

## **Handout #6: Roeber on Endogenous Control Over Belief**

### **1. Roeber's Thesis**

Doxastic involuntarism: We cannot have (or never have) direct voluntary control over our beliefs because we cannot believe at will.

Roeber's Thesis: "Doxastic involuntarism is virtually epistemological orthodoxy [see Roeber's footnotes 4 and 5 and the text preceding them], [but] nothing in the entire stock of objections to belief at will" rules out believing at will in "equipollent cases" (2019, 837).

Initial case: approaching a difficult-to-identify object. Gradual improvement of evidence from "requiring" suspension to "requiring" belief.

Roeber, following Conee and Feldman(2004): "If your evidential situation improves sufficiently slowly in a case like this, there should be some point where your total evidence supports suspension and belief equally well while ruling out disbelief. Moreover, on this view, if your total evidence supports suspension and belief equally well while ruling out disbelief, suspension and belief will both be rationally permissible."

A **permissive situation** is one in which more than one "doxastic attitude" is rationally permissible (i.e. rational) given one's total evidence [even under the assumption of evidentialism].

For our purposes we can define "evidentialism" as the claim that each of us ought to apportion her beliefs or credence to the evidence available to her so that only this evidence is relevant to assessments of the rationality or subjective justification of belief.

Roeber says his argument does not assume the existence or possibility of permissive situations only [rational?] belief in their possibility or actuality.

Two further claims: (1) it's possible to think (a) that belief and suspension are both rationally permissible when it's virtually certain but not absolutely certain that p is true and (b) that you're in a permissive situation with respect to p because it is virtually certain but not absolutely certain that p is true. (2) cases where your evidence supports p and not-p equally well are not (as many epistemologists mistakenly assume) the closest epistemological analogues of cases where your reasons support X-ing and not X-ing equally well. [Because in these cases suspension of belief is rationally mandatory or typically so.] Instead, permissive situations are the closest epistemological analogues of cases where your reasons support X-ing and not X-ing equally well.

**Roeber's intuition**: If you judge that you're in a permissive situation you won't feel compelled to believe p and you won't feel compelled to suspend judgment on p. You'll only feel compelled to not disbelieve p (by believing not-p).

S is in an **equipollent case** just in case (a) S thinks that she's in a permissive situation with respect to p, (b) S neither feels compelled to believe p nor feels compelled to suspend judgment with respect to p, and (c) S feels a stronger attraction toward each of believing p and suspending judgment with respect to p than she feels toward disbelieving p.

(D1) S f-d at will =<sub>df</sub> S decided to f and then carried out her intention to f by f-ing, in such a way that her intention to f was directly causally responsible for her f-ing;

(D2) S had direct voluntary control over her f-ing =<sub>df</sub> S f-d at will and her will was free, in the sense that she had control over whether she decided to f in the first place.

“The core idea behind involuntarism is supposed to be that, even if hard determinism is true and nobody has free will, belief and action are still importantly disanalogous in at least this sense: while it's possible to perform various actions at will, it's never possible to believe any proposition at will, at least for creatures like you and me. Properly understood, involuntarism is equivalent to this disanalogy thesis.”

But, “There are natural conceptions of belief on which it's hard to see why someone in an equipollent case couldn't believe at will, and involuntarists have produced virtually no reason for thinking that these conceptions of belief are mistaken. As a result, involuntarism emerges as an article of faith, not the obvious truth it often purports to be.”

## 2. Assertion and Belief

Roeber approves of Williamson's view of the relationship between belief and assertion, which he quotes twice over.

We can regard assertion as the verbal counterpart of judgement and judgement as the occurrent form of belief.

— Timothy Williamson (2000: 10)

Roeber gives no argument for this view beyond citing a bunch of people who have advanced this conception. **I think this view is wrong because belief evolved long before assertion.** But we can nevertheless see assertion as the expression of belief in favorable circumstances. Discursive beliefs are a kind of belief and they are manifested in assertion and the kinds of inner assertion that result when one thinks in language and draws conclusions from one's ruminations or internal monologues.

What is the relationship between belief and judgment?

“On Shah and Velleman's view, my judgment that p is not itself a belief in p, occurrent or otherwise. By judging that p, I might cause myself to believe p, and if I believe p while I'm still in the act of judging that p, then (presumably) my judging that p gives my belief the property of being presently occurrent. But my judgment isn't a belief. This isn't the view we get from the Williamson passage. On that view, my judgment that p is itself an occurrent belief in p, not just something I might do while believing p that would make my belief in p occurrent” (Roeber, 2019, 842).

