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COMPELLED BELIEF

Miriam McCormick

It is generally accepted that some agents have irresistible desires. Such desires can compel the agent to act in ways that deviate from what he judges it best to do. The agent may try hard to resist such a desire. But, if it is truly irresistible, he will fail. The action is thus compelled.¹

This paper will construct and defend an account of compelled belief as an analogue of compelled action.² To make sense of compelled *belief*, there must be times when the agent lacks the control to believe in accordance with his best judgment.³ The discussion will begin with a characterization of “compelled belief” and will argue that such a phenomenon can and does exist. Next, some of the implications of its existence will be discussed. First, it will be argued that if compelled belief is possible then certain kinds of evidentialist claims must be false. The final section will discuss what compelled beliefs might tell us about the nature of doxastic control and epistemic responsibility.

1. THE NATURE AND POSSIBILITY OF COMPELLED BELIEF

Just as there are times when our judgments about what we should do fail to determine what we actually do, it seems that our judgment of what we *ought* to believe will not

always determine what we *do* believe. Our beliefs are not always reactive to our deeper, more reflective judgments. An example of such a division that Gary Watson (2003) discusses is the following: I keep telling myself that the fact that seven heads in a row has come up does not increase the probability that the next flip will turn up tails and yet I keep expecting tails to come; this expectation seems to indicate that I believe tails will come up despite my more reflective judgment wherein I know the odds are even. In cases such as this, the conflict arises because one has trouble ridding oneself of a belief one thinks one ought not to have; it is not being affected by more reflective considerations. It is conflicts of this kind that can help form a conception of compelled belief.

Many of our beliefs arise involuntarily and are never scrutinized—are perhaps even carelessly unscrutinized. But compulsion requires more than carelessness. An action is compelled only if the agent could not avoid performing it even if he were to believe that, all things considered, he ought to refrain from performing it. It seems, analogously, a belief is compelled only if the believer could not abandon it even if he were to believe that, all things considered, he ought not to believe it. The present discussion will thus focus on the *retention* of belief rather than acquisition. We

can thus define a compelled belief or *CB* as follows:

CB: A belief *b* is compelled for *S* during *t* if and only if

- (1) *S*'s best epistemic judgment⁴ during *t*, all things considered, dictates that he abandon *b* and
- (2) *S* cannot abandon *b* during *t*.

There are beliefs that may seem compelled in certain ways that do not conform to this definition of compelled belief. I may be compelled to believe the conclusion of sound argument or to believe there is a tree in front of me when I see a tree, but not at the expense of what I consider my best judgment.⁵ There are many beliefs that are irresistible, beliefs that it seems I cannot give up. Hence an irresistible belief is defined the same as *CB* above, absent condition (1). Therefore compelled beliefs are a subclass of irresistible beliefs; they are those irresistible beliefs that my best judgment unsuccessfully demands I abandon. The nature and existence of compelled beliefs must be explained because if beliefs of this kind exist, they lend support to the view that there is a place for control in the doxastic realm; for cases of compelled belief seem to reveal a lack of control which we normally do have. Further it will be shown that the very possibility of the phenomenon here called "compelled belief" has been denied while the existence of "irresistible beliefs" is not contentious.

Given the focus on the retention rather than the forming of beliefs, what will be of concern is the gap between appreciating a belief as unwarranted and the abandonment of the unwarranted belief. What must be better understood so that the possibility of compelled belief can be assessed is the relationship between the recognition that a belief is illegitimate and its being abandoned. What happens after such recognition takes place? Is it plausible that there are times when such recognitions

will be entirely ineffectual, where one *cannot* give up a belief even if one thinks that one ought to? It will be helpful in answering this question to look at what supposedly keeps us from being responsible believers. If we work hard enough we should be able to create and maintain belief structures that will approximate that of the ideal epistemic agent, which could help us avoid lapses in good judgment. A closer look at the kinds of barriers that keep us from being responsible believers will help in assessing if these may sometimes be insurmountable. Consider the supposed gap between appreciation of a belief's illegitimacy and its abandonment. What causes such a gap? In John Heil's discussion of these issues (1984), he is quite vague on the causes, saying only that there is some deficiency in the believer's total psychological state that allows him (i) to fail properly to integrate his appreciation of certain facts and so (ii) to continue to harbor beliefs that are at odds with his better epistemic judgment.

