

Responding to Skepticism About Doxastic Agency

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Abstract My main aim is to argue that most conceptions of doxastic agency do not respond to the skeptic’s challenge. I begin by considering some reasons for thinking that we are not doxastic agents. I then turn to a discussion of those who try to make sense of doxastic agency by appeal to belief’s reasons-responsive nature. What they end up calling agency is not robust enough to satisfy the challenge posed by the skeptics. To satisfy the skeptic, one needs to make sense of the possibility of believing for nonevidential reasons. While this has been seen as an untenable view for both skeptics and anti-skeptics, I conclude by suggesting it is a position that has been too hastily dismissed.

1 Introduction

In what sense or to what extent is agency exercised in the doxastic realm? Some argue that the kind of control we have over beliefs is sufficient for doxastic agency, while others argue that the nature of beliefs precludes agency being exercised in what we believe. But getting clear on the nature of these disagreements is difficult because the disputants do not always share a common notion of what is required for agency in general, and doxastic agency in particular. A skeptic about doxastic agency may agree with everything an anti-skeptic says but insist that none of what is proposed counts as *real* agency. My main aim in this paper is to clearly lay out the dialectic as it stands and argue that most conceptions of doxastic agency do not respond to the skeptic’s challenge. Of course, one way to address a skeptic is to argue that the demands are unfair, or incoherent, and so do not need a response but,

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instead, a dissolution. This may indeed be what some proponents of doxastic agency view as the proper way to address the skeptic.

I will begin by considering some of the main reasons for thinking that we are not doxastic agents. I will then turn to a discussion of those who try to make sense of doxastic agency by appeal to belief's reasons-responsive nature. What they end up calling agency is not robust enough to satisfy the challenge posed by the skeptics. To satisfy the skeptic, one needs to make sense of the possibility of believing for non-evidential reasons. While this has been seen as an untenable view for both skeptics and anti-skeptics, I will conclude by arguing it is a position that has been too hastily dismissed. I am not here providing a full defense of this view but, rather, will argue that the arguments *against* the possibility which are often taken to be decisive are not. Further, the view that only evidential reasons can be reasons for which one believes rests on some assumptions that can be, but rarely are, questioned.

2 Sources of Skepticism

Why think that we do not exercise agency in believing what we believe? Many theorists argue that our inability to believe “at will,” or to *decide* to believe the way we can decide to perform many actions, shows that, whatever kind of control we have over beliefs, it is not the kind required for us to exercise agency in believing.¹

The idea that the very nature of belief precludes that we exercise agency in our beliefs begins with Bernard Williams's discussion in “Deciding to Believe” (1973), but has been expanded and elaborated in many ways more recently. We cannot choose what is true and if beliefs, in some sense, are *conceptually tied* to truth, then this shows why we cannot choose what to believe. If, as some hold, we only are in state of full belief when we take ourselves to have sufficient evidence for the belief, there is no room for agency. One is compelled by the evidence; one cannot do anything *but* believe when one views the evidence in a certain light. And it is this passive, involuntary nature of belief, according to his view, that undermines the legitimacy of attributions of responsibility and agency. This is the view argued for by Adler (2002) and Levy (2007), among others.

One common way of making sense of Williams's idea that beliefs “aim at truth,” and which further supports the view that the nature of belief precludes doxastic agency, is to argue that beliefs are governed by, and only by, truth-related norms. “Normativism” about belief has become very widespread; on this view it is built

¹ Skepticism is sometimes expressed about whether one can exercise agency *in believing* and sometimes about whether agency can be exercised in forming, maintaining, or abandoning, beliefs. Often, the target of the skepticism is not clearly delineated, and it what follows, depending on the particular view I am discussing, the two positions—which can come apart—will be largely treated as one view. The first way of expressing the skeptical view better captures the spirit of the concern, which is essentially a concern about the nature of belief. The idea is that if in believing I am not *doing* anything, it cannot be appropriate to say that I am exercising agency. Most will admit that I can *do* many things that predictably result in believing, but that the actual “forming” of a belief which results from, either automatic mechanisms, or deliberation and judgment is not something that I *do*. For a clear and useful discussion of how these positions can come apart see Chrisman (2016, p. 10).

into what it is to be a belief (as opposed to some other sort of mental attitude) that beliefs are subject to certain norms, and, while there is some disagreement of how to characterize these constitutive norms, it is agreed that they are alethic, or epistemic.² Further, on this view, the only reasons for believing must be reasons that relate to the truth. What might get me to refrain from acting a certain way or deciding to act in a particular way are reasons related to the goodness or badness of the act. If someone points out that a particular act might hurt someone's feelings, that is a reason to refrain from the action and one to which I can respond. Reasons like this are often called practical reasons. What might get me to change a belief, however, are usually thought of as reasons related to the truth of the belief. If I believe that Pluto is a planet and then you show me a number of recent articles by respected scientists who say it is not, these are reasons for me to alter my doxastic attitude regarding this proposition. Reasons like this are often called evidential or epistemic reasons. Again, it is argued that this asymmetry between reasons for beliefs and reasons for actions precludes doxastic agency. I can *act* for whatever reasons I choose; the reasons are *my* reasons. But the evidence controls what we believe, not us. In what follows, I will tend to use the term "non-evidential reason" to refer to those considerations that are not directly truth-related. Further, following Shah, I will use the term "evidentialism" to refer to the view that there are only evidential reasons for beliefs and "pragmatism" to refer to the view that allows for the possibility of non-evidential reasons for belief.³

Another reason that the nature of belief is taken to exclude the possibility of doxastic agency has to do with its metaphysical classification; it is a state and, according to many, states are not the kinds of things over which it even makes sense to say we exercise agential control. In arguing against doxastic voluntarism, Robert Audi enumerates several reasons why beliefs are not actions. Actions are events, he says, "in the ordinary sense in which the occurrence of an event entails that of a change. Beliefs are not events...To believe is not to do something or change anything...Beliefs then are not actions." (Audi 2001, p. 105) We have control and can be held responsible, he says, for many events leading to belief formation but once the belief is formed, its static nature precludes the possibility of agency.