Roeber's view of judgment is very naïve. According to him (following Velleman and Shah), "if I perform the mental act of consciously thinking to myself 'p', and if I do this in order to affirm the correct answer to the question whether p, I thereby judge that p" (2019, 843).

**The Naïve Cartesian View of Judgment:** S judges that p if S accepts a sentence a as true, where S's accepting s as true is constituted by S's asserting (or silently affirming) s as a consequence of trying to figure out its truth or the truth of some matter to which its content is germane.

**So understood, judgment is very thin.** It's akin to a sensation as understood by Berkeley in being just what it appears. To account for self-deception and self-ignorance, Roeber thinks of the relationship between judgment and belief as causal. When judgment causes belief (and one is aware of having judged), one believes what one judges to be true. But in cases of self-ignorance and inaccurate self-appraisal, a subject will mistakenly believe that she believes that p because she will have judged that p (and presumably recognized that she has judged that p) without therein coming to believe what she has judged. He contrasts this view with a different sort of causal view on which judgments are the manifestations (and so effects) of belief. Unlike this "manifestation account," which he calls "JE" and attributes to Boyle, Roeber thinks one can judge that p (in the thin sense he is advocating) without first believing p.

### 3. No Judgment is a Belief

Roeber attributes a thesis he calls "JB" to Williamson:

JB: Judgments are beliefs.

Argument against JB: to judge something is to perform an action of some sort (a mental action). But beliefs aren't actions, they're states of mind. So judgments aren't beliefs even if judging something true entails believing it as of one's judging it true. Judgment results in belief but is not itself a form or kind of belief.

Roeber's reply: belief isn't a state of mind. Some acts are beliefs: i.e. judgments are beliefs. But non-occurrent beliefs aren't acts.

First problem w Roeber's Cartesian Conception of the Relationship between Judgment and Belief: This view is overly rationalist. (It shares this problem with Velleman and Shah.) People can make judgments and form beliefs without concern for the truth. Think of Trump as an example.

Second Problem w Roeber's Cartesian Conception of the Relationship between Judgment and Belief: If judging p is understood in a thin way as just affirming p: i.e. saying "p" to oneself (in the process of trying to determine the truth about p). And judgment so understood is a kind of belief, then one can believe p just by saying "p" to oneself (in the process of trying to figure out whether p). But then one cannot be mistaken in believing that one believes that p in cases in which one affirms p to oneself and this seems wrong. What about self-deception, etc?

Roeber doesn't confront this problem. Instead, he just argues that JB is a better fit for various normative epistemologies than JC. I think he's a little confused here.

#### 4. Zimmerman on the Relationship Between Judgment and Belief

I have argued at length in favor of a substantive view of judgment on which it requires belief and belief is understood to require various dispositions to act (albeit dispositions conditional upon the focusing of attention and the control of behavior). As part of this work, I argue against the Cartesian view of the relationship between judgment and belief Roeber defends and the causal view he attributes to Velleman and Shah. My fullest treatment of the subject appears in an essay called “Basic Self-Knowledge” which is addressed to the general question of how each of us knows what she believes (when she does have this knowledge). I’ll post the whole essay to the course website but the most directly relevant section is 6, which I’m pasting in below. My critical target in the essay is Christopher Peacocke’s view in *Being Known* (1999). And though I disagree with Peacocke’s view he at least confronts the problem I’ve raised above for Roeber’s form of JB: i.e. the need to account for cases of self-deception and other forms of ignorance about one’s own mind.

#### 6. ARE OCCURRENT JUDGMENTS PURELY PHENOMENAL?

The introspective error Peacocke asks us to attribute to the unfair academic raises a difficult interpretive question: What is the notion of judgment with which Peacocke is operating? The academic is supposed to occurrently judge that undergraduate degrees from countries other than her own are of an equal standard to her own without believing that this is so. But what is judgment, if judging that p does not entail believing that p?

Peacocke introduces the notion of an occurrent judgment through examples: its occurring to you, on the basis of recollection, that Dubcek was Prime Minister when Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union; its suddenly striking you that you’ve left the tap running; your concluding in thought that Smith would be the best person for the job (1999, p. 206). The mental acts or states in question are then argued to have two features in virtue of which they can be said to be conscious or occurrent; again: (a) they partially constitute what it is like for the subject, and (b) they partially occupy that subject’s attention. But to say that these two features hold of occurrent judgments is not to say that they exhaust the nature of judging. Indeed, it seems that another essential feature of a subject’s occurrently judging that p is that, as of her judging, she believes that p. It may, in some sense, strike you that you’ve left the tap running, but if you know this thought to be neurotic and you have enough control over your neuroses, you will refrain from judging that the tap is running. If you can see that the conclusion of some thought process means that Smith is best for the job, but you have independent reasons for thinking that Smith is not best for the job, you will refrain from concluding (i.e. judging) that Smith is best for the job. If you seem to recall that Dubcek was Prime Minister, but you don’t trust your memory, its occurring to you that Dubcek was Prime Minister is not enough for you to judge that Dubcek was Prime Minister—occurrence without belief just is not judgment. In each such case one enjoys an experience similar to that present when one takes one’s memories and deliberations “at face value” but because one does not come to believe the proposition in question one’s mental act is not one of judging that proposition true.