Alfred Mele makes use of his discussion of akratic action to have some more to say about the nature of this breakdown. Mele has pointed out that akratic action occurs when evaluation and motivation diverge. One's evaluations of which desires should be acted on do not always correspond to their motivational strength. One of Mele's examples is the following: Someone with a severe fear of flying may judge that his flying would be better than his not flying on a particular occasion, and yet be so anxious that he would rather not board the plane. Similarly, says Mele, "The assessments of evaluations that ground decisive better judgments about matters of *belief* need neither fully determine nor exactly gauge the causal power of belief-influencing items. This opens the door to the possibility of a mismatch between determinants of belief (e.g., salience) and one's better judgment" (Mele 1987, p. 119). Heil makes a similar point when he says, "It is one thing to appreciate the evidence, another thing to

be moved by one's appreciation of it" (Heil 1984, p. 70).

The cause of the mismatch between appreciation and motivation can be further diagnosed if one recognizes the diverse determinants of belief, as well as the multiple reasons why one might judge that one ought not to hold a belief. One can think that a certain kind of belief-influencing item *ought* to be causally efficacious but this evaluation need not correspond to the actual strength of this influence. So perhaps I think that I ought to pay attention to the mounting evidence that my boyfriend wants to end our relationship (including his telling me repeatedly that he seriously doubts we have a future together) but I find myself, against my better judgment, attending to the way he looks into my eyes, and the tender way he holds my hand and so continue to believe that we will soon be married and have a family.

To further understand what it would mean for a belief to be compelled, it is useful to reflect on the nature of irresistible desires that may result in compelled action. The most detailed account of such desires is found in chapter 5 of Mele's *Springs of Action*. Mele there defines a desire *D* as being literally irresistible for *S* at *t* if there is no strategy for resisting *D* open to *S*. What it means for a resistance strategy to be "open to *S*" is given careful elaboration. For our purposes, we can summarize it thus: For a resistance strategy to be open, it must be "both representationally and motivationally open" to the agent and the agent must have the "physical and psychological skills and capacities necessary to execute the strategy in such a way that he intentionally brings it about that he does not perform an intentional action on the basis of *D*" (Mele 1992, p. 102). Mele is also careful to point out that a desire's irresistibility must be relativized both to specific agents and to specific times.

Consider a weak-willed pie-eater, Fred, who had successfully resisted desserts for

a month. He has strategies of self-control at his disposal; he could have refused to focus his attention on the yumminess of the pie, he could have promised himself a reward for resisting. And if he had employed such a strategy, he could have augmented his motivation to the point where he might have refrained from the akratic action. If the action resulted from an irresistible desire, this is not the case; he had no means at his disposal that would allow him to resist the desire.

The account given here of compelled belief has much in common with this account of irresistible desire. If one lacks the capacity to make the belief-influencing item which is in line with one's better judgment causally efficacious—that is, if there is no effective strategy open to an agent so that she can successfully resist believing what she judges she ought not to believe—the belief is compelled. So consider again my belief about my boyfriend. There seem to be strategies I can employ to make my evaluations efficacious. For example, I can make myself repeat the advice I gave friends who were unwilling to face painful truths and vividly recall their histories each time I see that tender look. But if there is no strategy open to me by means of which I can successfully resist believing that we have a rosy future ahead, then that belief is compelled.⁶

Other conceptions of irresistible desires can also help shed light on the phenomenon of compelled belief. The usual representatives of irresistible desires are desires of addicts. Addictive desires seem to compel the agent to act—often contrary to his best judgment. R. J. Wallace has argued that what is distinctive about "A-desires" (desires for things to which one is addicted) is that they are "resilient," meaning that they are "unresponsive to deliberative reflection" (Wallace 1999, p. 629). We have seen that this is also what is distinctive about compelled beliefs; they are resilient, in that they remain despite our evaluations of them.

There are some possible asymmetries between irresistible desires and compelled beliefs that will now be considered. An objection to Mele's account of irresistible desires is the following (IDe represents Mele's definition of irresistible desires):

Suppose that[,] seeing his youngest daughter flailing about in the lake twenty yards away in clear and immediate danger of drowning, S desires to save her. Owing to his love for his daughter and to his grasp of the situation, S is incapable of wanting to resist that desire and of wanting not to save his daughter. IDe entails that S's desire to save his daughter is irresistible but that is plainly false. Effective irresistible desires to *A* *compel* agents to *A*; an agent possessed of an irresistible desire is a victim of a power beyond his control, and any action generated by such a desire is accordingly unfree. (Mele 1992, p. 101)

Mele responds by saying that, indeed, this is an irresistible desire but it is not the case that all effective irresistible desires compel agents; irresistible desires for courses of actions that are fully supported by one's own values do not *force* behavior upon one or render one a victim.

