Handout #7: McCormick on Doxastic Agency and Belief for Practical Reasons

1. Normativism

According to Bernard Williams, doxastic agency is impossible because belief aims at truth in a particularly strong sense. His argument has been extremely influential in the relevant literature.

(1) I can do things or refuse to do things "at will" that would lead me to acquire evidence.
(2) But belief is an involuntary response to evidence so acquired (or the lack thereof), because I inevitably believe what (I take to be) supported by my evidence and cannot believe what (I think) lacks evidential support.
(3) So if I go beyond or beneath the evidence (or intentionally do so) my state of mind is (by definition) something other than a state of belief.
Therefore,
(4) It is impossible to believe at will.

In defining belief in terms of truth and the evidential norms to which we conform when trying to arrive at the truth on some matter, Williams adopts a kind of "normativism."

Normativism: what distinguishes believing that p from other states of mind or "attitudes" with this content (like fantasizing that p, assuming that p for the sake of argument, etc.) are the truth-directed or knowledge-directed norms the agent takes herself to be bound by in arriving at or retrenching the state of mind in question. If, for example, the agent does not take herself to be subject to evidential norms in arriving at or retrenching a given state of mind, that state of mind is not a belief.

Normativism is typically accompanied by evidentialism of some sort and a rejection of James' pragmatism, which includes the idea that we can and sometimes should believe "beyond" or "beneath" the evidence when doing so is morally or prudentially crucial. McCormick follows Shah's definition of these terms for the purposes of the philosophical debate on hand.

Evidentialism: there are only evidential reasons for belief.

Pragmatism: there are practical (e.g. moral or prudential) reasons for belief.

Here "evidential reasons" for believing p are supposed to be facts or purported facts which entail p or augment the probability of the truth of p (relative to some set of background knowledge).

Notice that Williams argues for normativism on the basis of an intuition of our lack of control over what we believe. (Premise 1 above.). Some philosophers attempt an extremely strong argument for this view by pointing out that English reports of belief depict it as a state of mind rather than an action or event. We speaking of judging that p but not believing that p. Instead we speak of the belief that p, having it, lacking it, etc. "I believe that p," seems to report that I stan in a relation to a proposition. It does not seem to describe my doing something in an active way nor something happening to me in a passive sense. But see Roeber's article for arguments against the inference from these linguistic phenomena to the conclusion that judgments cannot be beliefs or that beliefs cannot be actions.

McCormick cites, among others, Setiya, who claims that belief is by definition or meaning alone "a standing condition." 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).

2. The Link Between Doxastic Agency and Doxastic Norms

"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" McCormick (2018, 630).

As McCormick reports, Levy and Adler take this view and argue against the coherence of assignments of doxastic responsibility and does a nice job of articulating their intuition later in the essay:

"If I reproach you for believing the earth is flat or that climate change has nothing to 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 [given your lack of direct control over the belief I am criticizing you for holding]" (McCormick, 2018, 642-3).

Basu, if you recall, tries to argue against this view insofar as she argues that we wrong others (even harm them) by believing certain things about them, but tries to do this while at the same time denying any kind of direct doxastic agency or control over belief.

McCormick compares this sort of move to allowing that we cannot rule out various skeptical scenarios while insisting that we can still have knowledge of the external world. She wants to go beyond these **concessive responses** to those (like Levy and Adler) who challenge the coherence of assignments of doxastic responsibility and blame for belief, to develop a **direct response** which affirms the existence of the kind of doxastic control the skeptic thinks is essential to the coherence of assignments of responsibility for belief.

One form of concessive response (one way to have the cake and eat it too): McHugh - our beliefs are only controllable insofar as they are responsive to epistemic reasons or evidence.

McCormick's response: since actions are responsive to practical reasons, McHugh's view maintains an asymmetry between actions and beliefs that still seems to undercut the justification of holding people responsible for their beliefs. "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." (McCormick, 2018, 631).

"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 her, whatever its nature" (Setiya 2013, p. 193)" (McCormick, 2018, 632).

3. McCormick's Challenge

"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?" (2018, 633).

McCormick's Proposal: "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" (634).

4. McCormick's Argument from Cases

A preliminary claim: "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" (635).

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 I 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.

Question: What are your intuitions about this case?

