

Taking control of belief

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I investigate what we mean when we hold people responsible for beliefs. I begin by outlining a puzzle concerning our ordinary judgments about beliefs and briefly survey and critique some common responses to the puzzle. I then present my response where I argue a sense needs to be articulated in which we do have a kind of control over our beliefs if our practice of attributing responsibility for beliefs is appropriate. In developing this notion of doxastic control, I draw from John Fischer's discussions of "guidance control". A central feature of this kind of control is the idea of "ownership". I argue that we can own our beliefs and that we expect each other to do so. We take responsibility for our beliefs and taking responsibility includes taking control of them. I end by considering objections to my view as well as some implications of it.

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We express disapproval and approval for each other's beliefs; we ask in an incredulous tone, "How can you believe that?" or exclaim, "What a ridiculous thing to believe!" Such admonishments reveal that we think the person in question believes irresponsibly, and it seems we hold him responsible for holding this belief. This notion of responsibility is not simply one pointing out the causal genesis of the belief. Holding someone responsible for his beliefs is not like holding the wind responsible for knocking over the tent. That we praise and blame each other for the beliefs we hold indicates, rather, that at least sometimes, we view the beliefs one forms and maintains to be the consequence of one's agency.

Attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments in the doxastic realm are puzzling. For much of what we believe is beyond our control; we cannot decide to believe the way we can decide to act. It seems that such lack of control should excuse us from responsibility and judgment. I will investigate what we mean when we hold people responsible for beliefs. I will begin by outlining the puzzle concerning our ordinary judgments about beliefs and briefly survey and critique some common responses to the puzzle (Section 1). I will then present my response (Section 2) where I will argue a sense needs to be articulated in which we do have a kind of control over our beliefs if our practice of attributing responsibility for beliefs is appropriate. In developing this notion of doxastic control, I draw from John Fischer's discussions of "guidance control". A central feature of this kind of control is the idea of "ownership". Those aspects of our lives for which we take responsibility are the ones we own. I will argue that we can own our beliefs and that we expect each other to do so. In this section, I will also clarify how my response differs from and

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is preferable to the character-based view of doxastic responsibility. I will end (Section 3) by addressing some further objections to my view as well as some implications of it.

1. The puzzle of doxastic responsibility

We can formulate our puzzle by considering the following argument.

The voluntarism argument

- (1) If attributions of responsibility for beliefs are appropriate, then people have voluntary control over their beliefs.
- (2) People do not have voluntary control over their beliefs.
- (3) Attributions of responsibility about beliefs are not appropriate.¹

Yet our practices seem to assume such attributions *are* appropriate. We would disapprove of someone who believes that whales are fishes or and that her neighbor littered the sidewalk when she did not. We think a typically well-informed American ought to believe the Earth revolves around the Sun and would be critical of someone who believes the Sun revolves around the Earth.² And yet it seems quite clear that one with such a belief could not just decide to change it in the direct way he could simply decide to change his shirt. Nor did he originally decide to acquire the belief the way one could decide to acquire a new pair of shoes.

Three responses to this puzzle are possible. The first response denies the second premise, arguing that, at times, we *can* effectively decide to believe; this view has come to be called doxastic voluntarism.³

If all beliefs were directly under the control of the will, then I could believe whatever I want whenever I want for any reason at all. I can raise my arm whenever I decide to (absent external force keeping it down) whatever my reason for willing my arm raised; in such a situation I effectively decide to raise my arm because I succeed in executing my decision. Sometimes we decide to do things that we do not end up doing; something might get in the way of my decision being effective. Most opponents of doxastic voluntarism argue that it is impossible to decide to believe. What they really mean is that it is impossible for a decision to believe to be effective. The question here is whether effective decisions are possible in the doxastic realm. I cannot effectively decide to believe that I am, for example, six feet tall, or that Caesar died in his bed, or that there are an odd number of stars. Any contemporary voluntarist will accept that we cannot control all our beliefs in the same way that we can raise our hands or imagine the Eiffel tower. But the reasonable voluntarist will ask, is it the case that *no* belief can possibly result from a decision; is it really conceptually impossible to decide to believe? Voluntarists will deny this and claim that there are times when belief is voluntary. Ginet (2001, 64) argues that this can happen when the evidence it not conclusive. In such a case, he says, it is possible that what I believe is “up to me”.

A second response to the puzzle accepts the argument as sound and so denies that we are responsible for beliefs and argues that our common practices of attributions of responsibility are misguided; we are mistaken if we think, for example, someone should be praised or blamed for a belief he holds. Just as I cannot help feeling wet when rain falls on me or hot when the sun is strong, my believing that it is raining or the sun is strong is not something that is “up to me;” it is a state I find myself in when the world impinges on me in certain ways. On such a view, belief is a passive phenomenon and it must be to do its job. A recent proponent of this “no responsibility” view is Levy (2007, 127–55). Such a

revisionist theory which claims common practices are erroneous should only be accepted if there is no way of resolving the tension without plunging us into such widespread error. Levy canvasses a number of arguments aiming to show that doxastic responsibility does not require control as well as those that claim we do have the right kind of control over belief. He finds them all wanting and concludes that “our lack of control over belief typically excuses responsibility for them”. I claim to be providing such an account of doxastic responsibility and so think Levy’s view is mistaken. I will return to Levy’s critique when considering objections to my view.

