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DOXASTIC AGENCY*

(Received 6 May, 1982)

1. DOXASTIC VOLUNTARISM

We sometimes speak of a person's beliefs as being warranted, justified or reasonable. We say that one ought or ought not believe certain things, and we occasionally blame a person for believing what we imagine he ought not believe. These ways of talking make it appear that the forming, if not the holding, of beliefs resembles in at least some important respects the performing of actions. The latter view – which I shall call *doxastic voluntarism*, or plain *voluntarism* for short – has it that believing something can, at least sometimes, be under the voluntary control of the believer, as it were, *in his hands*. A person might be free with respect to what he believes in roughly the ways in which he can be free with respect to what he *does*. Indeed if believing (or rather coming to believe) is a species of acting, then believing is simply one of the things an agent, suitably equipped, can do voluntarily or non-voluntarily.

One may, of course, deny that anything one does is done voluntarily, or hold that all one does is caused but that this is altogether compatible with one's doing some things voluntarily. One may argue, as well, that some of the things one does are uncaused or that they are subject to some special *form* of causation. These are topics I prefer not to broach here. I wish rather to discuss whether believing or the forming of beliefs can plausibly be regarded as voluntary in whatever sense (if any) ordinary actions may be regarded as voluntary.

I have suggested already that our usual ways of talking about belief appear to incorporate an element of voluntarism. Should one wish philosophical support for this way of treating beliefs, one need look no further than Descartes' Fourth Meditation. There Descartes appears to assimilate believing to one's affirming (via the will) conceptions or ideas produced in the 'understanding'. The latter, in themselves, are not beliefs. They resemble propositions towards which an agent may take a range of epistemic stances. One of

Philosophical Studies 43 (1983) 355–364. 0031–8116/83/0433–0355$01.00

these stances, an attitude of endorsing, let us say, comprises belief. Believing, on this view, is two-tiered. There is a neutral *content* of some sort, together with the acceptance of this content.

Descartes, of course, was interested chiefly in devising a principle – what Goldman (Goldman, 1980) has labeled a *doxastic decision principle* – that would enable an epistemic agent to act *responsibly*: plainly mental contents ought not be endorsed indescriminately. He settled on the notion that such contents might differ with respect to their relative clarity and distinctness. Suppose we take the latter to be a simple, non-relational, internal property that may be had or lacked by items entertained in the mind. Descartes' advice is that we endorse thoughts that incorporate this property and withhold endorsement from those lacking it.

More recently, Laurence Bonjour has championed a non-foundationalist species of voluntarism. Bonjour suggests, for example, that epistemic agents who accept unwarranted beliefs, violate their 'epistemic duty' (Bonjour, 1980, p. 65). To avoid backsliding of this sort, one must 'reflect critically upon one's beliefs' and 'accept' only those for which one possesses sufficient warrant (p. 63). On the face of it, Bonjour appears to differ from Descartes in advancing the notion that it is *beliefs*, rather than neutral mental contents, that are scrutinized then endorsed or rejected by the epistemic agent. It is not clear, however, how one's *accepting* a belief is related, on the one hand, to the *forming* of the belief, and on the other hand to the *holding* of it. Is it that rational epistemic agents inspect their beliefs and select some for endorsement, others for condemnation? Can such agents continue to hold a condemned belief? The difficulty is that, as Descartes saw, believing itself evidently incorporates a measure of endorsement, indeed this seems to be what distinguishes believing something from merely *thinking* of it. It seems best to suppose, then, that when Bonjour speaks of accepting and rejecting beliefs he has in mind a Cartesian notion of the rational formation and withholding of belief.

I shall not here be concerned with the details of either Descartes' or Bonjour's conceptions of endorsement. I want rather merely to point out that there is a fairly widespread tendency to think of the embracing of beliefs as a species of action. It need not be supposed that believing itself is an action. *S*'s believing that *p* seems not to be a special kind of *event*, but a *state* of a certain sort. Rather it is the formation or adoption of beliefs that appears to be something done. And, in common with other things done, belief-forma-

tion may be done well or badly, intelligently or stupidly, efficiently or carelessly. Epistemology, on such a conception, is largely *normative*. Its task is to set (or perhaps elucidate) the standards governing the rational adoption of belief.

I think that there is something right about these observations, but that what is right about them is apt to be misconceived by philosophers with certain theoretical axes to grind. These points may be brought home if one examines another widely-shared batch of pre-analytical ways of thinking about belief. These suggest that the getting and harboring of beliefs is not at all voluntary. How often do we *decide* to adopt a certain belief? To what extent are our beliefs under our control *at all*? In contrast to the picture painted by the voluntarist, our beliefs seem mostly *forced* on us. Or, if that is too strong, they come to us unanticipated and unbidden. We find that we believe this or that, we find ourselves incapable of believing certain other things. The skeptic's doubts about tables, chairs, trees and minds are, we suspect, philosophical artifacts and in an important sense *frivolous*. It is not that these doubts could not be warranted, but that they do not reflect the skeptic's *real* beliefs about the world. To exorcise those, one needs more than a strong philosophical will.