Matthew Chrisman and Kieran Setiya both ground their scepticism about doxastic agency in the fact that belief is static rather than dynamic. One of the main reasons for Chrisman's conclusion that believers cannot exercise their agency in believing is that such a view requires us either to deny that a belief is a state or to make sense of a state being active. If states are defined as static, in contrast to events and occurrences that are dynamic, the idea of an "active state" seems very confused, relying, as Chrisman says, on a "category mistake."

² For a helpful recent discussion of normativism about belief see Nolfi (2015). Among those Nolfi cites as endorsing normativism (a number of whom I will be discussing here) are Jonathan Adler, Allan Gibbard, Peter Graham, Peter Railton, Nishi Shah, Ernest Sosa and Ralph Wedgwood. Leary (2016) argues that the strategy of appealing to the constitutive standards of correctness of belief to rule out non-evidential reasons for beliefs fails.

³ He defines evidentialism as the view that "only evidence can be a reason for belief" and the pragmatist is one "committed to the existence of at least some non-evidential reasons for belief" (Shah 2006, p. 482).

Similarly Setiya considers what might be meant by “active belief” and concludes that no sense can be made of such an idea that allows for a non-deflationary view of doxastic agency. Unlike Audi, Setiya does not begin by contrasting “states” with “acts” because he realizes that “acts” can be used more broadly or more narrowly than what is being picked out by the category which is being contrasted with “state,” namely the category of “what can be done in the perfective sense,” that is things we can describe as being completed. Because Setiya finds most nouns used to pick out what is in this category misleading, he instead used the adjectives “static” and “dynamic” to mark the contrast: “Shaking, buying and starting are dynamic; being red, owning something and knowing that p are static.” Once this distinction is made, it is clear that believing belongs on the static side: “to say that someone believed that p is not to report a completed act or event of believing, but a standing condition” (Setiya 2013, p. 181).

Setiya does not deny that one can believe for reasons, but this would just be to elaborate on the nature of the state; we often believe something on the grounds of our believing something else but “both believing and believing for a reason are states or conditions. They are static, not dynamic” (Setiya 2013, p. 182). If all that is meant by a belief being active is that one can believe things for reasons, then Setiya has no objections, but he views this as a deflationary reading and assumes that proponents of doxastic agency mean more than this when they claim believing is an activity. His challenge to the advocates of epistemic agency is to offer an account that “goes beyond the fact that we believe things for reasons, and the fact that we form and revise beliefs.” He finds all the interpretations that go beyond these modest conceptions to be “confused, mistaken or difficult to make out” (Setiya 2013, p. 179).

While the various skeptical arguments differ in their emphases, they all point to asymmetries between beliefs and actions and argue that given that beliefs fail to exhibit some essential features of actions, whatever kind of control we have over them in not of the agential kind. We know, then, that to satisfy the skeptic, one needs to either deny the asymmetry or argue that these asymmetries do not preclude doxastic agency.

3 Reasons-Responsive Accounts of Doxastic Agency

A problem with denying doxastic agency is that agency is often thought to be essential to responsibility. In fact, many accounts of doxastic agency are motivated by the idea that such an account is needed to make sense of our attributions of responsibility in the doxastic realm. And many who deny the possibility of such agency also deny that holding attitudes, such as praise or reproach, which imply we are responsible for what we believe, is inappropriate.⁴ One possibility then is that it

⁴ Levy (2007) is most clearly committed to this view. He says “our lack of control over belief typically excuses responsibility for them” and most of our actual attributions of doxastic responsibility are false. Adler thinks that it is “deeply misleading” to apply deontological language to beliefs. When he says “one ought to believe that p only if one has adequate reasons that p ” this “ought” is not pointing to a duty or a direction. Because Adler argues it is conceptually impossible to believe without taking yourself to have

is a mistake to praise or reproach people for the beliefs they hold or view them as responsible. If this were the case then our attributions of responsibility in the doxastic realm, which are common, would all be mistaken or meaningless. Many theorists, however, do not want to accept the view that there is such widespread confusion when it comes to common views about beliefs. If one thinks we can be responsible for our beliefs, and agrees that we cannot control our beliefs as we can our actions, one must develop a conception of responsibility that does not entail this kind of control. And such conceptions are abundant. While they differ in the details, one of the key ideas in many of these accounts is the notion of reasons-responsiveness. The suggestion is that when trying to find what is essential to agency, this is the place to look. I am not responsible for my eye color or heart beating because these cannot be altered in response to reasons. Both actions and beliefs, however, are reasons-responsive.⁵

Conor McHugh brings up a problem with many of the accounts of doxastic freedom, or agency. He says: “they propose criteria for doxastic freedom quite different to the criteria for freedom of action, without showing that what they are giving an account of is really a kind of freedom” (McHugh 2011, p. 11). He thinks he avoids this problem by unifying them via reasons-responsiveness. While he thinks doxastic freedom is exercised differently from freedom of action he says that these species of freedom are of the same genus: “The more general condition on freedom, that covers the various species of freedom I have discussed, in a condition of reasons-responsiveness” (McHugh 2011, p. 31).

What must be noted in all these accounts, including McHugh’s, is that, even though they take it that beliefs and actions are both responsive to reasons, the *kind* of reasons to which they are responsive are very different; beliefs are only responsive to reasons that are truth-related. And so the question of disunity re-emerges; the skeptics all point to differences between beliefs and actions and argue that these differences preclude doxastic agency. And, remember, one of the differences pointed to is the different kind of reasons one has for belief and for action. And these reasons-responsive conceptions of doxastic agency agree. But then it seems that McHugh’s worry still stands; doxastic responsibility would be a different *kind* of responsibility than the kind we attribute to actions. The kind of failure that leads to reproach in one realm would be crucially different from the kind of failure that leads to reproach in action.