The third, and currently most common, response to the puzzle argues that although we lack control over our beliefs, we can nonetheless be held responsible for them, thus denying the first premise of the Voluntarism Argument. Those who deny that responsibility should be tied in any way to control argue that, not only can we not believe at will, we do not have reflective control over our beliefs; a belief’s rationality is not constrained by one’s judgment of it the way an action is. It is not by reflecting on reasons for believing that one comes to believe. I may reflect on evidence for or against *p* in forming a belief that *p* but I will not reflect on whether believing *p* is rational, justified, desirable, or useful (even if we acknowledge such pragmatic considerations are part of what constitutes a belief’s justification). So, it is argued, we blame people for their beliefs not because we take them to have failed to exercise control. It is not the case that they have failed to keep their beliefs in line with their more rational goals.

If one takes it that responsibility entails control and one agrees that we lack this control, one would have to deny that we are responsible (or blameworthy) for our beliefs. If one thinks we can (and ought) to be responsible for our beliefs, and agrees that we lack control over beliefs, it must be the case that responsibility does not entail control. David Owens offers the most extensive (and I think most clear and careful) account of responsibility for non-voluntary states though there have recently been a proliferation of what I will call “character-based accounts” of doxastic responsibility.⁴ According to Owens (2000, 115–29), it is sufficient that a state be “responsive to reasons” for one to be held responsible for it, and beliefs are open to rational assessment in this way. If I hold a belief and am not responsive to the reasons that reveal the belief’s irrationality, I can be held responsible (and blamed) for holding this belief. For Owens, this is the case even if I could not have exercised better control or even if I cannot alter my belief now. Rather, he argues, holding irrational beliefs is an epistemic vice, which, in turn, reveals a defect in my character; we are responsible for what determines our merit as people, even if we cannot control these determinants.

Locating all responsibility for belief at the level of character is problematic. First, our capacity to blame others for beliefs when we have very little experience with them as believers casts doubt on the character-centered view. We are able to make general claims about what adult believers should or should not believe and we blame them for particular beliefs, regardless of what their general doxastic tendencies are. Consider someone who *does*, for example, possess the epistemic virtue of wisdom, who as Owens (2000, 125) puts it “knows to whom credit is due, at what point to form a view, when to open his mind and when to close it,” and most of the time believes in such a way that manifests this virtue. If, one time, perhaps when overcome with jealousy, he forms the belief that his wife is unfaithful on insufficient evidence, would it really make sense for us to say “shame on you, you are lacking merit as a person as you clearly have not cultivated the virtue of wisdom?” Can we really even assess whether someone possesses a particular virtue based on one instance? It seems not, but we can still blame him in this one instance. We can blame him for having a belief he ought not to have and, I will argue, that at least a part of our blame does indicate we think he has failed to exercise a kind of control.

Another problem with this character-based account is that if we really blame believers for their character traits, we would blame someone less for the occasional lapse than someone who often fails to respond to reason. I think the opposite is true. 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 has the capacity but fails to do so. For example, if someone grows up in a family and community with a racist ideology, where access to evidence is controlled and limited, his responsibility for the racist belief that whites are essentially superior to blacks will likely be somewhat mitigated. We would be less likely to mitigate responsibility for someone who has had more open access to the evidence and, in general, is seen as a wise and reflective person.

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 under our "reflective control". 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, at least partly, for lacking self-control. This is not to say that he is generally a person of incontinent character, but that he is lacking self-control in this instance. Because beliefs cannot simply and directly result from decisions the way many actions can, Owens (and others) have tried to separate responsibility entirely from freedom and control. But beliefs are products of our agency, something we have an active role in shaping and maintaining. Although we cannot believe at will, neither are we passive in the beliefs we form and maintain. I will argue that we take responsibility for our beliefs and taking responsibility includes taking control of them. We are blamed when we lose this grasp, when we do not exercise our reflective competence that helps us believe the way we *ought* to believe.

2. Taking responsibility and ownership of beliefs

2.1 What kind of control do we have?

I turn now to my response to the puzzle of doxastic responsibility. The character-based view denies the first premise, claiming that we can be responsible for what is not under our voluntary control. Doxastic voluntarists deny the second premise, arguing that we can, at times, decide what to believe. I think it is wrong to divorce responsibility from control, and I accept that if we do not have control over our beliefs then our attributions of responsibility are misguided. Many of those who oppose doxastic voluntarism admit that we have a kind of indirect control over beliefs but they do not think our attributions of responsibility are tied in any way to this kind of control. The kind of control for which I will argue is not the indirect kind to which these theorists concede; it is not simply derived from other states over which we do have control. It may be, in the end, that the kind of control I claim we have over beliefs is robust enough to count me among the moderate doxastic voluntarists. It may be that it lacks sufficient directness for those who advocate doxastic voluntarism. It matters little into which category the account is placed. What I want to defend is (a) that attributions of responsibility and other deontological judgments about beliefs are appropriate and (b) these attributions and judgments presuppose that we have control in the doxastic realm.