It is here that the analogy between compelled beliefs and irresistible desires breaks down and compelled beliefs must be seen as more analogous to those actions that *are* forced upon one by irresistible desires, i.e., compelled actions. A belief that is fully supported by all of one's values may be irresistible but it is not compelled; a compelled belief *must* be at odds with one's best judgment about what to believe. For me to be compelled to believe something, it seems there must be a sense in which I am divided, overpowered and a victim.

Another disanalogy which shows that compelled beliefs are more akin to compelled actions than to irresistible desires concerns the criteria needed for successful resistance. One is successful in resisting a desire if one does not act on it; but it seems it is simply

possessing the belief that is the issue for the compelled believer. Compelled beliefs are likely to be beliefs that are motivated by certain desires, interests, and biases. The problem for the compelled believer is that he cannot resist being motivated to believe, even if he disapproves of these belief-influencing items. In the realm of action, the agent is trying (unsuccessfully) to have certain desires not influence his action. In the doxastic realm, he is trying (unsuccessfully) to have certain desires and emotions not influence his beliefs.

Is it possible, then, that one's reflective evaluations about what to believe are *incapable* of being efficacious, with the result that one has a compelled belief? There seems to be nothing that rules out this possibility—why there cannot be times when the gap between appreciation and abandonment *cannot* be closed.

Now, we can see this is *possible* if we resort to science fiction. An evil demon may make sure that any time it appears that I am successful in closing the gap, I am thwarted and the demon causes my belief to be retained. Can we find less bizarre cases that point to the lack of control, where the lack of control stems from the agent's psychology rather than from evil demons? Heil says that the incontinent believer is "typified by the psychoanalytic patient who has acquired what might be termed an intellectual grasp of his plight, but whose outlook evidently remains unaffected . . . he continues to harbor beliefs, desires and fears that he recognizes to be at odds with his better epistemic judgment" (Heil 1984, p. 69). Heil is confident that, after repeated reminders and the passage of time, the import of what the patient has all along recognized will begin to take hold so that he "can be restored to wholeness." There are strategies open to this patient, with his therapist's help, that can be employed so that the "apprehension can be made to sink in." But if we remember that a belief is compelled only during a

period of time, it seems quite plausible that there is a period of time during which this patient's therapy is incapable of having the apprehension sink in, or that even once it has sunk in, certain events may trigger lapses. A vivid example of such a case is illustrated in the film, *A Beautiful Mind*, the Hollywood version of the biography of mathematician John Nash. Even after the main character (portrayed by Russell Crowe) comes to the intellectual recognition that people he thought were real are, in fact, hallucinations (based on the evidence that over the years they did not age), there are still times when he is unable to resist the belief-influencing item (namely, his *seeing* them) which leads to his conversing with people who he knows are not really there; one may say, believing they are there even while recognizing that he ought not to have such a belief.

However, it is not only severe mental illness that can lead to this incapacity. A belief's centrality or the painfulness of its loss may make it impossible, even for perfectly healthy people, to abandon it—even while appreciating its illegitimacy. Consider someone who has grown up in a fundamentalist tradition and believes that the Bible is literally true. This person may come to conclude that this belief is epistemically suspect, and that he should give it up. Now we can imagine that it would be very difficult to break the habit of believing in something inculcated at a very early age and reinforced throughout one's life—just as it is very difficult to give up smoking after twenty years even when one decides one should. And in both cases it seems *possible* that, for certain people for certain periods of time, giving up what is an integral part of who they are and what they do would be not only difficult, but impossible.

Psychological research on a phenomenon termed "belief perseverance" shows that compelled belief may be even more widespread than has been here suggested. This research shows that people's beliefs tend to persist

even after all the evidence from which they were derived has been discredited—particularly if these beliefs are central to an explanatory structure that has been adopted (Kassin and Studebaker 1998). For example, in one study, subjects read case-studies suggesting that firefighters were either cautious types or risk-takers and then were asked to generate an explanation for this correlation. They were later told that the information they were given was totally false but the subjects clung to their newly created beliefs even though the evidentiary basis for them was invalidated. These studies seem to indicate that it can be difficult to give up beliefs even when one sees that one should.⁷

2. EVIDENTIALISM

It may seem to some that the very idea of one's best judgment of what to believe deviating from what one actually believes is incoherent. Such deviation would be conceptually impossible if the conjunction of the following two propositions were impossible: (1) "S consciously holds a judgment that there is insufficient reason for his believing p" and (2) "S believes p." This conjunction may well seem like a conceptual impossibility, if we think we can believe only what we take to be true and we can take something to be true only if we think we have good reasons or evidence that point to its truth. Jonathan Adler espouses such a view in his recent book, *Belief's Own Ethics*. He tells us that when he talks of the "concept of belief" he means what it is to "hold a proposition true." It is thus conceptually impossible, he argues, "to maintain a belief in open defiance of the evidence." For you to *really* believe *p* you need to take yourself to have adequate evidence (or epistemic reason) for *p*. Following Adler, this view of belief will be called *evidentialism*.