The *phenomenology* of belief, then, as distinct from its epistemological conceptualization, looks distinctly non-voluntary. We speak of deciding whether or not to believe the testimony of a witness or the promises of a politician, but this seems another matter, one of determining an agent's trustworthiness or reliability perhaps. Beliefs about such things may generate beliefs about things previously doubted. In this way, beliefs appear to be among the products of reflection, but not strictly answerable to reflection. We believe, not because on reflection a certain thing seems worthy of belief, seems epistemically *valuable*, but because in reflecting we become *vulnerable* in certain ways to beliefs of certain sorts.

There is considerable tension, then, in our ordinary ways of thinking about belief. On the one hand, believers seem responsible for what they believe; they seem in this regard doxastic *agents*. On the other hand, believers appear to be passive; beliefs are not chosen or rejected, but simply held or not. In this regard, believers seem to be largely *at the mercy* of their belief-forming equipment. An adequate account of belief must, I think, make this tension intelligible, must, if possible, illuminate its source.

2. WILLING AND BELIEVING

To most of us it seems doubtful that beliefs can be acquired simply by performing an act of will. This, however, does not strike me as a *conceptual* truth about beliefs. If one takes belief exemplifications to be states of certain sorts (perhaps states with certain kinds of causal property) there seems to be no *a priori* reason why a belief could not be created by 'directly' willing it. In just the same way, it is a contingent fact that one cannot lift a book or illuminate a room simply by performing an appropriate act of will. Indeed these and similar feats might be easily managed by an agent equipped with telekinetic powers.

It will not do, in any case, to argue that the adoption of beliefs is not voluntary solely on the grounds that one cannot gain a belief merely by performing an act of will. Things done voluntarily may be done in this way, but they need not be. It may take little or nothing beyond an act of will on my part, for example, for me to move my finger. My paying a debt, however, or committing a crime requires more than a simple willing. Thus one may wish to distinguish *basic* acts (roughly, acts that may be performed simply by willing them) from *non-basic* acts (those dependent in some way on the performance of one or more basic acts), and contend that the adopting of beliefs, though not a basic act, is nevertheless an act, namely a non-basic act.

This move appears to account for the fact that the forming of beliefs, considered in itself, seems not to be under the immediate control of the will, and for the fact that we still seem to some extent responsible (hence criticizable) for the adoption of certain beliefs. On this view, one forms beliefs *by* doing certain other things – perhaps by examining evidence, testing hypotheses and the like. These activities might themselves be basic or they might be related in some way to further, appropriately basic, deeds.

I shall not here try to work out the details of such an account. I am unable to shake the conviction that it is a mistake to regard the adoption of beliefs as actions in *any* sense, whether basic or non-basic. This conviction is not founded solely on the observation tendered earlier that the forming of beliefs is not something that can be accomplished by a sheer act of will, but on the evident fact that our beliefs seem to come to us rather than issuing from us. Paying a debt is something I can set out to do; believing something is not. (Which is not to say that I might not set out to get myself to believe

something, a rather different matter.) Second, one convinced that the adoption of a belief is a non-basic act is obliged to produce some account of the basic acts thought to generate (in whatever way) the act of belief-adoption. It is not clear what those actions *could* be. There are no obvious candidates, certainly.[1] Nor is this to deny that I might be able to do a variety of things that can serve to inhibit or facilitate my acquisition of particular beliefs. I may elect to ignore evidence, to shut my eyes and plug my ears. I may make a special effort to locate facts favorable to a cherished hypothesis. But these activities are more akin to my doing things that inhibit or facilitate my catching cold, than to my doing things that generate (or if you like, constitute) my performance of a certain action.

It is a relatively uninteresting fact that belief-formation can be influenced in these (and similar) 'indirect' ways. If this is the extent to which beliefs fall under our control, then doxastic voluntarism seems much ado about very little. On the other hand, the voluntarist may avoid the trivilization of his view by convincing us somehow that belief incorporates actions in some more intimate way. This task, as the foregoing suggests, is fraught with difficulties.