In Setiya’s discussion of Matthew Boyle’s account of doxastic agency, one which is in the family of these reasons-responsive accounts I have been considering, he

Footnote 4 continued

adequate reasons for your belief the “ought” is taken as more of a “must” and thus “when I recognize that the evidence establishes (fails to establish) that p, it makes no strict sense to say I ought (or that it is not the case that I ought) to believe p” (Adler 2002, p. 51). Thus when we use this kind of language we are either saying something false or meaningless. Others who argue that the nature of belief precludes a robust form of doxastic agency offer some way of understanding our normative assessments. This is the case with Chrisman, for example, whose view I will discuss further below.

⁵ This kind of view of doxastic agency is found, for example, in Steup (2008), Hieronymi (2008), and McHugh 2011. I have argued for a view of doxastic agency that shares much in common with these views (2011, 2015).

brings up a similar worry. Boyle's view, like McHugh's, is that there is a genus of agency of which "being occurrently up to something is not the only species of the genus." Acting for a reason, in a sense that goes beyond that consideration simply causing the action and believing for a reason that goes beyond the notion that one belief causally sustains the other, Boyle argues, are pointing to two species of rational agency. As Setiya puts it: "In believing for reasons, we would relate to our beliefs in the same way we relate to our intentional actions: by a species of rational causation" (Setiya 2013, p. 190). If a case could be made that these were two species of same genus then Setiya would have the non-deflationary version of epistemic agency he was seeking. But he concludes that this analogy is flawed and the appearance of unity superficial. He criticizes this proposal on several grounds, but I want to draw attention to one of his points, namely that the nature of the reasons for believing differ from the nature of reasons for acting, and because they do, there is not unity in our believing and acting for reasons. If one believes p on some grounds, according to Setiya, one must view these grounds as evidence for p . But one can *act* on some grounds p without seeing p as a reason for so acting. The state of believing for a reason, he says, can reduce to a conjunction of two beliefs, namely the belief that p and the belief that q is evidence for p , but there is more to acting for a reason than a conjunction of action and belief: "There is a further causality involved here, whatever its nature" (Setiya 2013, p. 193).⁶

Many who argue against doxastic agency allow that the kind of activity appealed to in these reasons-responsive views is present, but say these conceptions do not include what is essential to agency. Engaging in inquiry, instruction, making judgments, forming hypotheses and making conjectures, all involve activity. But none of these, it is argued, show that we are autonomous in believing in a way close enough to the way we are autonomous in acting to justify claims to agency. For example, Chrisman concedes that the reasons-responsive view can offer a way to distinguish beliefs that are free in a sense from those that are not. He says that we should grant that the "notion of responsiveness to reasons provides us with a way to distinguish between two significant classes of doxastic attitudes—"free" and "unfree,"" but that this is not enough to show that the kind of agency in question is present for "although they are free from irrational influence, 'free' doxastic attitudes are not things over which we exercise direct voluntary control." (Chrisman 2008, p. 353) In a recent discussion, Pascal Engel says the following: "I actually accept that there are mental actions, and that a number of activities currently classified as epistemic or cognitive do not fall on the purely passive side of the mind. But I want

⁶ In trying to articulate what it means for a belief to be *based* on a reason, many would deny that this relationship could be reduced to this conjunction. One may hold both these beliefs, but unless the appropriate causal relationship exists between them one will not be based on the other, or, as Boyle puts it, one will not hold the first belief *for* the reason that one believes the second. How to capture the nature of the *appropriate* relationship is difficult and controversial, as it is in the case of intentional action. In a recent discussion, Ernest Sosa argues that one can find this same type of problem about how to offer content to the idea of "in the right way" emerging for theories of action and perception. What is "the right way" for an intention to be related to the intended act for it to count as a case of acting intentionally? What is "the right way" for a subject to relate to an object to count as a case of *perceiving* the object? (2015, p. 27). I will return to this question about the basing relation when thinking about whether one can believe *for* a non-evidential reason.

to deny that in so far as agency involves acting for a reason, there can be epistemic agency.” (Engel 2013, p. 159) And, as we have seen, Setiya does not think his skepticism “conflicts with the existence of dynamic relations to belief” or that “our intentional actions affect our beliefs in various ways” (Setiya 2013, p. 183).

What then is needed for a conception of agency robust enough that it meets the challenge of those arguing against its existence, where it is not an option to respond that what is being suggested is not *really* agency? What would clearly meet the challenge is a conception that makes sense of the possibility of having voluntary control over belief. And what is required for voluntary control? This is a controversial and complex issue and I can’t here get into details of various characterizations, but a few central ideas emerge from the skeptical arguments canvassed above concerning belief’s passive nature. The first idea centers on the notion of decision; that if something is under one’s voluntary control, one must be able to decide to it. I can raise my arm whenever I decide to (absent external force keeping it down) whatever my reason for willing my arm raised; in such a situation I effectively decide to raise my arm because I succeed in executing my decision.

Even if one cannot directly decide to believe, I do not think this denial needs to equate to denying the possibility of believing at will. What exactly is meant by “the will” and what does it mean to be able to act or believe “at will”? Again, just as characterizations of the voluntariness vary, so do views of what constitutes a person’s will. Historically, it was viewed as a mental faculty with a particular function, namely that of choice. Possessing such a faculty was thought to be what allowed a person to act in a way that accords with his own determinations and reasons (barring physical limitations).

While we don’t now generally think of “the will” as a kind of mental faculty with a particular function, we still employ the language of “will” quite often, both in everyday and in philosophical discourse. Thinking about some of these common expressions can help us begin to develop a conception of what it might mean for a state to be subject to the will. We call some people strong-willed and others weak-willed. Someone who has trouble keeping her actions in line with what she thinks, all things considered, she ought to do, is weak willed. One who can resist temptation and act as she thinks best, even when it is difficult, has a strong will. Sometimes we may say (usually of a child) that she is “strong willed” to mean something like stubborn or headstrong. But even in this case, the child knows what she wants, what she thinks is best and does not want her actions to deviate from these determinations.