Adler argues for evidentialism mainly by arguing that the incoherence of a number of assertions (inspired by Moore's Paradox) can

be understood only if evidentialism is correct. The argument goes like this: If I believe something then I must be willing to assert what I believe. But to assert something is to claim that it is true. So to say I believe p is just another way of stating p . This can be seen by the incoherence of the following assertion, "It is raining, but I do not believe it is raining." Adler would add that the following is equally incoherent: "It is raining but I lack sufficient evidence that it is raining," which (if assertion expresses belief) would also show that the following assertion is incoherent "I believe it is raining, but I lack sufficient evidence that it is raining." So Adler concludes, "We cannot recognize ourselves as believing p while believing that our reasons or evidence are not adequate to its truth and conversely" (Adler 2002a, p. 32). And the "cannot" is conceptual, not psychological.

However, Adler's "incoherence tests" do not settle the matter of what is conceptually possible. All they do is tell us that certain assertions sound very strange. Adler admits that when one leaves the realm of relatively simple beliefs, assertions of a similar kind may not seem so obviously incoherent. So, he considers the self-acknowledged anorexic who may believe she is overweight despite recognizing evidence to the contrary. Adler maintains that any seeming case of one's

- (i) believing p , while
- (ii) believing that one lacks sufficient evidence for p

will either be a case where one is not "fully aware" of having both beliefs or a case where there will be a temporal distinction between (i) and (ii)—they will not be held in "a single consciousness." He says if this were not the case, one would not have to seek "esoteric cases, like those afforded by thoughts of the mentally disturbed" to refute evidentialism. But it seems that if one can generate counter examples (no matter how esoteric) then

what he is deeming "full belief" is only one subspecies of the wider concept we call "belief." Adler says, "If there is no compelling connection between the concepts of belief, truth and evidence, then counter examples . . . should be plentiful. The need to search beyond the simple, blunt cases concedes the connection even as it tries to refute it" (Adler 2002a, p. 35). That there are such connections has not been denied. The questions at issue are: What is the nature of the connection and is it unbreakable?

What, then, accounts for the incoherence of these Moorean assertions, if evidentialism is not true? Adler's diagnosis is largely correct because beliefs often do behave the way Adler says they do. If I sincerely assert that I believe p , then it seems I am committed to acknowledging that I have *some* evidence or reason for p . So to say "I believe Tom is in the bar but I have no reason to believe this" is incoherent *because* your believing it normally entails that you have some reason for this belief. But it doesn't seem that beliefs *must* behave this way. What if a vicious blow to the head caused me to have the belief that Tom was in the bar and I was not aware that this was the cause? It would seem in such a case I myself could recognize (and even assert) that I have a belief while also seeing I have no reason for it. It certainly seems that Adler's stronger claim doesn't hold, namely that I regard my evidence as adequate for the truth of p ; I have no evidence to regard at all. This belief may be irrational and false, but Adler's theory is about the concept of belief, not the concept of rational belief. We are charitable to one another, and assume rationality. This is why these Moorean assertions sound so strange. One cannot be fully rational and make such assertions.

The core problem with Adler's argument is that he is trying to establish a necessary conceptual truth by appeal to contingent empirical facts. Now, if one is convinced that there are actual cases of what has here been termed

“compelled belief,” then we know Adler is wrong given that actuality implies possibility. But the contingent fact of non-existence is clearly not sufficient to establish conceptual impossibility. Adler tries to bolster his cases by illustrating how completely bizarre it would be to acknowledge in “full awareness” that one believes without evidence. But these illustrations, if anything, tell us about how attributions of rationality necessarily behave, not that beliefs must necessarily conform to the dictates of such rationality.

In all the cases that have here been considered there is something wrong with the agent who believes against his best epistemic judgment. This is sufficient for the main purpose of this paper, namely to show that such beliefs occur. But might there be times when it is a good thing to hold on to beliefs that one does not regard as supported by the evidence? Two possible examples of such cases will now be considered. These will not be examples of compelled beliefs because the agent in question will not judge that he ought to abandon the belief in question. In these cases, the agent’s “best” judgment may be to ignore evidential considerations in favor of non-evidential ones. But they will help underscore the poverty of the evidentialist’s view.