One of the reasons it may seem that we lack control over our beliefs is that so many of them are unavoidable and irresistible. If it is impossible for me to avoid holding a particular belief, how can I be said to have any control over my holding it? For does not being in

control entail that I could have done otherwise or could have chosen differently? Many theorists have been concerned with formulating a concept of control (and responsibility) that does not entail that one could have done otherwise. For if causal determinism is true (or if God has created one and only one perfect world plan), there may be a sense in which we can never act other than we do, but we would not want our notions of responsibility along with all the practices that go along with them to be rendered meaningless if it turned out that we did live in a deterministic universe. John Fischer calls the kind of control that does not entail alternative possibilities "guidance control". To illustrate the kind of thing he has in mind, imagine that you are driving a car that is a "driver instruction" automobile with dual controls. As long as you are driving in a relatively safe manner, the instructor lets you control the car and so when you, at the correct time, turn to the right it is *you* who is guiding the car to the right. But if you had shown signs of confusion and were about to mistakenly turn to the left, the instructor would have stepped in and steered it to the right. Thus you could have gone in no other direction but to the right. So although you have guidance control over the car, you lack what Fischer calls "regulative control", the instructor has that.

In their book, Fischer and Ravizza (1998) provide a detailed elaboration of this concept of guidance control and argue that it is sufficient for moral responsibility. I am not concerned with the details of their analysis or if the kind of control we have over beliefs directly maps onto what they have articulated, but much of their way of thinking about control seems to be getting at what we *can* do in the doxastic realm. There has been extensive criticism of this notion of guidance control and I will not here be concerned with addressing these concerns. What I want to argue is that applying this notion of control to the realm of belief does not bring up any *new* problem; the account can work just as well for beliefs as it can for actions. Further, thinking of doxastic control as a kind of guidance control is helpful, clarifying, and preferable to other accounts given.⁵

It is being the author or guide of one's actions that Fischer and Ravizza argue is the relevant sense of control in assessments of responsibility, not the principle of alternative possibilities (P.A.P). There are two main components to this notion of guidance control: reasons-responsiveness and ownership. We have seen that those, like Owens, who want to extend responsibility beyond the voluntary tie responsibility to reasons-responsiveness and thus argue that responsibility does not require control. Fischer and Ravizza (1998, 39) are adamant, however, that responsibility requires control, just not the kind of "regulative control" which requires alternative possibilities. An agent exhibits guidance control of an action "insofar as the mechanism which actually issues in his action is his own, reasons-responsive mechanism". The idea of ownership is left out of the character-based accounts but 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) is reasons-responsive, then even if you were directly manipulated (say, had scientists kidnapped you and implanted such a reasons-responsive mechanism), you would still be responsible.⁶

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. It is a process that occurs over time where we develop a concept of ourselves as

engaged in a kind of conversation. When we are addressed and treated as responsible agents through such attitudes as praising and blaming, we begin to form an internal view of ourselves as responsible and develop our own way of assessing and reacting to others. Fischer and Ravizza (1998, 212) describe the process like this: "The goal of achieving a correlation between external and internal attitudes supports the practices that we use to train individuals who are not yet full members of the moral community and to encourage them to develop the internal view that we are extending to them". Thus, taking responsibility need not be any conscious act; rather, the way we react to others and feel about ourselves reveal whether we have taken responsibility for the mechanism in question.

Can this notion of a mechanism be intelligibly applied to the doxastic realm? Fischer and Ravizza switch from a focus on agents and their properties to a focus on mechanisms to help make clear how it is possible for an *agent* to fail to be reasons-responsive while still being responsible. Part of their motivation for developing this "mechanism-based" approach comes from the challenge posed by "Frankfurt-type" cases.⁷ In such a case, an agent carries out some behavior entirely according to his own deliberations and reasons. For example, Sam carries out a plan to kill the mayor. But, if somehow Sam had wavered, then a device, which had secretly been installed in his brain that monitors all of his brain activity would have been activated by Jack, the installer, to bring about that Sam does kill the mayor. In such a case the agent, Sam, is not reasons-responsive but the actual-sequence mechanism is. The alternative-sequence mechanism, the one that involves direct stimulation of Sam's brain, is not reasons-responsive and not one for which Sam has taken responsibility.

Fischer and Ravizza are clear that all they mean by "mechanism" is the process that leads to the relevant upshot. This upshot is some kind of behavior and by behavior they mean to include actions and omissions. They also consider that the upshot may be a trait of character or, perhaps, an emotional reaction. It is plausible that one such upshot can be a belief. Examples they give of mechanisms or processes are deliberation, practical reason, brain-stimulation, irresistible (physically based) urges, hypnosis, addiction, and intentions. Given how broadly mechanisms are construed, it seems perfectly legitimate to talk about mechanisms that result in beliefs. Some of the processes that result in beliefs are inquiry, evidence gathering, attending, reasoning, memory, and perception. We can now ask if any of these mechanisms are such that we can take responsibility for them.

