

Virtue and voluntarism

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Abstract My aim here is to characterize a certain type of ‘virtue approach’ to questions of responsibility for belief; then to explore the extent to which this is helpful with respect to one fundamental puzzle raised by the claims that we have, and that we do not have, voluntary control over our beliefs; and then ultimately to attempt a more exact statement of doxastic responsibility and, with it a plausible statement of ‘weak doxastic voluntarism.’

Keywords Epistemic virtue · Responsibility for belief · Doxastic voluntarism

1 Three tenets of virtue and responsibility/the sad case of John and Jill

The type of virtue theory I am working from may be introduced as involving three central tenets. These I briefly set forth here, having defended them at somewhat greater length elsewhere.¹

(i) Responsibility (epistemic praiseworthiness or blameworthiness) with respect to our beliefs depends on the presence or absence of certain underlying truth-related attitudes. The suitable presence of these attitudes is shown in such virtues as care, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, and a dispassionate regard for truth; and their corresponding absence in such vices as carelessness, closed-mindedness, intellectual cowardice, and a tendency to wishful thinking. These qualities of intellectual character

¹ See my longest treatment of these in Montmarquet (1993). An account closer to the one presented here may be found in Montmarquet (2000). More recent treatments, emphasizing point (ii) just below, the role of context, would include Montmarquet (forthcoming)

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are distinguished, in the first instance, by being subject to our control: one can be asked or even commanded to be more careful, more open-minded, less given to wishful thinking, and so forth. In this respect, such qualities differ from mere epistemic capacities like good visual acuity, memory, or reasoning abilities, which are not subject to any such type of control.

(ii) These virtues are correctly applied relative to such factors as the moral and other practical consequences at stake in being wrong (or right) with respect to a given belief content. Thus, we cannot speak simply of an ‘intellectual duty not to jump to any hasty conclusion’ but of the blameworthiness of such haste when it *matters*. A due regard for truth, as manifest in such qualities as careful reasoning or open-mindedness will be virtuous—and its absence a vice—depending especially on such consequences as would ensue in a given case if one is mistaken. Thus there is no purely general intellectual duty to be “regardful of truth”—if this means some special effort that must be taken, regardless of circumstances (to have true, and avoid false, beliefs).

(iii) Inasmuch as the application of these qualities is often under our control and enters into the process of forming and continuing to hold given beliefs, belief itself is under our direct control, at least with respect to certain of its praiseworthy or blameworthy *aspects*. This virtuous exertion (or unvirtuous failure to exert) is direct in that it does not involve the performance of some act whose purpose is to affect one’s beliefs. Doing something (e.g., carving) carefully is not a matter of doing something—exerting special efforts of something called “care”—which, one hopes, will cause certain changes (e.g., in the movements of one’s hand while carving); it is rather a *way* of doing one thing.² Likewise, care in believing is not a matter of doing something—performing an act of “exerting care” intended to produce changes in one’s beliefs—but, rather, a way of doing one thing: arriving at (or maintaining) a given belief. Our doxastic control, in a convenient phrase, is thus *incomplete but not indirect*.

An example will help to elucidate these points, and to explore their bearing on the issues to come:³

John is chair of a church committee that must decide whether to promote Jill to the post of Youth Director. He has heard gossip concerning an affair Jill allegedly has been having with a married member of the congregation. In part because John does not like Jill (earlier she rebuffed his own advances), John believes these stories. In fact, they are not true—but let us stipulate: if they were true, they would be highly relevant from the committee’s standpoint. Sincerely believing them to be true, John repeats them to the committee; as a result, Jill is unjustly denied the position. Disheartened and disillusioned, Jill leaves her faith, eventually ending up “on the streets.”

Now, in this case, John’s morally blameworthy action is rooted in blameworthy (morally and epistemically blameworthy⁴ belief. What he has done (pass along his ‘information’ to the committee) would not be wrong—on the supposition that there

² Compare on this point “Gilbert Ryle’s classic discussion of “minding concepts” in Ryle (1949).

³ I employ this same example, offering a more extended analysis of it in Montmarquet (2005).