First, consider how you respond to evidence that seems to impugn your good friend’s character.⁸ It would seem wrong in such a case to weigh the evidence as you would in any other situation. It seems that the demands of friendship are such that your beliefs about your friend should be somewhat unresponsive to the evidence. You should interpret what you hear in a less damaging way than would a stranger, look for alternative interpretations to the obvious, damning ones. Just as a certain way of *behaving* concurs with our ideas of what a good friend would do, so does a corresponding manner of *believing*.

Finally, imagine someone who has recognized that he is an alcoholic and that he

needs to seek treatment and recovery. He attends an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and discovers that the only way he can benefit from treatment is to form a belief in a higher power. Suppose he has grown up an atheist and is convinced that there is no evidence supporting the view that there is anything beyond material existence. It would seem that if he could come to believe against the evidence that this would be good for him; it may not even be irrational of him.⁹

The evidentialist’s view of the nature of belief-formation and belief-maintenance is too narrow, omitting the many determinants of belief that go beyond a search for truth. A number of theorists have pointed out the importance of acknowledging such complexities for a proper understanding of belief. Once such complexities are recognized, it becomes clearer how a gap can arise between the appreciation of warrant and the holding of a warranted belief. Examples like these, where non-evidential reasons override the evidential, cast further doubt on the conceptual connection Adler adduces, thus opening conceptual space for my account of compelled belief.

3. DOXASTIC CONTROL AND RESPONSIBILITY

Just as we do not blame someone if his action was compelled (or at least that would appear to be a mitigating circumstance which lessens the blame considerably), it seems we can argue similarly in the doxastic realm. In most cases of self-deception or wishful thinking we expect the person to summon the strength to face the truth, and we blame them when they do not. “Who is she kidding?” my friends may think with exasperation as I consult with them about wedding arrangements. When the alteration of a belief would cause serious psychic disruption we are less likely to expect revision. When the John Nash character says that he chooses not to acknowledge his hallucinations—not to believe what he

sees—this is seen as a heroic achievement. When he lapses and believes against his better judgment, we are more likely to feel sorry for him than to blame him. It seems that our tendency to blame someone less for holding a belief that is compelled is tied to the fact that the compelled agent lacks the control needed for us to hold him responsible. If this is the case, then we must, ordinarily, have a control which we lack in the cases where our beliefs are compelled.

But the whole notion of control may seem out of place in the realm of belief. For it is clear that we cannot believe at will; our deciding to believe something will not directly produce the belief the way some decisions to act can directly produce the action, barring outside interference.¹⁰ If someone offered me a million dollars to believe that the earth is flat, I could not decide to do so. Belief does not seem voluntary in the way that at least some actions can. It is this argument against voluntarism, an argument that was forcefully put forth by Bernard Williams (1973, pp. 136–151), that leads many to dismiss the possibility of compelled belief. If we do not believe at will, how can it make sense to lack control over what we believe?

Although he ultimately argues against there being much room for control in the doxastic realm, David Owens (2000, 2002) has recently espoused a model of control that can help us understand the possibility of losing control over our beliefs. Owens argues that practical judgment (rather than the will) is the instrument by which we control our agency. On this view, we can judge the merits of our actions. If our actions are motivated by goals that we have deemed valuable, then we can be said to be acting freely and rationally. But, if I judge I ought not to act in a certain way, yet do so against my better judgment, the action will be free only if it is irrational. Because we deem different things valuable, this diversity makes room for a gap between what we judge we ought to do and what we

actually end up doing. For example, I may deem the pleasure of eating cheese cake to be valuable but deem the value of being healthy and fit to be more important and so decide not to eat the cheese cake. If I let the value of the pleasure trump my decision not to eat the cheese cake, the result will be an action that is irrational but still free.

Given that there are many influences on the formation of our beliefs, and that goals other than getting at the truth guide us in their formation, Owens asks rhetorically why this diversity does not make room for a similar lack of doxastic self-control. Imagine you are on the jury at Jones's trial and must decide whether the evidence is sufficient to prove that he is guilty. "The need for peace of mind, to be free to think about other things, might motivate me to form a view on what I judge to be insufficient evidence." And if I form this belief because I judge that I need peace of mind, why can't this be an instance of such a lack? But Owens thinks this is not possible; I cannot *decide* to favor the goal of peace of mind and so believe in Jones's guilt *for this reason*. Says Owens: "Purposiveness implies that a subject form beliefs in pursuance of a certain goal, that they control their beliefs by aiming at that goal" (2002, p. 394). But believers lack this kind of control so, Owens argues, there is no room for a gap between what we think we ought to believe and what we actually do believe. Our beliefs do not seem goal-oriented the way that our actions are.