So we cannot say that the subject Peacocke discusses judges that undergraduate degrees from countries other than her own are of an equal standard to her own without believing that this is so. Why then does Peacocke say this? His error, I think, stems from the puzzle the case raises for those committed to a view of beliefs as states that cause and rationalize behavior. Given that the subject in question has sincerely judged that p, how can she be said to believe that p when her discriminatory behavior shows that she is not disposed to act and reason in the ways we think essential to believing that p?

An extremely attractive description of the case opens up if we say that the dispositions that are strictly necessary for belief are conditional upon the presence of attention and [control].... Though Peacocke does not describe the case in enough detail to assess whether this necessary condition is met, it is quite possible that S fails to consider whether or not she might be giving undue influence to the home candidate. If she does not consider this matter—if her attention is not fully “turned toward it”—then (according to this metaphysical account of belief) her discriminatory behavior is fully compatible with her possessing a non-discriminatory belief.

But we needn't accept this characterization of the dispositions that are truly essential to belief; there are other ways in which we can describe the prejudicial academic without violating the entailment from judgment to belief. We might say that the subject, S, judges that p at t, and believes that p at t, but as soon as she moves on to think of other things she loses the belief that p. Adopting this description enables us to say both: (a) that (necessarily) beliefs are states that play a certain causal role, where nothing could play this role without bestowing certain conditional dispositions to act in certain ways; and (b) that one cannot judge that p without believing that p. The idea would be that because at t S possesses the dispositions essential to belief that p she does at that time believe that p, but she is never actually in a position to act on these fleeting dispositions because her hiring and letter-writing behavior is never accompanied by the relevant occurrent judgment. If S were to keep the judgment that p “in mind”, we might say, she could not fail to have these dispositions; it is only when her attention is diverted to other matters that she is susceptible to changes in belief. While S judges that American degrees are as valuable as English degrees she could not, e.g., intentionally place more value on one degree qua English than on another qua American, because while S judges the relevant proposition true, she must have the dispositions essential to belief in its truth. But when, at some later time, her mind is diverted, and she is not occurrently judging that American degrees are as valuable as their English counterparts, she may not believe that they are.

Alternatively, we might attribute the academic's unfair hiring to her failure to draw the relevant inference. We might say that S believes that degrees from foreign institutions are just as good as her own and she wants to hire the best candidate for the job, but insist that S does not believe that her actions jeopardize the achievement of her end, because she does not realize that the foreign candidate she passes over is superior to the domestic candidate she favors. Surely when S utters, “Foreign degrees are just as good as domestic ones”, she expresses a different proposition than she would were she to utter, “Foreign candidate A is better than domestic candidate B”. So it is fully compatible with S's using the former proposition to guide her actions and deliberations that she fail to use the latter. Of course, it may be obvious that what S is doing is discriminatory. It may be obvious that in the circumstances in question S ought to infer that A is better than B from her belief in the equality of the two degrees and her appreciation of the remaining evidence. If this inference is obvious, S's hiring practices will manifest culpable ignorance; we will then want to say that S is irrational for not applying her general belief to the case at hand. But we must be careful to distinguish culpable ignorance from flat-out lying. We respect this distinction when we say that while the liar does not have the belief she pretends to have, the subject who does not realize the prejudicial nature of her actions fails to draw the inferences to which her non-prejudicial belief commits her.

But Peacocke does not accept any of these explanations of the case, for he insists that S's occurrent judgment that p may provide the ground for her false belief that she believes that p. To reconcile something of this view with the unassailable fact that if a subject judges that p at t that subject believes that p at t, Peacocke would be forced to introduce a new category of mental state: seeming-