Frankfurt identifies the will with the desire that is effective, that leads all the way to action. On such a view an action done “at will” is one that accords with what one most (perhaps all things considers) wants to do.⁷ On Pamela Hieronymi’s view I can do something “at will” if I can do it intentionally, that is do it for *any* reason I take to bear sufficiently on it.

⁷ For Frankfurt, “the notion of the will is not coextensive with the notion of what an agent intends to do. For even though someone may have a settled intention to do *X*, he may nevertheless do something else instead of doing *X* because, despite his intention, his desire to do *X* proves to be weaker or less effective than a conflicting desire” (1971, p. 8). Those who identify will and intention more closely may question how settled his intention was given his failure to act.

This collection of thoughts suggests that one way to think of the will is as intimately connected with practical reason. An action done “at will” is one does for reasons, intentionally, decisively, or in accordance with one’s best judgment. Thus if we can make sense of believing for non-evidential reasons, this will offer a conception of doxastic agency robust enough to meet the challenge of those who argue that the nature of belief precludes its possibility. Both Chrisman and Engel who are skeptical about the possibility of doxastic agency, emphasize that it is the capacity to believe for non-evidential reasons that is required for true agency. According to Chrisman: “When the involuntarist claims that believing that p is not the sort of thing that one can voluntarily decide to do, I think this should be understood as the claim that beliefs are not responsive to practical reasons in the same way actions are” (Chrisman 2008, p. 350). Pascal Engel makes a similar point: “the epistemic reasons for belief seem to be the *only* kind of reasons that one considers, and ought to consider when one forms a belief...the structural difference between epistemic and practical reasons set a limit to the possibility of epistemic agency” (Engel 2013, p. 171, 176). Setiya’s critique of Boyle’s view discussed above comes to a very similar conclusion.

As we have seen, it has seemed to most that beliefs are not the kinds of attitudes that are responsive to non-evidential reasons; many argue that part of what it *means* to be a belief, as opposed to another kind of attitude, is that it is not so responsive. And this view of belief is accepted both by those who argue for the possibility of doxastic agency and by those who deny it. For example here is McHugh: “We are, in our doxastic lives, systematically unreactive, or only very restrictedly reactive, to practical reasons. In this respect, doxastic states stand in contrast with actions, which are reactive to any kind of reason you can recognise... The point is that such considerations typically cannot be *reasons for which* we hold beliefs—considerations whose probative force we can acknowledge in deliberation about what to believe, and form beliefs in reaction to.” (2011, p. 10)

It seems we arrive at a kind of stalemate, one that is familiar among skeptics and anti-skeptics in many domains. The skeptic says that an ingredient is needed that is lacking for x . The anti-skeptic replies by saying that given that a number of considerations reveal we do have x the ingredient (which it is agreed that we lack) is not actually needed; the skeptic’s demands are misguided or unfair. A familiar response to skepticism about knowledge, for example, which claims that our inability to eliminate the possibility that certain skeptical scenarios obtain precludes the possibility of knowledge, is to argue we can have knowledge even if we cannot eliminate these possibilities. Similarly, the proponents of doxastic agency claim we do not need to be able to believe for non-evidential reasons to exercise agency, an agency robust enough to ground responsibility. But they concede that if the possibility of believing for non-evidential reasons were needed then doxastic agency would indeed be impossible. But, must skepticism about doxastic agency follow if we accept that believing for non-evidential reasons is required? While it is widely accepted that such a condition cannot be met, that one cannot believe for non-evidential reasons, this only follows if one accepts some crucial, and questionable, assumptions about the nature and function of belief

In the next section I will argue that the possibility of believing for non-evidential reasons has been too hastily dismissed.⁸ I will begin by discussing some examples where, at least according to a natural reading, the subjects form and maintain beliefs at least partly for non-evidential reasons. When faced with examples of this kind, evidentialists will find a way of re-describing the cases so that we can make sense of them without accepting that these beliefs are based on non-evidential reasons. If you are convinced that a particular phenomenon is impossible, then when faced with a putative example of the impossibility, you will seek out ways to show that what seems to be the case is not actually the case. But, the arguments against pragmatism that are often taken as decisive, I shall argue, are not so. While I do not claim to be here offering a decisive argument in favor of the pragmatism, I will argue that it is a legitimate and promising option for defenders of doxastic agency to pursue. Thus, even if one concedes that the possibility of believing for non-evidential reasons is required for doxastic agency one is not thereby committed to skepticism. What I am suggesting here, then, is that a direct response to skepticism is available, one that would be analogous to responding to the external world skeptic by showing that I can know that I am not a brain in a vat. The anti-skeptic may, in the end, prefer the response which allows that the divergence between the two sides comes down to different conceptions of agency. But, if so, it does seem that a response to Setiya is still needed; why is the anti-skeptic's conception not deflationary?

4 The Possibility of Non-evidential Reasons for Belief

A way to respond to the skeptic is to accept an alternative view of reasons for belief, to recognize that they are not wholly evidential and non-evidential reasons have a role in our doxastic lives as well. The same kinds of considerations that bear on investigating what we should *do* sometimes also bear on what we should *believe*. When we say one ought to act a certain way and when we say one ought to believe a certain way, these “oughts” are not completely distinct. There is an “ought” associated with all our activities as agents, whether these result in beliefs or in actions.