In a more recent paper (2003), Owens's main concern is to show that beliefs do not have an aim in any meaningful sense. He makes this point by contrasting believing with guessing. In deciding whether and what to guess, I can reflect on a number of matters and then exercise control in the guess I make. For example, it may be perfectly reasonable for me to make a guess, on a quiz show, as to whether the earth's population is greater than seven billion. Even if I have no evidence at all, if the consequence of *not* guessing is

that I will not get one million dollars, it is reasonable for me to make a guess. There may be other times when non-epistemic considerations weigh against the reasonableness of hazarding a guess. But beliefs cannot be similarly controlled by reflection. I cannot get myself to form a *belief* “by reflecting on some broader aims, epistemic or non-epistemic.” One can only aim at something, according to Owens, if one can make a conscious decision to pursue the means by which to achieve this goal. Owens thinks that, because we lack the control needed to make a decision about what to believe, it is misleading and unhelpful to think of beliefs having aims at all; he ultimately concludes that we should not try to force beliefs “into the mould of the teleological norms which govern action.”

But what is needed for the possibility of control (or lack thereof) in the sphere of belief is not that we have strict purposes at which we consciously aim in forming beliefs. It is enough that we can evaluate these beliefs and, at times, conclude that the beliefs are not well founded. The question is what effect these evaluations will have. Is it possible that they remain ineffectual in the same way that an addict’s negative evaluation of his desire for heroin is ineffectual in ridding him of the desire? What needs to be found is an internal struggle in the agent where there is a tension and a lack of control in resolving the tension. It seems struggles of this kind are abundant, suggesting that there is more control in the doxastic realm than Owens admits.

The bulk of the discussion of doxastic control focuses on the acquisition or formation of beliefs. Given that one cannot “believe at will,” the main difficulty is to explain what *is* in the agent’s control. There is a consensus that we have certain kinds of indirect control over what we believe. For example, in gathering and evaluating evidence that will be integral to my forming a belief, I engage in many intentional activities. So the dispute concerns, rather, whether we have a form of

control with respect to belief that is not derivative in this way. Gary Watson has recently argued that we do. Watson rejects the view that the kind of disanalogy Owens points to reveals that we lack control over our beliefs. Even if we are powerless to adopt beliefs just *because* we think they would serve our ends, it does not follow that beliefs are simply things “that happen to us, are effects upon us of the world.” There does seem to be some room for agency and activity in the doxastic realm. Watson argues that this is the case because we can be held responsible for the judgments we make just as we can for the actions we perform. And, if this is so, there must be a sense in which what I believe is “up to me.” Beliefs, it seems, are subject to my decision-making powers and my normative competence. And when the evidence is inconclusive, what I believe may even be more straightforwardly under my control. To say, ‘I believe *p*, though not-*p* is equally supported by the evidence’ is not paradoxical in the way Adler’s assertions are. It is not even clear that such an attitude is irresponsible. One of the main conclusions Watson draws is that just because there is not an analogous doxastic will, this does not mean there is no room for doxastic agency. “The boundaries between the active and the passive are not marked by the will” (Watson 2003, p. 196).

Now, Owens agrees that we can be responsible for our beliefs. But he denies that responsibility entails the kind of reflective, intellectual control that is exhibited in practical judgment. He argues that we do not have this kind of control over our beliefs; a belief’s rationality is not constrained by one’s judgment of it the way an action is. Given that he thinks we can (and ought) to be responsible for our beliefs, it must be the case that responsibility does not entail control. Rather, he argues it is sufficient that a state be “responsive to reasons” in order for one to be held responsible for it, and beliefs are open to rational assessment in this way

(Owens 2000, pp. 115–129). If I hold a belief and am not responsive to the reasons why the belief is irrational, I can be held responsible (and blamed) for holding this belief. This is the case, for Owens, even if I could not have exercised better control, or even if I cannot alter my belief now. Rather, holding irrational beliefs is an epistemic vice which, in turn, reveals a defect in my character. According to Owens, we are responsible for what determines our merit as people, even if we cannot control these determinants.