judgments. A seeming judgment would be the mental state of someone whose experience (or conscious state) is exactly like that of someone who does judge that p, but who, because she lacks the cognitive and behavioral dispositions necessary for belief that p, does not really judge that p. Now if this notion is coherent, there is nothing inconsistent in supposing that S seemingly judges that p and does not believe that p; but it is not at all clear why mere seeming-judgments (if there are such) should provide basic or non-inferential grounds for our second-order introspective beliefs. Is it because when “normal relations hold” seeming-judgments really are judgments and really do instill or sustain beliefs? What is the nature of these normal relations? Since their holding is a contingent matter, so too is the existence of first-person authority. It would seem possible, on this account, for all of a subject’s second-order beliefs to be grounded in what merely seem to be judgments, in which case all of that subject’s second-order introspective beliefs would be false (though, presumably, justified). Indeed, the contingency brought into the account by the introduction of seeming-judgments points to a deeper problem, for it marks a return to the perceptual model of introspection that Peacocke wants to avoid. The perceptual model can be found in the significant disanalogy that seeming-judgments create between knowledge of our beliefs and knowledge of our sensations. My knowledge of the fact that I feel pain (rather than my knowledge of the bodily trouble it normally indicates) is directly grounded in the fact that I feel pain; but my knowledge of my belief that p is now supposed to be grounded in the fact that I seemingly judge that p. This seeming-judgment is then taken as an indication that I do really believe that p; as such it plays the role that an intermediary “appearance” of the feeling of pain would play on what Shoemaker calls the “object perception model” of introspection (1996, p. 204–223). So, if we are to truly reject the perceptual model of introspection, we must reject the idea that our knowledge of our second-order beliefs is grounded in seeming-judgments.

Of course there are theorists who embrace the object-perception model. Eric Lormand, for example, confesses

I think it is utterly normal, in becoming aware of one’s attitudes, to have accompanying phenomenally conscious ‘symptoms’ of the attitudes. For example, one’s standing unconscious belief that snow is white may cause one to form an auditory image of quickly saying the words ‘snow is white’ ... There are normally more aspects to this verbal imagery, which help one to determine which kind and strength of attitude (belief, desire, suspicion, etc.) is revealed via thought. In cases of belief, for instance, one may imagine saying the words in an assertive tone of voice, and without any concomitant proprioceptive sensations of suppressed giggling, or auditory images as of appending ‘NOT!’ etc... . It is no part of my proposal that each belief or desire has a canonical phenomenal symptom, and I do not here assert (or deny) that every bit of attitude self-knowledge proceeds via phenomenal symptoms. But to say the least, we should be very suspicious of any view of introspection that marginalizes such an important and nearly ubiquitous entryway into knowledge of attitudes. (1983, pp. 12–13)

It should be clear, though, that Peacocke could not join Lormand’s camp while also avoiding [what Peacocke calls] the “spurious trilemma”—for Lormand’s account of self-knowledge of propositional attitudes involves both perception and inference.

## **5. The Argument from Equipollence: AFE**

I have very good but inconclusive evidence that Jones is guilty and I believe that I can either remain agnostic or believe in Jones’ guilt in a rational manner. I am “courageous” or I take myself to be epistemically courageous and thus affirm Jones’ guilt.

(1) I judged at will that Jones is guilty.

(2) My judgment was itself a belief.

(3) I believed at will that Jones is guilty.

“This argument is valid—at least given the details of the case and the natural assumption that, when I judged that Jones is guilty, I took my judgment to be a belief. As I will argue below, however, nothing in the entire stock of objections to belief at will threatens either premise of this argument, since nothing in the entire stock of these objections threatens JB or the assertion that I judged at will that Jones is guilty.”

## 6. Responding to Objections to Belief at Will

Conceptual Objections - “The basic problem is simply this: no conceptual objection threatens JB, yet, if JB is true, belief at will seems about as hard to conceive as assertion at will” (2019, 851).

(1) First, contrary to arguments forwarded by Williams (1973), Scott-Kakures (1994), and others, there’s no reason to think I must have believed that Jones did it before I judged that she did it, nor any reason to think that, if I didn’t believe that Jones did it before I judged that she did, then I must have had a dim view of my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that she did it, or somehow changed my mind about my epistemic position with respect to the proposition that she did it.

(2) Second, contrary to arguments from Buckareff (2004), Hieronymi (2006), Setiya (2008), Schmitt (2015), and others, there’s no reason to think that I must have judged that Jones did it for extrinsic reasons, merely practical reasons, or any other reasons that would suggest that my judgment wasn’t aimed at truth.

(3) Third, contrary to arguments from Winters (1979) and others, even though I judged that Jones did it on the basis of considerations relevant to the truth of the proposition that she did it, this doesn’t suggest that my judgment couldn’t be relevantly analogous to an action I might perform at will. For example, suppose I assert p on the basis of my belief that p is sufficiently likely to be true. Then I assert p on the basis of considerations relevant to its truth, but it doesn’t follow that I don’t assert p at will. After all, my asserting p on the basis of my belief that p is sufficiently likely to be true is consistent with my deciding to assert p and then carrying out my intention to assert p by asserting it, in such a way that my intention to assert p is directly causally responsible for my asserting p.