Most of the time, the answer to such questions is obvious; believing in accordance with the evidence will be the way to have the best beliefs one can—the beliefs that are the most helpful to oneself and others, the beliefs that reflect the kind of person one wants to be. But most of our *actions* also require little assessment or deliberation; we often operate almost automatically, and we often manage not to violate the rules of prudence or morality. It is when the right course to take is *not* obvious that deliberation comes in. Again, determining what to believe is not so different from determining how to act. I will now consider a number of examples of doxastic deliberation where it at least seems plausible, to see non-evidential

⁸ I discuss this issue further in Chapter 3 (McCormick 2015). On arguments for possibility of non-evidential reasons for belief see Reisner (2009, 2013, forthcoming), Talbot (2014), Rinard (2015) and Leary (2016).

considerations operating, even from a first-person perspective. First, consider the following case:

Referee: Geoff, an experienced referee, is refereeing a high school soccer match. He blows his whistle, declaring that a player is offside. He can see from the reactions of both teams, and the fans, that they think the call was mistaken. Based on this new evidence he asks himself “What should I believe? Should I believe I made a mistake? Should I revise my belief that the player was off-side?” In the process of this deliberation, Geoff considers that if he were to revise his belief or now believe he made a mistake, he would both (1) replay the past event in his head to try check if he made a mistake and (2) overanalyze future events. The former increases the chances he will miss crucial evidence in the future while the latter increases the chances that he will draw the wrong conclusion from the evidence he does collect. In either case, he will be a poorer judge or collector of the evidence as the game proceeds, thus making him both an inferior epistemic agent, as well as worse referee. He continues to believe the call was correct and the player was indeed off-side.

The considerations that bear on whether Geoff should maintain his belief (even from Geoff’s perspective) are not all evidential; he is also thinking about whether it would be good for him to maintain his belief and bad for him to revise it; the fact that it would make him a worse referee if he were to revise is salient in his deliberation, but this is clearly a non-evidential reason. If he is right that he also has reason to maintain his belief because doing so will allow him to form more true beliefs in the future then some of the non-evidential reasons may be what Brian Talbot has recently referred to as “truth promoting non-evidential reasons for belief” (Talbot 2014).

Here is another example that Sarah Paul discusses in a recent paper on doxastic self-control:

Philosopher: Suppose that at some point in the past, I deliberated about a philosophical question, considering all the major arguments for and against the possible views. Eventually, I formed the belief that View X is the correct one, thereby coming to believe in the truth of X. But when I arrive at the conference to present on X, my confidence in my previous deliberation plummets (though I gain no specific information concerning a flaw in that deliberation). The arguments in favor of X now strike me as much less forceful than they previously did. Although my time and psychic energy could be better used by concentrating on the next session, I instead spend it by re-opening the question and deliberating anew with the same evidence I previously had, with my insecurity-infused judgment now leading me to abandon my belief in X. Finally, although I previously held that the prestige of a philosopher’s home institution is no evidence at all that his or her views are correct, I now perceive the arguments of those with prestigious positions as much more compelling and form the new belief that Y is the correct view (Paul 2015)

Paul calls this kind of situation one of “epistemic temptation” and she argues that it can be overcome and that doing so manifests a kind of “doxastic self-control.” In this case, I end up with a false belief because of the way the evidence now strikes me as a result of my insecurities. The question Paul asks is: could I “have been more autonomous or self-governed than I was: could I have maintained my previous

belief throughout the conference, even though it no longer seemed during that time to be true or adequately supported by the evidence?” Paul answers that I can because, she argues, “it is open to me to conceive of myself as occupying a genuinely diachronic first-personal perspective that encompasses past, present, and even future assessments of the truth as potentially my own. I am in a position to recognize that my capacity to evaluate what is true vacillates over time. I can therefore see that the best way of satisfying the norm of believing P only if it is true may not be always to let my present perspective determine what I believe.” (Paul 2015, pp. 12–13)

Paul offers an account that allows for me to consider that, even though my current evidence supports the truth of p, I can still have reason to refrain from believing p. She thus allows for a space between what I view as my evidence and what I view as my reason for believing, a space that many have argued is conceptually unavailable. But what kinds of considerations might help me overcome epistemic temptation? While Paul would resist putting it this way, it seems many of these considerations would be non-evidential. I could think about the kind of person I want to be, that I do not want to be spineless, intimidated by prestige and overpowered by emotion. These are not considerations related to the truth of the proposition but they seem relevant to whether I should continue to believe as I do.

Both of these cases, philosopher and referee, are ones where it seems that considerations can enter in first person doxastic deliberation that are not evidential or alethic but that are ones that can ultimately help one do better epistemically and so, perhaps there is still a sense in which one can say that such reasons will be deemed “epistemic.” Here is another case that I do not find substantially different from the other two but where you bring non-evidential reasons to bear on what you ought to believe, not for the sake of being a better epistemic agent but for the sake of your relationship. This is taken from Berislav Marušić’s recent discussion of reasons for trusting:

Suppose that your lover has been unfaithful to you. But suppose also that he or she is contrite and repenting and makes a reasonable case that it will not happen again. For instance, your lover was cunningly seduced when he or she succumbed to temptation, or there are some mitigating circumstances. You are seriously considering whether you can see past the betrayal. As you are discussing reconciliation, your lover says to you, “I will be faithful to you, I promise” and thereby sincerely and resolutely expresses his or her commitment. (Marušić 2015, pp. 175–176)

The question that Marušić focuses on in discussing this case is “in light of which reasons could you rationally trust the other to keep the promise?” I do not think you could trust someone to keep the promise if you do not believe that he or she will keep the promise, but there are some who wonder whether trusting someone to do something entails believing it.⁹ Given the risk associated with trusting I find this implausible; trust makes you vulnerable, you open yourself up to the possibility of

⁹ See, for example Katherine Hawley, “Partiality and Prejudice in Trusting”: *Synthese* (2014, especially 2030–2031). She largely bases her discussion on Holton’s (1994).

betrayal, as Richard Holton says it requires a kind of “emotional seriousness.” (7, 1994) If I tell you sincerely that I will keep my word and you say you trust me even though you don’t believe me, I would have hard time understanding you. Not being believed is a terrible feeling and it seems to be the same terrible feeling as not being trusted. But to bracket this concern for now, we can elaborate on the case so that it is clear we are talking about a belief, the content of which is a proposition that is clearly true or false.