It is clear, and Owens would agree, that the actual mechanism issuing in a belief is often reasons-responsive. So, say I believe, on inadequate evidence, that my brother stole some money from me. I discover my error (perhaps by finding the money or finding the real thief). I will then (under normal circumstances) revise my belief about my brother. But do we take responsibility for these mechanisms and for the resulting beliefs? Can we "own" them as a consequence of our agency the way we can the mechanisms which lead to actions? I think we can see that this is possible if we think about our capacity to feel guilty about simply having certain beliefs. So consider again the belief about my brother. Even if I never acted on it in any way, I can still feel guilty for having formed this belief at all. I am not here suggesting that our feelings of guilt are always appropriate or that feeling guilty is what marks off the domain for what we are responsible. It is just one of many reactive attitudes like blame and praise which reveal that we find the initiator of the behavior who provokes such reactions to be responsible; in the case of guilt or shame the initiator is usually oneself. Just as is the case with action, these reactions can sometimes be misplaced; but such attitudes are not always misplaced. At times, guilt is an appropriate response to holding a belief. How can the character-based view which denies responsibility entails control account for my guilt feelings? According to this view, my guilt does not result

from a failure of control, but rather it results instead from my feeling bad about not being a good person in general. But if I really viewed myself as lacking control over this belief, would I feel the same kind of guilt for having it? Say I discovered that I had undergone some kind of psychic manipulation such that the mechanism responsible for issuing in beliefs about my brother was one which was controlled (via some remote control) by some evil scientist. I may still feel some shame and view myself as somehow defective, but part of the reason I feel guilty has to do with this belief being a result of *my* agency. I have taken responsibility for the mechanism issuing in evidentially based beliefs. When the mechanism is faulty it is *my* fault, and I can be said to have lost some control over this mechanism given that I am failing to guide my beliefs appropriately.

That some notion of control is in play when assigning blame to beliefs is reinforced if we consider when and why we mitigate such blame. If you *cannot* make your higher order judgments effective about how you ought to believe, there is a sense in which your belief is no longer your own; you are divided and overpowered. I would blame you less if you really are compelled to believe against your better judgment. You are not as open to blame as someone who can believe the way he ought to but who fails to put in the care and effort required to do so.⁸ Let us now look at a number of different cases of defective believing and see where we are apt to assign responsibility and when we are not. It seems that the more guidance control we have over the belief-issuing processes, the more likely we are to attribute responsibility for it. This kind of control comes in degrees and the more control we have, the less we are apt to mitigate responsibility.

2.1.1 Perception

Many of our beliefs result from perception. Perceptual beliefs also seem to be the ones that are most obviously not under one's regulative control. But thinking again about what it means to take responsibility and that this is properly seen as a developmental process, we can see that even this most seemingly passive mechanism is one over which we do have some degree of guidance control. Imagine that someone is insistent that he *sees* a unicorn galloping toward him and based on the usual trustworthiness of his senses and *believes* there is a unicorn galloping toward him. If this person later discovers that a powerful hallucinogenic drug had been slipped in his drink and he still believes that a unicorn had galloped toward him, it is appropriate to criticize him. For, normally, if I point out reasons for thinking that your normally well-functioning mechanism has gone awry, you should revise your assessment of the resulting upshot. Further, you see yourself as appropriately chastised for being overly confident or hasty in the proper functioning of this mechanism. Imagine a case of "misperception" that is not a result of an external agent (like a hallucinogenic drug.) Sam believes his girlfriend was kissing Jack in the car and he believes this because he *saw* her doing so. It turns out she was, in fact, not kissing Jack and somehow his perception was faulty and misled him into forming a faulty belief. If through pleading and insistence, Sam's girlfriend convinces him that she did not kiss Jack, how should Sam view the belief he formed? It is appropriate that he should feel some guilt about it and, again, he should be criticized for his forming and maintaining it.

Of course, it is not possible for us to constantly monitor our perceptual faculties to ensure that they are operating free of biases or neuroses that may be leading us astray. But there is some presumption that we should be ready to do some monitoring to ensure that this mechanism for which we have taken responsibility is operating correctly. If I find this mechanism is regularly leading me astray, something is wrong with *me*; it is not appropriate for me to insist but "these beliefs result from perception over which I lack

control and so it is not my fault that I keep forming false beliefs". If your perceptual faculties really are "taken over" say by some severe psychosis, a point does come where we would excuse you from responsibility. But this again underscores the difference of our assessment in the non-pathological case where we think assessments of responsibility are appropriate and so some degree of control is possible.

