, not just validity.

So far there is no real conflict between Vermaire and the Aimers.

B. The Doxastic Constraint

1. Here is the Constraint in an allowed alternative reading:

If someone rationally aims to ψ by ϕ -ing, then her ϕ -ing is based on a doxastic state that represents ϕ -ing as a means to ψ -ing.

Now, *quoting from the paper*, here is the presentation of the two key notions in the critique of "Aiming" normativity of judgment:

Judgment

Judgment is an occurrent affirmation with a distinctive, belief-like commitment to the truth of what's affirmed, which often amounts to the formation of a belief (or perhaps to belief itself in its occurrent form).

Inference

From here on out, when I speak simply of "inference," I mean to refer to the personal-level, belief-forming inferential judgments picked out just above.

So, with *inference*, we are abstracting from what "often" happens, so as to focus on the nature of inference itself. And so this turns out to *include* the formation of a belief. The upshot is that inference is defined as a sort of judgment, as an occurrent affirmation that is belief-forming.

2. Aha! So, *that* seems why he moved so easily between *judgment* and *inference* in his formulation of his central organizing argument above. But that is at best an optional conception of "inference." My own impression is that more usually inference is associated not with judgment but with argument, with a move from certain premises to a given conclusion. Thus, suppose we occurrently wonder whether q , and we recall that p and also that if p then q , so that we can now occurrently reason: "Well, p and if p then q , so q ." We did not need to reason our way to either $\langle p \rangle$ or $\langle \text{if } p \text{ then } q \rangle$, since we had long firmly believed those two things. We now *affirmed* those contents publicly or *represented* accordingly in the privacy of our minds). When we drew those things from our body of beliefs, we were not inferring to them. We were not *acquiring* those beliefs. Rather we were just affirming or representing in accordance with what we already believed. The inference was then constituted by the basing of the new affirmation, that q , on those two

affirmations (or representations) in line with the two beliefs that were already lodged in our minds. And these occurrent affirmations (of particular sorts) surely need some recognition in our epistemic psychology. Usually, I believe, they are recognized as *judgments*, but not by Vermaire, since he reserves the term 'judgment' for inferential *coming to believe*.

3. Well, how should we (in Vermaire's framework) think of an instance of coming to believe q through an occurrent argument in the mind of a thinker who so argues from $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle \text{if } p \text{ then } q \rangle$ to $\langle q \rangle$. What are the *premise-containings* that we move from on that occasion to the *conclusion-containing*. The premise containings are *not* for him judgments, nor are they just affirmations. I think I see what they are for him: they are "occurrent beliefs." They are presumably then episodic acts, affirmations presumably. But they are not just affirmations, since guesses are affirmations. Well, they are then presumably affirmation tokens of types that have a certain functional profile.

3. Then, next we can distinguish between valid inferences (or arguments) and sound inferences (or arguments). But here it remains plausible to distinguish inferences and arguments that *do* aim at truth (the ones that aim at soundness, not just validity), on one hand, as opposed to inferences and arguments that *don't* aim at truth (the ones that aim just at validity, not soundness).

So, the argument for the aimlessness of judgment is really an argument for the aimlessness of a certain *distinctive sort of immediate inference*, which amounts to a certain sort of formation of belief.

That, however, is irrelevant to whether judgment aims at truth, if *judgment* is conceived as simply *an affirmation of a certain sort*, but not necessarily one that is *belief-forming*, nor any kind of inference, of *motion from premises to a conclusion*, whether it be a mediate or an immediate inference.

C. How we might cut through to the heart of the matter, perhaps beyond merely verbal disagreements.

Here's a try, anyhow, and let's see how persuasive it may be.

1. Here again is the Doxastic Constraint:

If someone rationally aims to ψ by ϕ -ing, then her ϕ -ing is based on a doxastic state that represents ϕ -ing as a means to ψ -ing.

Is it not plausible, however, that a trapper might be asleep in their cabin as the trap door shuts and traps a fox inside? And might it not be that this fox is one that the trapper was trying to capture: namely, the fox that has been wreaking havoc among the farmers who hired him to do the job. Make whatever suppositions may be required to make it highly plausible that there is just one fox in that highly remote area. So, that's the fox that the trapper aimed to capture, and he aimed to do so through the operation of his trap together with his wily lures designed to lure foxes and never any other critters that roam in that vicinity. So, that night as the trap door shuts on the doomed animal, how plausible is the following assessment?