Imagine that a year after this crisis, you find yourself and your lover apart for a couple of months and on Skype your lover tells you about the dinner he or she is going to and who is going to be there. Later that night you might ask yourself if you ought to believe that your lover has remained faithful. What advice should you give yourself? What considerations should guide you here?

The orthodox view of doxastic reasons will say the only considerations that bear on what to believe are evidential: what does the evidence tell you about the likelihood of the belief being true? But if these are the only relevant considerations then it seems there is nothing to distinguish your situation from, as Marušić has put it, that of a disinterested bookie. Part of what you may well think about is that you love your lover, that you care about your relationship, that *your lover* told you that he or she would not betray you. And let us suppose you answer your question, resolve your predicament by saying you ought to believe your lover remained faithful. On the face of it, at least some of your reasons for believing are non-evidential.

Evidentialists will likely not be fazed by examples of this kind. All will admit that non-evidential considerations, in fact, can contribute causally to what one believes. Many (though not all) will even say that such considerations can count as reasons for these subjects to believe what they do, and, again, such reasons may partially cause the beliefs. What they will all deny, however, is that these subjects believe *for* these non-evidential reasons. To try to articulate what it means to believe *for* a reason, as opposed to the reason simply being one of the causes of the belief is not simple and philosophers disagree on the nature of the relationship. One finds a parallel problem when trying to articulate what it means to act *for* a reason as opposed to the reason *simply* being a cause of an action.¹⁰ But at least one condition that must be met is that the subject recognize it as *her* reason. This is not quite enough for one can take a third-person perspective on oneself and see that one of the reasons was the cause without it having operated as the *basis* or *grounds* for the belief or action. A fairly strong constraint on what counts as a reason *for* Φ ing, one argued for by Nishi Shah (2006), is that it be capable of operating as premise in deliberation. I have deliberately constructed cases where the subjects consciously

¹⁰ See footnote 6. For a thorough discussion of different ways of thinking about what count as reasons for belief and the basing relation see Sylvan (2016). Some view the relationship as essentially causal, but attempt to characterize the “appropriate” kind of causation so as to rule out deviant cases, while other have abandoned the causal approach for what have been termed “doxastic” accounts. These accounts argue that for a belief (P) to be based on a reason (Q), one must judge that Q is good evidence for P . Only doxastic characterizations of the basing relation clearly rule out non-evidential reasons, but such accounts have been widely criticized for ruling out a lot more as well, and ultimately seem to commit one to a strong internalist view of justification. I do not have the space here to fully defend this view though will say some to motivate it in what follows.

and explicitly employ these reasons in their deliberation, where they can say to themselves: “I am going to believe p (at least partly) *because* it is good for me to do so,” and if this the case then the subjects are believing *for* these non-evidential reasons. One may think even more is needed, that these agents, once having formed their beliefs, must be able to recognize their non-evidential reasons for believing. I think this is possible in certain cases; you can see that some of the considerations sustaining your belief that your lover is faithful are non-evidential. But that one needs to be able to recognize one’s reason for believing once one believes seems an overly demanding constraint on what is required to believe for a reason. Consider an ordinary case of believing for an evidential reason. You believe the match will go ahead and the reason you believe this is that it is sunny. If we accept Shah’s strong constraint on reasons, namely that for a consideration to be a reason for you to Φ , it must be a consideration from which you could reason to Φ -ing then what makes the fact that it is sunny outside a reason for your belief is that this fact is used in your reasoning to the conclusion that the match will go ahead. Again, in the cases I have presented, the agents do just that. What gives this constraint plausibility is that reasons should guide us. But to add the further constraint that for a consideration to be a reason one *must* have full conscious awareness of the reasons for which one Φ s would imply that we rarely believe (or act for that matter) for reasons. You form the belief that the match will go ahead and so go the match. If you do not maintain full consciousness of why you so believe, do you thereby no longer believe for a reason?¹¹

What motivates the widespread view that we cannot believe for non-evidential reasons? I think it is at least partly the concern that the view that we *can* believe for non-evidential reasons has implausible or very worrisome implications. I will close my discussion by addressing some of these concerns.

First, one may worry that the pragmatist view fails to pay attention to the distinction between practical and theoretical reasoning. Reasoning about what to do and reasoning about what to think, it seems are very different. Theoretical reason is used to address questions concerning what is true while practical reason is used to address questions about what is good. I accept that we reason about different kinds of issues. But I do not see why we need to posit two radically different *kinds* of reasoning. Reasoning about theoretical issues and practical issues are often overlapping and intertwined. To figure out what is best to do, we often need to have a correct grasp of the facts. If I deliberate about whether to stay home and grade or go out to see a friend’s band, it is helpful if I know, for example, if and when the band will play again, and what will happen if I put off my grading.

While the role of theoretical reasoning in deliberating about what to do is generally acknowledged, the role of practical reasoning in deliberating about what to believe is not. I think this is because it is generally accepted that knowing the

¹¹ Jonathan Way (2016) has argued that for the constraint on reasoning to preclude non-evidential reasons for belief it needs to be this very strong constraint, but unlike the weaker constraint that just says it needs to be capable of motivating or of operating in deliberation or reasoning “the condition looks gerrymandered to support an argument for evidentialism” (812). Susanna Rinard (2015) has recently argued that the characterizations of the basing relation which rule out non-evidential reasons for belief rule out a lot more, namely they rule out non-evidential reasons for action as well.

truth can help you determine what's good, but knowing the good cannot help you determine what's true. Depending on how one unpacks this slogan, both clauses of this compound sentence turn out false. Even a minimal acceptance of the is/ought distinction will lead to the denial that the facts (what is) can determine what is good (or what ought to be). So it is only once certain normative principles are accepted that the facts can help in one's practical determinations. And there will be times when knowing all the facts will be no help at all in determining what to do. The most difficult moral dilemmas arise at such times, times when it seems either course of action will be wrong.