2.1.2 Memory

Another common belief issuing mechanism is memory and, again, like perception, this seems to be a process over which I exercise relatively little control. And if I have a very vivid memory of an occurrence it is almost impossible for me to fail to believe that the thing occurred. But, as in the case of perception, thinking about when and how this mechanism goes awry can help show that the appropriateness of attributions of responsibility are tied to our having some guidance control over this process. Imagine, you are conversing with a friend and you start talking about a conference you were both at the previous summer. You begin recalling together who else was at the conference. You say, "oh and John was there – I remember liking his talk". Your friend insists that John was not there and you are emphatic that you *remember* him being there. If the next day, your friend shows you the program and convinces you that you misremembered, you will feel very sheepish about your firm belief that John was there and a certain degree of blameworthiness is appropriate for you having this belief.

Contrast this case again with a pathological one. If someone has Alzheimer's disease and so has a severely defective memory mechanism, there comes a point in which we excuse him from responsibility in his memory-induced beliefs and it seems to be at the point in which he loses ownership of the process, where he is incapable of correction and of keeping his beliefs in line with his and others' judgments. As such diseases are often gradual, we can find that, at first, we do continue to react in ways that reveal we hold the agent responsible for his beliefs. We will say, with frustration, "Don't you remember? You left the keys on your desk". But as the disease progresses, such admonishments seem less and less appropriate. Just as lack of control over one's faculties excuses one from being admonished for how one acts, similarly it excuses one from being admonished for how one believes. But, again, it is not a question of whether I could have believed otherwise about John's presence at the conference. Rather, this is a belief that I have ownership over in that I have the capacity to keep it in line with how I think I ought to believe.

2.1.3 Practical reason

Attributions of responsibility are the most obviously warranted in cases where beliefs result from deliberation or inquiry and these are processes over which we clearly have guidance control. These mechanisms are responsible for issuing in actions as well as beliefs. One of the examples that Fischer and Ravizza consider is taking responsibility for "acting from the mechanism of *practical reason*". They refer to these actions as "reflective actions". Beliefs that come about as a result of reflection are clearly ones for which we have taken responsibility in Fischer and Ravizza's sense. If I am a juror and, through a process of deliberation come to believe the witness and acquit, if I am later convinced that there were good reasons to doubt the witness, I will accept criticism and it seems criticism is appropriate.

2.2 Comparison with the character-based account

How, then, does this account of doxastic guidance control address the initial puzzle of doxastic responsibility and why is it preferable to Owens' character-based response? Consider

again the example of the person who thinks the Sun revolves around the Earth. The character-based view argues that our criticism of one holding this belief is in no one way tied to whether having the belief or not is in one's control: "the key concept for any theory of responsibility should be responsiveness to reasons, not agency or control" (Owens 2000, 126). But we see that in cases where we lack guidance control over the belief-issuing mechanism, attributions of responsibility and the reactive attitudes that come with them cease to be appropriate. We expect a well-informed American to be sensitive to the amount of evidence that supports the heliocentric view and expect that his belief will conform to this evidence. This expectation comes, at least in part, by the fact that he has seen himself as a fair target for being chastised in this way and that he takes responsibility and ownership for what he believes. These are all the necessary components of guidance control. If one does not exhibit this kind of control, it would be misguided to criticize him or otherwise hold him responsible.

But isn't saying that I am responsible for what flows from those aspects of myself that I *own* very similar to saying I am responsible for what flows from my character? Consider the example, which I argued is problematic for the character-based account; the husband who has the misguided belief that his wife is having an affair. It seems we could blame him for having this belief, even if, in general, his character is such that he forms beliefs wisely. I suggested that we would tend to blame him more if he were generally wise, partly because we expect better of him; we expect him to be in better control of his cognitive and emotional life. On the account I am proposing, we are not blaming him for possessing an epistemic vice which reveals his defective character. Rather, his history has displayed that activities like weighing evidence and attending to arguments are processes for which he has taken responsibility; his having taken this responsibility is actually an aspect of his character. He has accepted that it is appropriate to chastise him when these processes send him off track. The appropriateness of our blame is tied to the appropriateness of our expectations. In general, he has the capacity to respond to reactive attitudes in the doxastic realm. If he lost this general capacity, we would begin to question whether these processes and the upshots of them really were *his*. The more questionable this connection becomes, the more questionable become our attributions of responsibility.

The character-based view cannot explain our mitigating and excusing of bad beliefs as easily as my ownership account can. Remembering those cases where we are excused makes it clear that responsibility *is* tied to control of the kind I have described. The less our beliefs flow from our selves, the less responsible we are. Once we start to participate in the world as agents, we not only expect each other to take responsibility for actions; the responsibility extends to the doxastic realm as well. How would the character-based view explain, for example, the gradual diminishing of responsibility in the case of developing Alzheimer's? Owens would say that responsibility disappears when the person's beliefs are no longer responsive to reasons. But what accounts for this failure? For Owens, there is no meaningful question about whether you *ought* to be responsive to reasons or not.