⁴ The belief is in the first instance “epistemically” blameworthy in involving a distinctly epistemic vice; given the *context*, however, given the moral consequences of this epistemic shortfall, it seems perfectly correct to describe the belief as “morally” blameworthy as well. A similar example of what would surely count as epistemically and morally blameworthy belief is offered in William Clifford’s more famous case of the boat owner who rents out a leaky boat, believing it to be safe, resulting in the deaths of those who trusted him. See Clifford (1986).

had been nothing faulty in his doxastic state (his beliefs concerning Jill). For it has been stipulated that he is *supposed*, on this occasion, to convey his beliefs regarding Jill's morality or lack thereof. John's belief, I claim, is blameworthy in turn because it involved such vices as wishful thinking. Wishful thinking is a suitable vice in this regard because it can be understood as involving, fundamentally, a lack of due effort (concern) regarding truth. For such thinking involves, certainly, a failure to suppress one's wishes—or the influence they might exert on one's beliefs. But John's guilt, notice, too, is also *contextual* in nature. It matters very much in this case, what John thinks of Jill; her future is at stake. If, by contrast, John had formed a kind of momentary impression, also based on wishful thinking, that Jill (seen at a distance, wearing a skin-colored bathing suit) was naked, there might be nothing particularly wrong with that. For there might be no reason to suppose that John should be rigorously truth-regarding, steadfastly resistant to his desires and wishes as they might influence his beliefs, as he walks along a California beach.⁵

2 The paradox of responsibility/against the 'indirect control' view

The *paradox of doxastic responsibility*, as I will call it, may be brought out by the preceding example. John's moral responsibility (blameworthiness) for his action is apparently grounded, as we pointed out, in his blameworthiness (thus responsibility) for his relevant belief(s). But, presumably, responsibility for belief would require that John have some type of *control* with respect to what he believes. More particularly, if John is to be held directly responsible for what he believes, John must surely have something like direct control with respect to this.⁶ At this point, then, we have an apparent paradox, for it does not seem that John has, or can have, any such control over his beliefs. John did not *will* to have this belief; nor was this belief, in any other notable way, directly responsive to his will. As most philosophers have agreed, belief is not directly subject to the will.⁷

Now, my own solution to this paradox has already been indicated. Even though we cannot believe at will, we do (in many instances) *have control with respect to the very aspects of belief for which we are most plausibly held responsible*. Notice in this regard that persons are not praised or blamed merely for believing or not believing something—irrespective of grounds. Nor are they praised or blamed for their beliefs (even considering their grounds), irrespective of context and virtue. John—or, for that matter, his dog “Rusty”—may presently have a very well grounded perceptual belief that it is raining outside, without being praiseworthy for having such a

⁵ One might well compare this to the better known case of Leopold Bloom, from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, who goes about Dublin forming (or call to mind) all sorts of ill-considered, often untrue, but basically harmless, spontaneous convictions. Here, I want to say, we do not judge Bloom to be 'blameworthy' in any, or most any, of these cases inasmuch as nothing matters on his getting things right—at least not then and there. Even if he is 'careless,' he is so in circumstances when care is not notably required (I note, as well, that even to call someone 'careless' when care is manifestly not required, is at best a kind of joke.).

⁶ See Zimmerman (1997). I reply to Zimmerman's argument—that we are never (directly) responsible for our beliefs—in Montmarquet (1999).

⁷ Here I cite the main contemporary source of opposition to doxastic voluntarism, namely: Bernard Williams' celebrated “Deciding to Believe” essay, in Williams (1973). A still more 'classical' position taken against any notion of doxastic voluntarism would be David Hume's in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section V, pt. II. Advocates of the 'indirect control view' (see note 8 below) are also a source of opposition to voluntarism.

belief. Two medieval physicians may have equally *ill*-grounded diagnoses of a patient's condition — yet we can still praise the one for care and effort he has put into his, while faulting the other for his lack of such virtues.

In short, we do not seem to want, or to have need, to judge believers for anything other than what clearly is subject to their control, namely, their exercise of, or failure to exercise, certain epistemic virtues. That, in outline, is the case I want to make. The most popular *rival theory*, seemingly, is this.