It seems odd to locate all responsibility at the level of character, given that the virtues we do or do not cultivate have so much to do with our upbringing, something clearly not up to us. It seems that if one has grown up in such a way as to be able to exercise epistemic virtues, but fails to keep one's beliefs in line with one's more reflective judgment, then one can be blamed for this lack of control. If someone has never, for example, learned to apportion his belief to the evidence, this person seems less blameworthy than one who knows that he ought to do so but who fails. The fact that we can even make the distinction between the lapses of the reflective person and the unreflective one seems to indicate that beliefs are more under our "reflective control" than Owens contends. For the wise person's beliefs will be more responsive to reasons than those of the unwise, and when the wise person's beliefs fail to be so, we blame him not for lacking virtue, but for being careless, for lacking self-control.

Owens admits that we have a certain kind of indirect control over our beliefs but claims that our attributions of responsibility have no connection to this kind of control. If it is true

that we will be inclined to excuse those who are compelled to believe, then it seems our attributions of responsibility are not wholly disconnected from our ability to control our beliefs. Though I cannot directly will myself to believe the way I can will myself to raise my arm, Watson is right that the kind of control we do have in the doxastic realm must be less derivative than Owens, and others, contend.¹¹ Thus, the account of compelled belief given here shows both that evidentialism is false and, that there is an important sense in which we can, ordinarily, exercise control over what we believe.

This discussion has tried to offer a coherent and plausible account of compelled belief, lending support to those who have argued that there are times when our intellectual or more reflective acceptances do not necessitate the abandonment of beliefs that do not accord with those acceptances. It has been argued that we might even be unable, at times, to make them accord. If this discord is possible then belief itself is not a purely intellectual act. We do not simply want our beliefs to "fit the world," where "the world" is understood as something distinct and external to our minds. We also want our beliefs to conform to our view of the world, to help us succeed in the world, to make us happier. There is an important emotional element involved in belief-maintenance that the evidentialist dismisses, viewing the function of beliefs as entirely distinct from that of desires. But given that what we believe is affected by more than the evidence provided to us by the world, we are not passive in forming our beliefs. We can exhibit more or less care and control in how and when we form them.¹²

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NOTES

1. What is of interest here are actions that are internally compelled by states of the agent, not actions that are compelled by external force. For those who are skeptical that there can be desires that compel in this way, the argument that we find a similar kind of internal compulsion in the doxastic realm will be unconvincing. But for those who are convinced that there are times when our desires compel us to act against our better judgment, it is interesting to ask if there is a sense in which our desires (and other states) can similarly compel us to believe against our better judgment.
2. In a discussion of akratic belief, Alfred Mele notes that doxastic incontinence, like incontinent action, requires that the believer be responsible for the belief and that it is necessary to find a doxastic analogue for free (or uncompelled) action. He calls this analogue “freedom* of belief” but, given the main purposes of his discussion, says that to attempt to construct and defend the analogue would take him too far afield (Mele 1987, p. 112). This paper offers an account of what it is for a belief to be unfree.
3. The idea of one’s believing not according to one’s best judgment may seem to pose an immediate problem, for judgments seem to be beliefs of a certain kind. So, what does it mean to hold a belief that does not accord with what you believe? It sounds as if this is simply pointing to the possibility of someone holding an inconsistent set of beliefs. This is not the case. When we judge (or believe) that we ought not to hold a particular belief, this does not necessitate that the set of these two beliefs is inconsistent. For this to be clearly the case it would need to be impossible for the propositional contents of both beliefs to be true. But consider these two propositions: “It is raining” and “I should not believe it is raining.” An inconsistency arises if one translates the first as “There is good evidence that it is raining” and the second as “there is no good evidence that it is raining” but the legitimacy of such an evidentialist translation is exactly what will here be questioned.
4. The phenomenon that will be under discussion for the bulk of the paper is that of one recognizing that one has good epistemic reasons for abandoning a belief and yet one retaining it. So the considerations that enter into this “best judgment” are epistemic, i.e., considerations about evidence and truth. There may be times when it can seem that one’s best judgment can tell one to believe against the evidence. Perhaps one could have good prudential reasons that trump the epistemic considerations. This possibility will be considered at the end of section two. But unless otherwise noted, “best judgment” should be read as short for “best epistemic judgment.”
5. It has also been suggested that a belief is compelled if I think I ought not to believe it (so condition (1) holds) and I am incapable of not *acquiring* it. But I think my attitude upon acquisition is crucial. If, once I acquire it, I no longer hold the judgment that I ought not to believe it, then it would seem that along with acquiring the belief, I acquired reasons for believing it of which I approve and so no conflict or compulsion exists. If I maintain the judgment that I ought not to hold it, then the belief is compelled in the way it has here been defined.
6. In a discussion of self-deception, Mele (2001, p. 103) refers to some of the evidence in social psychology which reveals that there are strategies for opposing bias in beliefs. A review of some of these strategies is found Kunda (1990), Baumeister and Newman (1994) and Trope and Liberman (1996).
7. These studies do not tell us that the agents in question judge that they ought to give up these perseverant beliefs but they do seem to show that epistemic considerations, even when made apparent, do not always lead to the abandonment of the epistemically suspect beliefs. We see, in the following section, that the possibility of this disconnect has been brought into question.
8. This discussion of the epistemic demands of friendship comes from Sarah Stroud.
9. It is not being argued that forming a belief for such a practical reason is possible, only that if it were so it is not obviously irrational. Given this view, one could not object to the practical considerations