3. THE FORMATION OF BELIEFS

What *is* involved in one's coming to have a belief? We speak of beliefs being *embraced, acquired* and *adopted*; of their being *formed, accepted* and *framed.* I have delibarately refrained from settling on one of these expressions as a general term for belief-acquisition because I suspect that each calls to mind different *sorts* of case. We speak, for instance, of beliefs being adopted, framed or accepted chiefly in contexts is which evidence is considered and weighed, where conclusions are drawn and verdicts pronounced. It is here, if anywhere, that belief-formation may resemble the purposive, reflective activity depicted by Descartes and Bonjour. It is not altogether obvious, however, that evidence-gathering is ordinarily directed toward the acquisition of beliefs. Members of a jury are instructed to pronounce on the force of testimony, not on their beliefs – indeed these may run in opposite directions. In such cases, beliefs formed have to do mainly with the force and character of evidence and only secondarily with the propositions putatively warranted by that evidence. Admittedly, it is a short step from '*S* believes that (the belief that) *p* is (or would be) warranted' to '*S* believes that *p*', but it *is* a step.

What is at issue, in any case, is the character of the process of belief-formation. It is not obvious how the example of legal deliberation illuminates the latter if the beleifs in question are beliefs about the warrant of certain propositions. Is it fair to say that *these* beliefs are adopted in some voluntaristic fashion or rather that they are somehow *induced*? If, on the other hand, the example is meant to illustrate jurors' adoption of appropriate first-order beliefs (those beliefs, namely, that they have come to believe are warranted), it appears to fall short of its mark.

Similar considerations apply, I think, to cases in which investigators employ inductive techniques in the testing of empirical hypotheses. I do not wish to deny, of course, that these and related activities can and do lead to our coming to have beliefs. My suggestion is only that this is not their primary aim and that they are, in consequence, unsatisfactory models of belief-formation in general.

The source *par excellence* of our beliefs about the physical world – our so-called empirical beliefs – is perception.[2] It is hardly surprising, then, that attempts to account for the warrant of such beliefs regularly focus on perceptual beliefs. It is with respect to beliefs of this sort that voluntarists seem most inclined to offer prescriptions and advice. Perhaps, then, by examining the determinants of perceptual belief we may come to an understanding of the relation between believing and willing.

First, I wish to suggest that perceiving is non-contingently a matter of belief-acquisition.[3] This is not to say that perception might not involve a good deal more as well. It suggests, in any case, that the two-tiered characterization of belief formation advanced by Descartes, whatever its merits, does not apply to ordinary perceptual belief. We do not first perceive our surroundings, then come to hold beliefs about what we perceive. The original perceptual experience is itself epistemic, belief-saturated. It is not, of course, that beliefs acquired in this way are always true. Perceptual error is common enough. Nor is it necessary that one always 'believe one's eyes'. I shall say more on this in a moment.

If I am right in assimilating perception to belief-acquisition, then it is scarcely surprising that we feel perceptual beliefs to be thrust upon us. If seeing, for example, is believing, then we have no choice in what to believe when we gaze about ourselves. We may, to be sure, elect to shut our eyes or to look more closely, but this seems only a matter of opening or closing one's doxastic floodgates.

Second, I submit that the perceptual beliefs one acquires are determined in some measure by beliefs one already possesses. It goes without saying that they are determined as well by the character of the items perceived, the conditions under which these are encountered and the state of one's sensory apparatus. Whether I take what is before me to be a tree, an elm or merely an obstacle will depend (in part) on my beliefs about such things.[4] Whether (in this sense) I *see* an approaching cold front or merely a bank of clouds on the horizon will depend on my meteorological savvy.

The fact that perceivers come to a perceptual situation equipped with different beliefs explains how it is that two persons looking at the same state of affairs may ('in some sense') see differently. The beliefs they acquire will be shaped by beliefs already held. Further, their perceptual beliefs, like beliefs in general, may be characterized *de dicto* or *de re*. In describing what *S* perceives, we may characterize his perception *de re* if our interest is in the state of affairs perceived. If, in contrast, our interest lies in *S* (what information he has picked up, what he is likely to say or do), we shall want to characterize his perception *de dicto*. Do I see what a meteorologist sees when we both gaze at the horizon? Yes and no. The meteorologist acquires beliefs, picks up information to which I am in an important sense blind. Our subsequent behavior will be affected by our respective beliefs, hence we may say or do very different things.

There is latitude, then, in the beliefs one acquires by way of the senses but not the sort of latitude sought by the voluntarist. Perceptual beliefs are caused by an interaction between external stimulation (detected by one's senses) and the beliefs one has already. There is no room here (and certainly no need for) an additional act of will.

Finally, however, I should like to put forth the suggestion that the procedure that results in the acquisition of perceptual beliefs is not merely a passive reception of external stimulation, but a purposeful, intelligent *activity*. Perceivers move about their environment, exploring, investigating and manipulating what they find there. These activities are guided by beliefs held already and by wants and fears. They are guided as well by perceptual 'feedback': if an object appears in some way odd or suspicious, if the lighting is unusual, one may be obliged to look more closely or carefully than at other times. We keep our eyes peeled, prick up our ears when the occasion demands. If much is at stake, we may wish to examine things more cautiously still. These perceptual activities have the effect of *refining* perceptual beliefs,

rendering them less liable to error. And, in common with activities of other sorts, they may be done well or badly, intelligently or stupidly. They are *techniques* capable of embellishment and sophistication.