While we lack direct control over what we believe; we clearly can *indirectly* affect what we believe—through our actions and failures to act. Thus, John should have performed such acts as would have been involved in checking on the veracity of the stories concerning Jill. Insofar as actions, and failures to act, are paradigmatically things subject to our control, we do have a good measure of (indirect) control over our beliefs. On that basis, John may be judged in his beliefs and consequent actions concerning Jill.⁸

No doubt, we have such indirect control over some of our beliefs. The question of whether this notion is sufficiently robust to account for the kind of doxastic responsibility we want to ascribe agents like John. Now John, according to this view, is directly blameworthy for such acts (omissions) as failing to investigate the stories told about Jill. Well, we may agree that John should have made such investigations; but this suggestion, notice, only pushes the problem back one step. For John's failure to investigate was undoubtedly rooted in his *beliefs* that he did not need to investigate, that he already had sufficient evidence. Those beliefs were themselves blameworthy no doubt; but what act, one wonders, is to blame for *them*? Perhaps one could find some other failure at the level of action, but it, too, given the nature of the situation, would be grounded in a defective belief—for by now the real source is becoming abundantly clear—if it were not already so. It is John's defective, truth-related (or unrelated) *attitude* that is ultimately at fault; and not any act productive of that deficient attitude. All of John's relevant beliefs and acts here are rendered blameworthy—by the same lack of regard for truth, the same willingness to believe what he clearly wants to believe!

Similar remarks apply—we may add here—to the often drawn distinction between belief and *acceptance*.⁹ L. J. Cohen set forth the difference in this way:

to accept that *p* is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that *p*—that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for immediate purposes only) as a premiss in some or all contexts for one's own and others' proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc. . . . Belief that *p*, on the other hand, is a disposition to feel is true that *p*, whether or not one goes along with the proposition as a premiss. (368)

Now, what is especially important here is that, according to Cohen, acceptance is subject to one's control (being essentially decisional in nature), whereas belief, being a mere disposition, will not be.¹⁰ Thus, in our present case, an acceptance theorist would

⁸ On this way of understanding doxastic responsibility (or culpable ignorance) as action-relative, see particularly Price (1954), Stocker (1982), Heil (1983), Smith (1983), Naylor (1985), and Leon (2002).

⁹ On this, see particularly Cohen (1989, 1992), Bratman (1992), Lehrer (1990), Church (2002).

¹⁰ Cohen says (369) that "acceptance that *p* . . . is voluntary. It is decidable at will, while belief that *p* is not. You may decide to believe a friend, that is, to trust his word. You may even decide to believe *in* him, that is, to have confidence in his abilities. But you cannot decide to believe *that* it will rain tomorrow. . . ."

likely hold that it does not matter what John believes concerning Jill; he may “believe in his heart” that she is completely guilty. What matters is that he should not have *accepted* her guilt—at least not for purposes of the committee and its deliberations.

He should not accept this—but why not? The answer, presumably, is that he knows, or should know, that the evidence for this is weak. But that would seem to imply that he *believes*, or should believe, the evidence to be so. Evidently, then, John remains culpable with respect to some relevant belief-state: John is evidently culpable in believing that the evidence for Jill’s guilt is not weak. If he were not culpable in believing this, one could hardly fault him for believing and utilizing the propositions supported by this evidence.

So we are still left, seemingly, with a case of doxastic responsibility (blameworthiness). Still, as a last resort, an acceptance may offer that John should *accept* the proposition—regardless of whether he believes it—that the evidence is weak. But I am not sure what this contention accomplishes—again, beyond pushing the difficulty back one step. If John *believes* the evidence to be adequate, presumably he does so for what he regards as good reasons. In the light of these reasons, it is unclear why he should not also accept the story as a basis for action.

3 Replies to objections

One line of objection might challenge my analogy between believing and carving carefully:

You have observed that forming a belief carefully is, like carving carefully, a matter of doing one thing in a certain way—not performing an inner act of “exerting care” thereby to affect one’s subsequent whistling or belief formation. Very well, in that case since carving carefully will refer to an act of carving, we must take it that believing carefully refers to an act of believing. But then it will follow that, in your view, we must have direct control over acts of believing after all.