When he goes to bed in his cabin that night, Trapper is rationally aiming to *capture that fox by trapping it*.

Moreover when the trap door slams shut with the fox inside, just as he planned and intended, then Trapper rationally aimed to trap that fox in the specific way he did so, with a specific sort of lure and a specific sort of trap with a distinctive mechanism. So, it also seems right to say at that moment, with the trapper asleep and the trap door slamming shut:

What happens at a certain moment while Trapper is fast asleep is that the fox enters the trap lured by Trapper's lure, and this thing that happens is just as Trapper intended all along. He intended the lure to lure the fox into the trap as the trap door slammed shut, thus capturing the fox inside. That's what he still intended to happen as he slept soundly, even at the moment when it happened. At that moment he intended it to happen and at that moment it did happen.

True, he did not intend it "to happen *at that moment*," not by ostension of the moment. (Though it might still be found plausible that he did pick out that moment by description. But we need not go into those thickets of reference by definite description versus reference by acquaintance.)

2. And that is how I suggest that we can helpfully view our perceptual systems. They are trappers of truths, dedicated trappers of truth of pertinent sorts: our visual systems of visual facts, our auditory systems of aural facts, etc. They are trappers of objective seemings of corresponding sorts: whether visual, or q, etc. And then we can bring to bear our background knowledge of our pertinent degrees of reliability so as to come to affirm alethically reliably enough, with competence of sufficient quality, and to acquire relevant sorts of knowledge that way while avoiding a mere thermometer sort of knowledge, such as the knowledge of conceivable chicken sexers or blindsighters.

D. Probable response by Vermaire?

1. Any such trapping is not the sort of judgment of interest to him. The focus of such trapping lies below our conscious deliberative thought. It turns instead to evolutionary teleological truth-trapping systems, which Vermaire explicitly rules out, as of little or no interest for his project. As responsible, rational thinkers, we have a special interest in what views we can attain by conscious, deliberative thought. So, we aim to understand epistemic attainments above the level of mere animal, functional, teleological success.

2. If we too are interested in the heart of that matter, where we are supposed to find the aimless heart of what we really care about, we should

join for a close look at that special case, that of conscious, deliberative, rational thought

Well, as we peer into that heart of darkness, I think that in fact *we do find unavoidable and consequential trapping*.

Thus, let us focus on a paradigm case of our exercise of conscious, deliberative rationality, as we consider an instance of deductive modus ponens.

Say you are interested in a question *whether q*. And suppose it serendipitously "strikes you" as you ponder, first *that if p then q*, and soon thereafter *that p*. And so, you must be led to reason inferentially as follows:

p
If p then q
Therefore, q

Consider that array. Is it supposed to be spread out in time, so that there is a time apiece for each component? Well, even if there are three such times, at the last time, the conclusion time, you must still have in mind the respective contents of the earlier two times: namely, *that p*, and *that if p then q*.

Moreover, for the immediate inference to work, you must put it all together into one unitary thought. So, your immediate inference must really take the form of assent to a single unitary content:

II <Since p and if p then q, therefore q.>

So, your "move" from <p, and if p then q> to <q> is not a *move across time* at all. Talk of a "move" here is metaphorical, since the immediate inference must really be a single thought that binds the conclusion to the premises in a single logical thought.

Two questions are raised by that conception of immediate inference.

a. We still need to end up somehow with the detached <q> all by itself. So, is that too a logical inference that does go across time? Or should we rather say that here when you apparently "move" across time to <q> you are really moving to <<Since p and if p then q, therefore q>, therefore q>? Regress threatens here, so that we will never end up with a detached <q> all by itself.

b. Regardless of the worry just brought up by question a, for a proper immediate inference as above (a modus ponens one) don't we need the thinker to just "see" the modal, inferential fact itself, directly, with no need for any further inference from further premises? (Shades of

Achilles and the Tortoise.) If so, how do we understand the thinker's grasp of the II (Immediate Inference) content above? Don't we here again have need of mental trapping, where "grasp" of a modal fact is attained with no benefit of guidance by evidence that is logically and evidentially prior.

Plausibly, then, the most simple modus ponens inferences of belief formation are prime examples of logical, consciously deliberative belief formation that do not require any "decision-making based on guidance that is logically and evidentially prior." They can be understood on the model of trapping, where no consciously deliberative, in-the-moment guidance by logically and evidentially prior considerations is in order.