It is here, I think, that it makes sense to speak of the 'epistemically responsible agent', to speak of one's 'epistemic duty' and the like. The 'responsible' epistemic agent is, roughly, one who goes about the activity of information-gathering in a *suitable* fashion. What is 'suitable' will depend on a variety of matters difficult to pin down in a general way. It will depend, for example, on the *subject-matter* about which an agent comes to hold particular beliefs. Great care may be required if one's aim is to identify birds of a certain species. Painstaking scrutiny may be less important if one wishes merely to mark the presence of birds irrespective of species. Second, the circumstances – ambient illumination, condition of sensory mechanisms and the like – may mandate special precautions not called for in the ordinary case. One decides on a tie or a coat under artificial illumination only at risk.

In general we *expect* one another to undertake the task of information-gathering in an appropriate way. We condemn *S* for not looking more closely before reporting his sighting of a blue-crested finch; we chastise *T* for not listening more carefully to the gurgling sound produced by our De Soto. We find persons liable for things not done, for investigations not undertaken or undertaken with insufficient care. We enjoin one another (and of course ourselves) to 'act responsibly' in this regard, I think, because acting in this way tends to make our beliefs more dependable, more reliable, more likely to be true. It is our status as intelligent, belief-acquiring instruments that constitutes our status as epistemic agents. We do not choose what beliefs we acquire, but we have a hand in determining how we shall go about the business of gathering those beliefs. And this is a business that may be conducted responsibly or casually.

4. CONCLUSION

I have sought to provide an account of the relation between believing and willing that does justice to our seemingly inconsistent intuitions on these matters. One feels torn between regarding beliefs as resulting from forces one is powerless to manipulate and regarding them as states the occurence of which one may be held accountable for. I have rejected the notion that it might be useful to regard belief adoption as an act – whether basic or not –

subject to voluntary control. Such a conception seems utterly at odds with what I termed the phenomenology of belief. I suggested, instead, a characterization of the activity of information-gathering pertaining to perceptual beliefs that seemed to account both for these convictions and for the fact that procedures employed in the acquiring of beliefs are ones in which purpose and intelligence may be brought to bear. It is not that one has a choice in the beliefs that one forms, but that one has a say in the procedures one undertakes that lead to their formation. The notion of 'epistemic responsibility' attaches to the undertaking of appropriate procedures.

My suspicion is that techniques for information-gathering and belief-refinement are to be valued chiefly because they are dependable, they may be relied upon to produce beliefs that are more often than not true. This, in turn, raises the tantalizing possibility of a connection between what has been said here about doxastic agency and reliabilist accounts of justification. That connection cannot be explored in the space remaining, but it may be possible to see at the very least that the characterization of 'epistemic responsibility' I have defended here is not obviously *at odds with* the notion that beliefs may be justified in virtue of their having been produced by a certain reliable cognitive process. The latter may incorporate purposive, intelligent moves on the part of the believer.

I mention this point only because it has been argued (for example in Bonjour, 1980) that reliabilist accounts of warrant fail to do justice to the notions of epistemic agency and responsibility. It is true, certainly, that reliabilists may wish to reject Cartesian forms of voluntarism. One's coming to have a belief does not seem to be something done in this sense. It is still possible to speak of epistemic responsibility and agency, however, if one focuses, not on the ways (if indeed there *are* any) in which agents select beliefs, but on the ways in which they select belief-generating procedures. It is here that talk of doxastic agency appears to have its most obvious application.

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NOTES

* The author is grateful for support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and from the Faculty Grant-In-Aid Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is

indebted as well to Robert Audi for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of the present paper.

[1] One might think that such things as evidence-gathering and testimony-weighing are plausible candidates. Such activities may certainly *lead* to the formation of beliefs. It does not follow from this, however, that belief-formation is itself an action, much less that it is an action generated by the examination of evidence or testimony.

[2] I do not say that *all* of our empirical beliefs are perceptual in origin, only that a significant number of them are.

[3] The claim that perception is epistemic, that to perceive is to acquire beliefs is amplified and defended in Heil, 1982.

[4] One may object that what is required in such cases is not a set of beliefs but a set of beliefs together with appropriate *concepts*. I concede this requirement, but I am not altogether convinced that the possession of concepts cannot be analyzed by reference to beliefs. If this were so, then to possess a concept of *X* would be to harbor a belief of a certain sort (perhaps a belief about what counts as an instantiation of *X*). If I am wrong about this, then concepts as well as beliefs will have to be thought of as determinants of perceptions.

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