But believing, notice, is *unlike* carving in this relevant sense. From the moment one begins to move the knife, one is carving; in the other case, we are not “believing” from the start, but moving *to* the formation of a belief.¹¹ The effect of this difference is that in carving carefully one could be said to be shaping or directing one’s carving quite directly. Here, then, we are not limited to saying that we control an “aspect” of the carving process. We have sufficient control over its *various* aspects (speed, direction, etc.) to speak of control over it (*tout court*). And not only that: we are able to exert this control with an eye to some relevant goal-state: I am carving in this way so as to produce a wooden dagger. Again, though, nothing like this holds in the case of belief. Whatever control I may have over this process (e.g. in how carefully or open-mindedly I carry it out), I am not controlling, I am not shaping an ongoing “believing process” and still less am I shaping it to some specific end.¹²

Now, though, it may be complained that, by these lights, we should view doxastic control and responsibility as *merely indirect*: a matter of making certain virtuous

¹¹ In Aristotelian terms, this is the distinction between *energeia* and *kinesis* (between an actualization like seeing and a mere process like walking).

¹² In fact, if I am engaged in a process of bringing about a certain belief (my target state), this will be a case of *indirect* control of belief via action (akin to carrying out Pascal’s famous recommendations for acquiring faith (“taking holy water, having masses said,” and so forth)).

efforts (acts) that, one hopes, will have a salutary *effect* on what is going to happen partly as a result of this effort. This brings us, I think, to the very heart of the matter: how, at bottom, the kind of ‘aspectual’ (or ‘incomplete control’) view I endorse differs from the ‘indirect control’ view. Consider, in this regard, the following perfectly ordinary case: I am doing some important calculations, say, doing my tax return. In this instance, I might both try to be careful (an application of virtue) and turn off the television (an action) expecting or hoping that both of these would have a salutary effect on my eventual beliefs (fewer errors in my results). Notice, however, to describe the application of this virtue (care) in the same terms as my turning off the television—as an act taken with an eye to producing salutary effects on my beliefs—misses the relevant difference between these.

Notice, further, this difference is not that there is a causal relation (between one’s efforts and one’s results) only in the action and not the virtue case; nor does it lie in the intended results of one’s intervention, as these are the same. The difference is rather to be explained in these terms:

A person is involved in an ongoing process, involving certain efforts put forth to achieve a certain result. Now, an aspect of these efforts may involve such epistemic virtues as care. As this process continues, this person may also undertake one or more acts, designed to have the same effects (as the care) on her results. These are distinguished, however, in that they are not merely aspects of her on-going efforts to carry out the activity in question, but *separate efforts*, taken with an eye to affecting the results of that activity. These collateral efforts are not themselves exhibitions of virtue or vice (epistemic or otherwise) but may in turn involve such virtues or vices as a *further* aspect of them.

The difference, then, between these approaches to doxastic responsibility lies in this. On the ‘indirect’ approach, all responsibility for belief is, in effect, assimilated to the kind of responsibility I have for my act of turning off the television—but this responsibility, I claim, is derivative of some more basic responsibility an agent has for the beliefs underlying that act. By contrast, I recognize that, at the most basic level, responsibility for belief is grounded not in such collateral acts, but in such qualities as underlie the belief process itself.

A third, and quite distinct, point of criticism would involve a charge of *circularity*. Responsibility for belief depends on the amenability of certain qualities to voluntary control. But what is it for a belief to be voluntary. I reject any notion of ‘strong voluntarism’—i.e., any notion that we can simply will the having or not having of relevant belief contents. But what can one say, then, concerning any notion of non-strong (‘weak’) voluntarism? Is it enough to say that ‘weakly voluntary belief’ is belief dependent on qualities that are themselves subject to our voluntary control? That does sound circular—thus, Jonathan Kvanvig (1996) wrote of an earlier account of mine:

Montmarquet seems to be on a journey with one foot nailed to the floor. A requirement for a belief to be epistemically virtuous, we were told, is that it is voluntary in some sense, and the right sense of “voluntary” is one that allows for the formation of epistemically virtuous belief. Any decent student in a first philosophy class could see the circularity.