These considerations reveal that the role of facts, and the theoretical reasoning that helps in their discovery, in determining what is best to do or believe is both complex and limited. The same holds for the other half of the slogan, namely that knowing the good cannot help you determine what is true. There are times when questions about what is good *do* bear on the questions of what I take to be true. I have pointed to some of those times in my discussion above. Another set of examples concern when part of whether something turns out true depends on one's own actions. Whether it is true, and so whether I should believe, that I will keep my promise or follow through on a commitment, is affected by my viewing it as good to do so; here questions about what is good help me determine what to believe.¹²

The examples I have given of when one can believe for non-evidential reasons all have content that refers to something of practical significance. But if the norms of belief are not wholly evidential, why, when it comes to more mundane, purely factual beliefs, does it seem I have no control? Why can I not believe that I am six feet tall, or that the US is still a colony of Great Britain? The first thing to say here is that one cannot believe something while thinking it false; this connection between belief and truth holds; if I believe something I must take it to be true. So what about utterly trivial beliefs when the evidence is neutral, like for example, that the first person who flipped a coin in Berlin today got heads (assuming one has no evidence about this matter)? Now I am not sure it is *impossible* for someone to form such a belief, but I find myself right now unable to do so. And why is that? Well, I have no reason to believe it. If I were asked *why* I believed it, I would have nothing to say, no reason to point to. There is an important difference between holding a belief for *no* reason and holding a belief for very important non-evidential reasons.

What if you had a good practical reason to form this belief, say someone offered you a huge amount of money to do so? That we are unable to form a belief against (or without) the evidence when offered money or other incentives to do so is often taken to show decisively that we cannot believe for non-evidential reasons. While I think there are *some* beliefs that one cannot believe for *some* non-evidential reasons, I do not think we can generalize from examples of this kind to the conclusion that non-evidential reasons are never reasons for belief. It is quite likely that there are many actions one could not perform no matter how high the monetary incentive like, for example, killing an innocent person or jumping out the window, but this would not tell us that one can never act for reasons of this kind. To object that one *could* perform these actions but one chooses not to begs the question. In both

¹² Marušić discusses such examples in (2012, 2013, 2015).

cases—that of believing and that of acting—one is being asked to do something that goes against a deeply entrenched view of who one is and what one values.

Now one may argue that it is enough to display a deep asymmetry between beliefs and actions, one which precludes doxastic agency, that we have clear cases where we can act for incentives, but no clear cases where we believe for incentives. But remember the crucial difference that the skeptics pointed to is that one could not believe for any non-evidential reason, not that one could not believe for a particular kind of non-evidential reason. The broad category that can be termed “practical” or “pragmatic” goes beyond the narrowly instrumental. If part of your reason for believing something is that it will contribute to the good in general then this counts as a practical reason.¹³

But is it even the case that incentives cannot be reasons for believing? It is generally acknowledged that even if I cannot use the offer of a reward to form a belief immediately (as I could raise my hand), I could undertake some program that would eventually lead to my having the belief. It is often then claimed that I have a reason for engaging in this program but not a reason for the belief. I do not see why this cannot give me a reason for both engaging in the activity that will lead to the belief and the belief itself. If you offer me a huge reward to run a marathon, I cannot do it right now. But I may well have a reason to engage in a program that will lead to my running the marathon. The offer of the reward provides a reason for the training as well as the running.¹⁴

In closing I want return to the concern, posed by Chrisman and Setiya that, because belief is a state it cannot be active. Mathew Boyle has argued that we can make sense of a state being active by paying attention to the distinction between two different kinds of activity based on Aristotle’s distinction between *kinesis* and *energeia*. Kinetic activity is the more familiar kind, the kind found in the unfolding of a process that leads to a change. But another kind of “actualization of a capacity” is one which does not proceed toward a certain result but one “in which the end is present.” Aristotle’s examples are: seeing, understanding, thinking, living well, being happy. These are all, Boyle contends, modes of active *being*. To further illustrate what this might mean, Boyle considers Aristotle’s example of “living well” and says: “it seems to be a kind of *actively* maintained condition: for though it is possible to flourish only if various external conditions are met, the primary ground of a person’s flourishing lies not in the obtaining of these conditions but in his capacity to govern himself.” (Boyle 2011a, p. 20) Boyle then argues that we can apply this idea of an energetic state to belief: “a person’s believing something...is,

¹³ Once one recognizes this wider sense of “practical” it can be argued, as both I (2015) and Rinard (2015) have, that the reason we have to believe as the evidence dictates is ultimately practical. Here is Rinard: “In most ordinary cases, evidence in favor of P constitutes a pragmatic reason to believe it. Typically, evidence that the store is closed now is a pragmatic consideration in favor of believing it, as one would (typically) be inconvenienced by having false beliefs about the store’s hours. Evidence that one’s spouse has pneumonia is (typically) a pragmatic reason to believe it, as one will (ordinarily) be better suited to care for them if one has true beliefs about the nature of their illness” (219).

¹⁴ Rinard makes a similar point. In many cases of *acting* for pragmatic considerations “the causal connection between the pragmatic consideration for Φ -ing, and the agent’s actually Φ -ing is complex and indirect. But this does not prevent the consideration from constituting a genuine reason for Φ -ing” (2015, p. 213).

in a perfectly good sense, an *energia* of her capacity for doxastic self-determination... we can say, in general that a rational subject's believing what she does it itself her enduring act of holding it true... The relevant agency at work is not the installation or modification of beliefs, but in the kind of believing characteristic of rational creatures as such. This believing is self-determined, not in virtue of some precedent process or event, but by being the special kind of self-affirmed condition that it is."