Owens has little to say about what excuses responsibility in cases like this. In a discussion of memory and when it can serve as a reliable source of evidence for rationally preserving belief, he (Owens 2000, 159) says the following: "A person with a mangled memory has an impaired capacity for reasoning; he has no sensitivity to the past reasoning which could justify his current beliefs and so can't be held responsible for their lack of justification". Here "mangled memory" refers to any time one's memory "garbles the content" of a reasonable belief. Owens' point is that, unless one has reason to doubt one's memory and to check its reliability, one is not responsible and so not blameworthy for continuing to hold

the belief. Of course someone who has recently learned that he has Alzheimer's has reason to suspect the reliability of this faculty. So on Owens' view such a person would be more blameworthy for his unjustified belief than you would be when you mistakenly believed that John was at the conference last year. According to Owens, you should admit your belief is groundless but you should not be blamed for having held it as you did not reveal any epistemic vice in your forming the belief. Again, I think the character-based account issues in the wrong result. Blame would be severely mitigated in the case of the Alzheimer's victim. Recognizing that at a certain point the person loses guidance control over his memory-induced beliefs can explain this kind of case in a more straightforward manner.

Besides being able to make better sense of the examples where we limit responsibility, the guidance control account has two other advantages over the character-based account. First, it allows for much more symmetry between our responsibility for beliefs and our responsibility for actions. Because Owens (2000, 126) wants to preserve the notion that we are responsible for beliefs and he is convinced that we have no reflective control over beliefs, he argues that we should eschew what he calls "the juridical theory of responsibility" that links responsibility to control: "Neither the scope of the will, nor the power of reflection determines the boundaries of responsibility. Virtue and vice are matters of my responsiveness to different sorts of reasons – ethical virtues concern ethical reasons, epistemic virtues concern epistemic reasons – and I am praised or blamed accordingly". Given that his concern is to explain how one can be responsible for unfree states, he never applies his theory to states for which one is more obviously free. In the realm of action, responsibility is often diminished, as is legal responsibility, when the action is compelled. For Owens, compulsion would be incidental; what must matter is whether one is responsive to "ethical reasons" in carrying out the action. I suppose a gun at your head will cause you to be less reasons-responsive but it seems more crucial that, in such a case, your agency has been overtaken. Again, the *reason* that you cease to become responsive to ethical reasons ought to matter.

Finally, one important worry about having responsibility based on character is that how one's character develops is contingent on factors wholly beyond one's control like upbringing and environment and, at a certain point, is extremely difficult to alter. Both Owens and Fischer and Ravizza discuss emotions as examples of states for which we may be responsible. Consider two agents who both become possessed with unjustified anger. Given that for Owens (2000, 118) such a state is blameworthy because it detracts from one's goodness as a person, the genesis of the state, as well as one's own reaction to the state is irrelevant to our assessment of it. If you try extremely hard to conquer your road rage, for example and I do nothing to try to control mine, we are as equally culpable in having unreasonable emotions that reveal vice in our characters. For the ownership account of responsibility, one's history matters in terms of assessing responsibility. Fischer and Ravizza suggest that the difference between the cases in which we are inclined to hold an individual responsible for an emotional reaction and those in which we are not so inclined may be explained in terms of guidance control. If one's upbringing was filled with neglect and abuse to the point that one's capacity for normal moral development was undermined, this would make a difference in our assessment of moral responsibility. And, if one tries very hard to gain control of one's emotional life and fails, blame would be severely mitigated. Given that taking responsibility is understood as a developmental process, a point need not arrive when one is beyond hope; one can always gain guidance control over one's emotion-issuing mechanisms and so become a fuller member of the moral community.

3. Objections and implications

3.1 Does my account allow for blameworthy beliefs?

As mentioned above, Neil Levy is the most recent advocate of the view that we are not responsible for beliefs and his way of arguing for this position is to show that all accounts given of doxastic responsibility are flawed. He uses the term "compatibilist" for accounts that articulate a concept of doxastic responsibility that does not require having regulative control over belief. This would include accounts which deny that responsibility entails *any* kind of control and those which say responsibility entails guidance control. He begins his section objecting to compatibilist accounts of doxastic responsibility by mentioning Fischer and Ravizza, but neither of the compatibilist views he addresses refers directly to the idea of ownership and taking responsibility. The first one he considers, however, is closest to the account of control I have given, and so I will assess whether his objection applies to my view. He claims that this view will never allow one to have a blameworthy belief. The account he considers, one argued for by Heller (2000, 130–41), says we are responsible for beliefs if "we form and assess our beliefs in accordance with our self-endorsed belief-forming dispositions". I can thus be blamed just in case I form beliefs in accordance with a bad reasoning process that I endorse. Levy asks if such an account allows for the typical excusing conditions of compulsion and ignorance. Compulsion does not seem to be a problem for it would seem that if my belief is compelled then is not formed in accordance with my endorsed epistemic practices. If ignorance is to be an excuse, however, it seems that every badly formed belief would be excused. For the only way one would endorse a fallacious reasoning process would be out of ignorance or irrationality. So it seems the only way one can be responsible is if one believes well. Beliefs are either praiseworthy or the believer is excused.