To remedy any such deficiency, let us begin by considering a trait of *moral* character: say, generosity. Now, when we say that such a trait is ‘directly dependent on the will’ or ‘subject to our direct control’—this means, I suggest, that, under suitable

circumstances, one is able to exhibit generosity *simply by trying*. A needy person asks me for some money; in this instance, I may exhibit generosity simply by trying to do so.¹³ Now, to be sure, such exhibitions do not make one a ‘generous person’ but we are not claiming that coming to have and keep *abiding* traits is directly subject to the will. We are only claiming that the *exhibition* of a trait—whether or not one has it as an abiding trait—is thus subject. Nor, for that matter, is the claim that merely trying is sufficient for some *ideal* level of generosity; the claim is only that, under the circumstances, ‘being generous’ (exhibiting what would reasonably count as an instance of generosity) is subject to the will.

Now the same, it seems to me, will be true of such epistemic virtues as ‘care in drawing conclusions’ or ‘open-mindedness.’ Merely by trying to exhibit these, we succeed—at least to some reasonable degree. If, while listening to your argument, I am genuinely trying to be open-minded (and not merely trying to seem open-minded!), I *am* being so—at least for now.

What of the corresponding vices? In this case, notice, the mere absence of a suitable effort may suffice in the case of a lack of generosity—and a mere absence *must* suffice in the case of an epistemic vices. That is, one may be guilty of a lack of generosity by merely failing to exert oneself in a generous way—or by deliberately exerting oneself ungenerously. By contrast—and this is a point to which we shall return—closed-mindedness (as an epistemic vice) consists—and can only consist—in a failure to exert oneself suitably with respect to ‘being open to possible sources of truth’ (i.e., open-mindedness). There is no such thing as ‘deliberate closed-mindedness’ (if this means a conscious effort to be closed to sources of truth and knowledge). While one may easily be closed to sources of truth and knowledge, one cannot simultaneously *recognize* something as such a source and try to be closed to it.

With that difference, the epistemic virtues and vices appear to be ‘voluntary’ or subject to the will in precisely the same way, and roughly the same degree, as the moral virtues and vices are, and have been taken by moral philosophers to be, subject to the will. To be sure, this notion of ‘subject to the will’ still needs to be spelled out; but on the face of things—at least at this point—doxastic responsibility (based on the epistemic virtues) seems no more threatened with circularity than would moral responsibility for actions (based on the moral virtues).

4 Doxastic responsibility characterized

As conceived here, responsibility for belief involves either epistemic praiseworthiness or blameworthiness (with respect to that belief). We begin with this suggested account of the former:

EpPr-1 Subject S is epistemically praiseworthy for believing B under circumstances C insofar as B’s formation or retention involves, on balance, the

¹³ Of course, I may also exhibit generosity by trying to do other things—e.g., by trying to make this person ‘feel better’ or ‘have something to last them for a while.’ Now, it might be insisted that if I could *only* be generous by willing such other things, that generosity would not be subject to my direct control. If so, the above requirement makes perfect sense. But even if one rejects that restricted view—this would amount to a broadened view of what ‘trying to be generous’ involves. It would, in effect, allow that when I am trying to make the needy man feel better, I am trying to be generous—a not implausible contention.

exhibition of an epistemic virtue *V* such that under *C*, *S*'s trying to exhibit *V* was sufficient for doing so.

This will do—at least as a first approximation. The case, however, of blameworthiness is more troublesome in exhibiting this asymmetry. As we just had occasion to observe, epistemic *vice*, unlike epistemic virtue, is a failure of positive effort (a failure of effort regarding truth), not a negative effort (an effort directed at falsehood). It is not that the closed-minded person is responsible for his vice because he consciously tries to shut his eyes to the truth, but that he fails to make suitable efforts regarding truth. (He doesn't, as the saying goes, 'try to fail' so much as 'fail to try'.) This consideration, then, might suggest the following view:

EpBI-1 Subject *S* is epistemically blameworthy for belief *B* under circumstances *C* insofar as *B*'s formation or retention involves, on balance, the exhibition of an epistemic vice *V* such that under *C*: (a) *S* was able to try to exemplify the corresponding virtue *V** and (b) trying to exhibit *V** would have been sufficient for exhibiting *V**.