While Boyle doesn't here talk in terms of reasons for believing, I think what he says is compatible with the way I have been talking about belief. If belief is not seen as the result of a mechanistic process akin to the digestive process where the "norms" applied to it are simply the norms of proper functioning but as a state that are expressions of what we value, this opens up space for the reasons to keep "holding true" to go beyond evidential ones. *I* have reasons to endure in the act of holding true what my love says that the disinterested bookie, who only has evidential reasons, does not.

In a discussion of Boyle's view, Chrisman argues that we do not need to invent a new, and deeply problematic, category of an "active state" for us to make sense of epistemic normativity and doxastic agency (2016). Instead we can locate some of the norms in the familiar category of norms that apply to states; these would then would be expressed as doxastic "oughts" that tell us, in general, truths about beliefs and believing. They would be of the form:

X ought to have doxastic attitude *A* towards proposition *p* under conditions *C*.

This rule does not specify what should be done to bring it about that one have the attitude one ought to have. The kind of rule of action that is implied by a doxastic ought, Chrisman argues, may well apply to individuals beyond the believer. For example, when we say "One ought to disbelieve the earth is flat" this could well imply the "interpersonal" rule of action: "Parents and teachers ought to teach young people that the earth is not flat." However, Chrisman points out that "none of this implies that believers cannot be agents. We just have to appreciate that they do not exercise agency in believing what they believe" (2008, p. 369).

Where we might locate cognitive agency so that we can make room for "genuine" normative demands in the doxastic realm, according to Chrisman, is in the domain of cognitive "activities." So instead of thinking that cognitive agency "might be exercised only in the state of belief itself or in the events and occasions involved in deliberating about, judging and forming a belief" it might also be exercised "in the activity of maintaining a system of belief" (2016, p. 17).

Though I agree with much of what Chrisman has to say on these topics, and his view allows some sense to be given to how doxastic oughts can be true, his view seems to imply that many of the reactive attitudes we have in the doxastic realm are misguided. If I reproach you for believing the earth is flat or that climate change has nothing to do with human activity, on Chrisman's view, whether my reaction is appropriate depends on facts about you: your history, your psychology, your background. There is a sense in which my reaction is misguided no matter what the circumstances if I am reproaching you for being in a state of believing. I can make general claims like "one ought not to believe falsehoods," but if I feel resentment or

anger towards *you* for being in such a state, it seems such attitudes are unwarranted.¹⁵

Perhaps his more recent view which locates much of doxastic agency in the activity of maintaining a belief-system allows more room for these kind of reactions. For perhaps, what I am reacting to is not that you are in a passive state where you are not *doing* anything, but instead, to your failure to engage in activities, that if you did, would alter that state. This starts to sound like the “process view,” where I am faulting you for defective processing, for example for failing to deliberate properly which then results in a kind of faulty belief. Chrisman rightly criticizes this view for it does not allow norms to apply to a “here and now” belief and also would only allow exercises of agency to apply to a subset of belief, namely those that result from deliberation. Chrisman argues that given that activities are *atelic*, namely that they do not have an internally determined endpoint, this offers doxastic norms and cognitive agency a much wider range than the process view. But even on this view I cannot properly criticize you for holding a certain belief but instead failing to do a good job in maintaining your system of beliefs. But I think Boyle has it right; there are times I want to say: “Be a better believer”, not “Be a better belief-system maintainer.”¹⁶

Boyle’s idea of thinking about believing as an expression of our self-determined rational natures legitimizes these practices of reactions and expectations and helps to make sense of how agency is exercised in believing. It is not simply that beliefs are reasons-responsive that allows for doxastic agency. Rather, it is that we expect of each other and accept the expectation that we will maintain beliefs in accordance with the norms of how we ought to believe. We are reproached when we lose this grasp, when we do not exercise our reflective competence that helps us believe the way we *ought* to believe. Moral, prudential, and epistemic faults are all faults in agency, revealing that one is becoming passive and unreflective where one should take active control.

¹⁵ In a recent discussion of doxastic control, Kate Nolfi (2013) argues that her view is preferable to alternatives because it allows a “unified account of when and why we are appropriate targets of prescriptive evaluation in virtue of how we form, revise, and sustain the range of different types of mental attitudes that we are capable of having.” She argues that we have doxastic control when our normative judgments of how we ideally ought to believe causally influence our belief-regulating dispositions. While I think her view ultimately shares some of the problems with character-based views of doxastic agency and responsibility which I discuss in detail (2015), I also think that finding a unified account of our prescriptive and reactive practices is important.

¹⁶ This view of agency being exercised in the activity of maintaining a system of beliefs shares much in common with Boyle’s view and Chrisman admits as much. His preference for it has to do with its being more careful and precise in respecting traditional metaphysical (and linguistic) categories. One of the problems with Boyle’s “active state” view, according to Chrisman is that it should allow that a proper response to “what are you doing?” should be “believing” which seems very odd. But how much less odd would it be for me to respond to that question by saying “maintaining my belief system”?

5 Conclusion: Adjudicating Between Evidentialism and Pragmatism

When a philosophical view becomes orthodoxy, that is a view so dominant that is taken as a shared assumption even among those who disagree on many fronts, it becomes very difficult to think of the view as needing defense or to worry about its potentially problematic implications. I have here considered some of the potentially problematic implications of pragmatism, and attempted to assuage concerns that accepting the possibility of non-evidential reasons for belief leads to confusion or incoherence. But what about the costs of evidentialism, of the view that that only evidence can be a reason for belief? While I cannot here go into detail about the nature and extent of these costs, what I hope to have shown is that accepting this view invites the idea that we are passive in our doxastic lives, and supports a particular narrow conception of belief as one which reduces believers to information processers. The kind of complexity of doxastic deliberation that I described in the cases discussed above must be explained away. What, on the face of it, looks like non-evidential considerations supporting the view that I should or should not believe some proposition, needs to be re-described such that only evidential concerns bear on that question. In the end, the benefits of evidentialism may outweigh the costs but, in adjudicating between these positions, these costs need to be acknowledged and the benefits needs to be made explicit.

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