There are two ways in which Levy's criticisms do not apply to the account given here. First, his description of belief-issuing mechanisms is much more narrow than what I have here described. We take responsibility for more than just reasoning processes. If I am right that we can *own*, for example, our perceptual faculties and the beliefs that result from them, our ill-formed beliefs will not always result from ignorance or irrationality. Further, Levy's talk of endorsement is a much more active and conscious process than is the historic conception of ownership. Even if we never actively endorse a mechanism, we can still have ownership of it. I can be blamed for a badly formed belief if it results from a process for which I have taken responsibility, and I have taken responsibility if I have accepted the expectation that I keep beliefs of this kind in line with my higher order judgments of how I ought to believe. And, again we normally accept being chastised for bad believing once we come to understand how and why we were led astray.

3.2 How does this account differ from the "uncontroversial" indirect control?

Another question that arises with my account is whether the kind of control I have described is any more direct than the kind of indirect control that everyone acknowledges. This is a difficult question because the many people who address this issue each have a different view about what kind of indirect control is uncontroversial. The important point is that however they characterize the uncontroversial indirect control, they claim that our attributions of doxastic responsibility do not depend on this kind of control. For example, Richard Feldman says that we can have "non basic voluntary control" over belief because we can act in ways that will cause beliefs. I can make myself believe the lights are on by turning on the lights. But the range of cases for which we attribute responsibility is much larger than this small subset. Feldman (2000, 672) thus says, "our ability to control our beliefs in the way

described here is epistemically insignificant” and he thinks our deontological judgments about belief do not depend on having this or any other kind of control. Indirect control is also discussed in the context of distinguishing between bringing about a belief and believing. So I can act on myself in various ways so that I will likely be in a state where a belief will arise in me.⁹ This idea goes back to Pascal’s (1966) wager where he suggests that if one acts like a Christian, it is likely one will come to believe like a Christian. One has direct control over actions such as going to mass and indirect control over the beliefs that come about as a result of these actions. It is a widely held view that we can act for pragmatic reasons but we can only believe for truth-related reasons and so we could have reason to engage in certain kind of self-manipulation so that we are more likely to view a certain proposition as true. In these cases of self-manipulation, if we do attribute responsibility for the developed beliefs it is because we attribute responsibility for the actions that led to those beliefs; doxastic responsibility is thus derivative. With the ownership view one’s responsibility for beliefs is not derivative in this way. Your responsibility for your beliefs is as direct as responsibility for many of your actions; in each case you are responsible just in case the action or belief resulted from a mechanism for which you have taken responsibility in the sense I have described.

Again, allowing for the possibility of non-derivative doxastic responsibility allows for symmetry between our responsibility for beliefs and our responsibility for actions. Tying responsibility directly to control in the doxastic realm reveals the possibility of doxastic agency. An important implication of this view is that the norms governing belief are not isolated from the norms governing other aspects of our agency.

3.3 *Inappropriate takings of responsibility?*

Another worry with the ownership account is that on the one hand, it can be too easy to duck responsibility by refusing to take responsibility and, on the other hand, one can be held responsible when one ought not to be because one has mistakenly taken responsibility. Should responsibility really depend on attitudes of the fallible agent? Fischer and Ravizza discuss this worry at length and I am satisfied with their response. First, we must remember the dialogical and historical aspects of their account. As I emphasized in response to Levy’s objection, taking responsibility is not a single act that one chooses to do or fails to choose to do. The price of failing to take responsibility is high and not one that many people would be willing to incur. In viewing oneself as an agent and as an “appropriate participant in the family of reactive attitudes” one thereby takes responsibility. If one does not see oneself in such a way, one would be cut off from most meaningful human relationships. The price of failure to take responsibility is “to relinquish autonomy and to remain a fragmented self that is constantly in danger of ‘slipping away’” (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 220). There is indeed a “subjectivist” component to the ownership account in that an agent has to have a certain view of himself to be responsible. But one’s seeing oneself in such a way is not all that matters; one can mistakenly see oneself as in control when one is not. If one were being directly manipulated, for example, by electronic stimulation, one’s *feeling* like one was an appropriate target for reactive attitudes would not thereby make one responsible (Fischer and Ravizza 1998, 236).

3.4 *What is the connection between epistemic and moral responsibility?*

A further concern that one may have with the account I have given is that many examples of when we blame believers involve beliefs with moral content. When we blame someone for

having a racist belief, for example, are we really blaming him for any kind of epistemic flaw, or is it because we closely tie racist beliefs to immoral actions for which we blame him? When the content of a belief is rather insignificant, do we blame someone who formed it hastily or on insufficient evidence? Included in Adler’s (2002, 64) examples of blameworthy beliefs are “that whales are fishes” and “that some UFOs are alien spaceships paying regular visits to Earth”. What do we think about these beliefs? Would pity be more appropriate than blame for ignorance? Do we react in any way that reveals that we hold them responsible? I think we do; shaking your head in frustration reveals that you are passing judgment.¹⁰

There is a deeper issue, however, lurking behind this worry about whether the blame is moral or epistemic. Is epistemic responsibility a kind of moral responsibility, or are the two realms distinct? When Clifford (1987, 24) says, “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything on insufficient evidence”, he means it is morally wrong. He thinks that the inculcated habits of forming beliefs on insufficient evidence could lead to dissolution of society and a violation of a duty to humanity. We can see this in the following flourishing passage:

But forasmuch as no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind, we have no choice but to extend our judgment to all cases of belief whatever. Belief, that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves, but for humanity . . . Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces. No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe. (Clifford 1987, 22)

Most contemporary theorists resist this kind of conflation, thinking of epistemic responsibilities as distinct from moral ones. The “ought” regarding belief is an epistemic ought, telling you what principles you ought to follow as a doxastic agent. These are thought to be distinct from the oughts of morality. Feldman (2000, 694) has argued that if these “oughts” conflict there is no way to adjudicate between them, no meaningful question about what I ought to believe all things considered. He says, “We’ve diasambiguated ‘ought’ and we can’t put the various senses back together again”. I think that Clifford is pointing to something important which puts this picture in question. It is not that epistemic faults *are* moral faults. Rather, both moral faults and epistemic faults are pointing to a fault in agency, revealing that you are becoming passive and unreflective where you should take active control. If this is true, then assessments of epistemic responsibility are not only analogous to the moral, but tied to it. There may indeed be a source of normativity, which provides force to our practical, moral and epistemic judgments. Feldman wonders what value would be associated with this “just plain ought”. This is a good and difficult question, but not necessarily one that is meaningless or unanswerable. It could be that a kind of eudaimonistic theory of the good life may begin to provide an answer. Maybe we just plain ought to do what most contributes to human excellence. It may be hard to adjudicate between different dimensions of excellence, but it could be a meaningful adjudication nonetheless.

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Notes

1. Here I follow the presentation of the argument by Feldman (2000) except I replace his “deontological judgment about beliefs are true” with “attributions of responsibility for beliefs are appropriate”. Feldman solves the puzzle by denying the first premise. This is Feldman’s characterization of Alston’s argument in (1988). Many discussions about issues of doxastic control and responsibility take Alston’s argument as their starting point and then either defend Alston’s position or argue against it. Alston is not, however, directly concerned with responsibility. Rather, he is primarily interested in whether a belief’s justification should be thought of in terms that are analogous to how actions are assessed as permissible or impermissible in ethics. I will not be discussing how best to understand justification. But Alston’s argument seems to cast doubt on all our talk about belief which assumes responsibility. Feldman and Levy take it that his argument has this wide reaching scope.
2. I do not take it that one is only responsible if blame is appropriate. I follow Fischer and Ravizza (and they follow Peter Strawson) as seeing an agent as responsible if he is an apt candidate for a reactive attitude. Reactive attitudes include gratitude, indignation, resentment, love, and respect. They need not always coincide with judgments of blame-worthiness but they often will.
3. My discussion mainly focuses on the positive ability *to* decide to believe. But the strongest form of doxastic voluntarism would also allow one to withhold belief.
4. See Owens (2000). The view that responsibility extends beyond the voluntary has recently been espoused by Smith (2005) and Hieronymi (2008). Recently, Pascal Engel has argued that responsibility for belief requires neither control nor agency. But the kind of responsibility he discusses is minimal; it simply requires that there is “a minimal capacity on the part of the subject to recognize his mental state as a belief and be sensitive to the norm for belief”. As long as he is not a “dumb brute” who observes the “passing show”, there is as sense, Engel says, in which the subject is responsible. Whatever kind of responsibility this is, it is not one for which the reactive attitudes are appropriate (see Engel 2009).
5. Though, as we will see below, Fisher and Ravizza briefly consider how their account might be extended to emotions, they do not consider how it might be extended to beliefs. When they discuss beliefs in passing, they talk about them as being non-voluntary and not “up to an agent” (217) and suggest that we find it less problematic if our beliefs are causally determined by the external world then if our desires, choices and intentions are (236).
6. Steup (2008) makes a similar point when considering “reason-responsiveness compatibilism”. If reasons-responsiveness could result from systematic conditioning or manipulation (or even brainwashing), reasons-responsiveness is not sufficient for freedom. Although Steup cites Fischer and Ravizza as supporting this view, it is crucial that reasons-responsiveness is a necessary but not sufficient condition.
7. Harry Frankfurt famously introduced examples which seem to show that we can be responsible even when there is no alternative open to us thus undermining the P.A.P, see Frankfurt (1969, 1971).
8. I offer a model of a loss of doxastic control in (McCormick 2005, 157–69).
9. Hieronymi (2006) argues that, although belief is not subject to our will, we can exhibit managerial or manipulative control over beliefs, meaning we can act on ourselves in certain ways to bring about belief. It is hard to know whether this type of indirect control is relevant to attributions of responsibility. She does not address this question. Others who allow for indirect control but who do not think it is significant for doxastic responsibility are Alston (1988), Adler (2002), Levy (2007). See also, Audi (2001), Hieronymi (2008) and Shah (2006).
10. Does “shaking your head in frustration” constitute a “reactive attitude”? It seems to reveal a kind of lack of respect, or even contempt, which does seem to be such an attitude.

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