Pascal puts forth for belief in God by saying that beliefs should always be based on only evidential and not prudential grounds. But it is not obvious that the considerations Pascal offers would be as universally motivating (if such a thing were possible) as he thinks they are. The alcoholic, desperate and in need of help, can see the concrete benefits of the program. It is possible that for someone who finds life meaningless and empty, the wager Pascal advocates would make sense. Like the alcoholic, he could see others benefiting from the Christian practice encouraged by Pascal. But whether everyone, even those who feel content and fulfilled, should be moved by Pascal's considerations, is not clear. For it is the mere *possibility* of infinite rewards (vs. the *actuality* of finite ones) that is supposed to be the reason to form the belief. This reason lacks the kind of immediacy or clarity of the alcoholic's reason to form a belief in a higher power or the friend's reason to ignore evidence.

For differing views on whether one can have non-epistemic reasons for belief see Heil (1992) and Mills (1998).

10. Many of those who maintain that there is a place for doxastic control argue that a kind of epistemic akrasia is possible. Amelie Rorty has argued that a person believes akratically "when he believes that *p*, being implicitly aware that *p* conflicts with a preponderance of serious evidence or with a range of principles to which he is committed" and the akratic believer must be "capable of forming and maintaining a belief that is in accordance with his judgment about what it is appropriate to believe" Rorty (1983, p. 175). John Heil defines "doxastic incontinence" as "those cases in which an agent, to all appearances, believes against his better judgment" (Heil 1984, p. 56). Alfred Mele has recently defined a type of akratic believing as being constituted by instances of believing that "(1) violate a doxastic principle that the believer, *S* either explicitly believes to be correct or undeniably implicitly accepts . . . and that (2) were suitably avoidable by *S* by means of an employment of self-control" (Mele 1995, p. 94). A recent issue of *The Monist* (vol. 85, July 2002) was devoted to issues of epistemic responsibility. There Mark Leon argues that there is an important sense in which we can have control over our beliefs.

11. To explain the exact nature of the kind of control that is sufficient for attributions of epistemic responsibility is beyond the scope of this paper. What I have in mind is what John Fischer refers to as "guidance control" (1994, 1998). There are two main components, reason responsiveness and ownership. We have seen that both Adler and Owens try to tie responsibility to reason responsiveness and thus argue that responsibility does not require control. The notion of ownership is not discussed by either Adler or Owens, yet it is essential in trying to understand how one can have guidance control over beliefs. If all that were required for responsibility is that the mechanism issuing in the action (or belief) were reason responsive, then even if one were directly manipulated (say scientists kidnapped you and implanted such a reason responsive mechanism) you would still be responsible.

For the mechanism that actually issues in certain behavior to be one's own, one must *take* responsibility for it. Taking responsibility is understood historically. As one comes to view oneself as an agent, as having an effect on the world as a consequence of one's intentions, decisions, etc., one comes to view oneself as a fair target for the reactive attitudes, such as punishment or praise. By viewing oneself as an appropriate target for the consequence of a particular mechanism (say ordinary practical reasoning) one thereby takes responsibility for it and the behavior resulting from it. Once one takes responsibility for a particular mechanism then this ownership extends to future operations of the mechanism. If beliefs result from a mechanism for which I have taken responsibility and which is reason responsive, then they are under my control. In the cases of compelled belief, it seems this kind of control is absent.

12. Versions of this paper were read at the College of William and Mary and at Virginia Commonwealth University. I have greatly benefited from discussion with Alfred Mele, Eugene Mills, Sarah Stroud, Geoff Goddu, Antonia Lolordo, and Robert Norris. I am also thankful to the editor of this journal and two anonymous referees for their comments and suggestions.

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