But this could give rise to the following objection, or groups of related objections:

Your account of blameworthiness makes this require something very much like a "freedom to do otherwise." If so, you ought to require this for *praiseworthiness* as well. Moreover, even if one accepts **EpPr** exactly as is, **EpBI** clearly saddles responsibility for belief with all of the old issues and conundrums, regarding 'the ability to do otherwise.'

My reply here will be to make a strategic retreat—to a less metaphysically precarious position. This position would not require, for *praiseworthiness* or *blameworthiness*, an 'ability to do otherwise.' What it requires is simply that one's virtue or vice be *an expression of one's will*—where that covers both the case of exertions of effort and failures to exert effort. For this suffices, notice, to distinguish my position from the fundamentally 'externalist' (reliabilist) appeal to undifferentiated truth-conducive capacities like visual acuity and power of recall. These are not expressions of the will; nor of course can poor visual acuity or weakness of memory be construed as failures of will.

To achieve this, we introduce the following definition:

T is a *strictly truth-related* goal just in case it is impossible to pursue *T* without regarding oneself as also pursuing truth.

Thus, truth itself and the avoidance of error are such goals, but so are the distinctive ends of such virtues as open-mindedness and impartiality: namely, openness to truth, and equal regards for competing views insofar as they are equally likely to be sources of truth. The idea, then, is not that such ends, or even less the disposition to pursue them, is subject to our control—but that episodes consisting in trying to achieve them, that these will be thus subject. Hence, we claim:

EpPr-2 Subject *S* is epistemically praiseworthy for believing *B* under circumstances *C* insofar as *B*'s formation or retention in *C* involves, on balance, an epistemic virtue *V*, such virtue consisting in *S*'s making an effort to achieve a strictly truth related goal.

EpBI-2 Subject S is epistemically blameworthy for believing B under circumstances C insofar as B's formation or retention in C involves an epistemic vice V, such vice consisting in the absence of such truth-related effort as would have constituted in C an expression of virtue.

From these, then, we may derive:

DoxRe. Subject S is responsible for believing B if and only if S is either epistemically praiseworthy or blameworthy for believing B.

What, then, of 'weak voluntariness?' I take it that it is at least a necessary condition of such voluntariness that a belief be one for which its subject is directly responsible—or that it have such a belief in its causal ancestry? Mere causation, however, surely casts the net too wide. A given belief—even one for which a person is directly responsible—by odd association, could lead to most any, very surprising, belief.

Might we suppose, then, that beliefs are 'weakly voluntary' if they are *inferred* from ones for which we are directly responsible? This seems promising enough—however, it should be noticed that actually it does not cast the net very wide at all, for if (e.g.) I reach a belief with suitable open-mindedness, then infer something from it—we would reasonably allow that the open-mindedness also applies to inferred belief—allowing it to pass **DoxRe** (as well). Likewise, if I believe something out of wishful thinking and go on to infer something from it, intuitively, there seems no problem with allowing that my wishful thinking extends to the inferred belief as well. After all, if I were deficient in failing to check my wishful thinking in the first case, I am equally deficient in failing to check it in making the inference. My closing suggestion, then, would be this:

WeVol. A belief B is weakly voluntary for subject S just in case S is directly responsible (i.e., epistemically praiseworthy or blameworthy) for believing B.¹⁴

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¹⁴ This may seem a defect, then, in our formulation of **DoxRe**, for it would seem that one is only indirectly responsible for the inferred belief. One could, of course, suitably modify **DoxRe** to make this a case of indirect responsibility. However, if one does regard the virtue or vice as characterizing the forming of the inferred belief, I see no reason why this responsibility must be "indirect" Notice, it is not that the belief in question is a mere consequence of something for which one has direct responsibility. These **DoxRe** quite properly treats as matters of indirect responsibility. I am not, then, convinced that **DoxRe** needs tinkering on this point.

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