(4) Fourth, contrary to arguments by Buckareff (2006), McHugh (2014), Booth (2015), and others, there is no reason to think that my decision to believe that Jones did it couldn’t have been causally responsible for my judging that she did it. Plausibly, if I’d found the evidence compelling, then I would have gone straight from considering the evidence to judging that Jones did it, without ever deciding to believe that she did it. But of course, I didn’t find the evidence compelling. By hypothesis, it didn’t trigger whatever cognitive process automatically produces judgment when I do find the evidence compelling, and, as a consequence, I wouldn’t have judged that Jones did it if I hadn’t decided to believe that she did it.

(5) Fifth, contrary to arguments from Audi (2015) and others, there is no reason to think that I caused myself to judge that Jones did it in a way relevantly analogous to the way I might cause myself to blush (for example, by thinking about something embarrassing which then causes me to

blush). If there's any sense in which, by deciding to believe that Jones did it, I caused myself to judge that she did it, I caused myself to judge that she did it in exactly the way I would cause myself to raise my arm in a paradigm case where I raise it at will.

(6) Sixth, contrary to arguments from Peels (2014) and others, there seems no reason to think it's an essential feature of my doing something at will that, after I decide to do it, I can still control when I do it and for how long. To see why, just imagine a case where my reasons for snapping my fingers are perfectly counterbalanced by my reasons for not snapping them, and suppose it's obvious to me that, if I'm ever going to snap them at all, I should snap them right now. We can easily imagine that, in this case, if I decide to snap my fingers, I'll be compelled to snap them immediately. And we can also imagine that, since I don't know how to control the duration of a snap, I won't be able to control the length of my snap either. But even with these suppositions, it clearly doesn't follow that I can't snap my fingers at will.

(7) Seventh, and finally, even if Buckareff (2004), Proust (2012), Audi (2015), and many others are right that it's possible to accept a proposition without believing it, there is no plausible notion of acceptance on which it's both clear that my judgment that Jones murdered Smith was an instance of acceptance and clear that no instance of acceptance is a belief. On Proust's notion of acceptance, for example, I accept p if I decide to regard p as true while thinking that p might not be true (ibid., p. 319). On this notion of acceptance, it's not obvious that no instance of acceptance can be a belief, and even if this were obvious, my judgment that Jones murdered Smith wouldn't be an instance of acceptance, since I wasn't, at any time, treating that proposition as true while simultaneously thinking that Jones may not have done it.

#### Psychological Objections -

(1) First, the vast majority of psychological objections in the literature focus on the wrong kinds of cases. Even if we agree with Curley (1975), Alston (1989), Nottelmann (2006), Booth (2015), and many others that we can't believe at will in cases where p strikes us as obviously false, cases where p strikes us as obviously true, and cases where p strikes us as exactly as probable as its negation, this is all irrelevant to the case we have been considering.

(2) Anything might prevent a specific individual from doing something at will, and there's a glaring asymmetry between arguments that say 'I can do it, so somebody can', and arguments that say 'I can't do it, so nobody can'. The first are deductively valid while the second are egregious instances of hasty generalization. Given this asymmetry, it seems completely dogmatic to insist that it's psychologically impossible to judge at will.

(3) It's worth noting in this context how often epistemologists use lucky guesses as examples of beliefs that fall short of knowledge.... If these guesses really are beliefs, then presumably guessing at will can be a way of believing at will.

**Question:** Can we accept these arguments without endorsing JB and believing (instead) that though judgments aren't beliefs they initiate beliefs so that one only judges that p at t if one therein comes to believe that p at t (in the substantive extra-phenomenological sense employed by functionalists)?



## 7. Is it Always Irrational to Believe at Will?

**Epistemic Permissivism:** There can be more than one “attitude” toward  $p$  that  $S$  can rationally adopt at a given time  $t$  even holding fixed  $S$ 's evidence at  $t$ .

**Sylvan:** epistemic permissivism is false, but someone who believes that it is true might irrationally come to believe something at will in the manner described by Roeber.

Roeber's response: “It's consistent with Sylvan's view that I'm rationally required to believe that Jones did it, so assume that this is true. Then it follows that, if I believe at will that Jones did it, then I do at will exactly what epistemic rationality requires. In this case, presumably, both the belief that I form and my forming it are epistemically rational. My suspension of judgment was irrational, of course, but surely that doesn't entail that either the belief that I've formed or my forming it is now also irrational” (2019, 854-5).

Another response: Permissivism is true.