McCormick: The referee believes what he does for partly pragmatic reasons. His belief is supported by what Brian Talbot has recently referred to as ''truth promoting non-evidential reasons for belief'' (Talbot 2014).

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)… 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)

McCormick: "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."

McCormick concedes that the reasons for belief in the two examples described above are derivatively epistemic and so considers a more thoroughly non-epistemic reason for belief in the following case:

Romantic Betrayal: 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. … 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 Marusic 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.

An Evidentialist response: The subject does not believe "for" the pragmatic or non-evidential reasons in play.

Question: Can the pragmatist disarm this response without resolving debates about the "basing" relation and what it is for one belief to be based on another or to be based on one set of reasons or considerations rather than another?

McCormick (cf. Jonathan Way): only a gerrymandered or unnatural account of the basing relation could rule out beliefs being based on practical reasons without also (implausibly) ruling out the vast majority of our actions being so based.

5. Can Beliefs Be Based on Practical Reasons?

McCormick's essay "Can Beliefs Be Based on Practical Reasons?" takes up this issue. Her general conclusion, which I support wholeheartedly, is that assessment of beliefs and the processes of belief fixation and revision that people undergo must be cleanly detached from the evaluation of arguments and proofs. It is to some degree because of a misplaced connection between these that philosophers think you can't believe for practical reasons.

Initial intuition: When someone believes something because of a "blow to the head" (or enculturation, conditioning or some wholly non-discursive, non-argumentative cause), she believes what she does for no reason. Boghossian expands on this to distinguish associations in thought which are not based on reasons at all from inferences, the conclusions of which are based on good or bad reasons depending on the nature of the premises from which they are drawn.

McCormick cites Comesana and Kelly as arguing that when one believes something because of some practical factor (e.g. cases in which the content of what one's believes would be flattering if true and one believes because of this) one does not believe "for" a practical reason.

McCormick's reply: (1) One can believe for practical reasons and (2) "take" oneself to believe for practical reasons (where this taking isn't necessarily phenomenally conscious nor necessarily in conformity with one explicitly reports (to oneself or others) to be the grounds for one's belief). What distinguishes (a) believing for a reason from (b) a reason's (or factor's) "merely causing" one to hold a belief, is that in the case in which one believes for a reason, one "endorses" the connection between the reason and the belief for which one holds it, even if this endorsement is unconscious in the relevant sense. (3) And one can even be "correct, proper or rational" in endorsing the connection between one's practical reason for belief and the belief one holds on its basis. Indeed, (4) "Evidential reasons are also practical." When we believe on the basis of (good)

evidence, we do so, at least in part because doing so "contributes to the good in general" (McCormick, 2019, 227).

McCormick's cases: (1) Robert believes in God as a result of joining AA, where this decision involved deciding to adopt the beliefs required for participation in AA, but the decision was based on largely practical reasons. (2) Leary's Mary believes in God for partly practical reasons, though she is not described as taking herself to believe for practical reasons. (3) Susan, who is dying, believes that some part of her will live on and she does so "because it helps mitigate the concern she has for the pain of her loved ones" (2019, 227). "The feeling associated with the belief that some aspect of her being will continue to exist is supportive; it is part of what the belief is based on" (2019, 229).

6. The Limits to McCormick's Pragmatism

If we can believe **for** pragmatic reasons, why can't I, say, believe "at will" that there is a giant pink elephant in front of me if offered a million dollars to do so? In the course of answering this kind of question, McCormick describes some limits to her pragmatism.

"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" (2018, 640).

Challenge: What does "true" mean in this context? Can I hold moral or aesthetic beliefs without believing or "taking" their contents to be true in the sense of being accurate representations of mind-independent features of reality? For McCormick's proposal to be plausible "true" must be defined in a deflationary sense or treated as redundant. But then this is not a substantive limitation on doxastic agency: it's just saying that I cannot believe p while at the same time failing to do so.

I endorse the rest of McCormick's response however: "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" (2018, 640).

"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" (641).

Questions: What are the consequences for the metaphysics of mind of accepting the existence of believing for practical reasons? Is Bain's naturalized functionalism a better alternative to the normativism advanced by many of the critics of practical reasons? Isn't naturalized functionalism of this sort a better fit with science (and evolutionary psychology in particular) than the kinds of normative conception that rule out practical reasons for belief by definition?