

Book Review

Believing Against the Evidence, by Miriam Schleifer McCormick. Routledge, 2014. Pp. 144.

Miriam McCormick's new book argues persuasively for two main conclusions. The first conclusion – defended in part I of the book – is that there can be non-evidential reasons *to hold* a belief. The second – defended in part II – is that there can be non-evidential reasons *for which we hold* beliefs. The first conclusion concerns doxastic *normativity*, while the second concerns doxastic *agency*. Since normativity is that which is supposed to guide agency, these two issues are related. In what follows, I'll spell out McCormick's argument for each of her two main conclusions a bit more fully, and then conclude with a question for her view.

First, let's consider McCormick's defence of the view that there can be non-evidential reasons to hold a belief – a view that we will henceforth call her 'anti-evidentialism'. Her defence of anti-evidentialism has three components.

The first component is a positive argument from cases to the anti-evidentialist conclusion. Consider, for instance, my optimistic belief that, however badly people may behave, they at least have the capacity to behave well, and that, if only their internal and external conditions were of the right sort, they would be able to exercise this capacity. It seems that this optimistic belief is not supported by evidence, and yet there may nonetheless be very compelling practical reasons for me to hold the belief: viz., holding such a belief makes me much happier, and makes me treat other people with much more sympathy than I otherwise would. In such a case, it is not at all irrational (and may even be rational) to hold the optimistic belief in question, even if it is not evidentially supported.

The second component of McCormick's defence of anti-evidentialism involves her offering a positive account of the value of true belief, and then arguing from this positive account to the anti-evidentialist conclusion. Why is it valuable, irrespective of your particular goals, to hold true beliefs? Because, McCormick says, whatever else you may value, achieving that value requires having true beliefs about the situation that you're in, and about how best to navigate that situation so as to achieve that value. Notice that this explanation of the value of true belief does not predict that *all* true beliefs are valuable: having true beliefs about how many current

residents of Dubuque have surnames that end in ‘M’ may be of no value whatsoever. But the true beliefs that do have value are those that are practically useful to an agent, given whatever they may happen to value.

The third component of McCormick’s defence of anti-evidentialism, and the one that occupies the bulk of her energy in the first half of the book, is her rebuttal of some recently influential arguments for evidentialism. One such argument is that the very concept of belief is the concept of a mental state formed in appreciation of some evidence in its favour, so no mental state otherwise formed is a belief: this argument is rebutted by examples of beliefs formed by wishful thinking. Another such argument is that the concept of belief is the concept of a mental state properly formed only if formed in appreciation of some evidence in its favour, so no mental state formed otherwise can be a properly formed belief: this argument is rebutted by examples of beliefs formed by natural and highly adaptive mechanisms of belief-formation that do not involve evidence (e.g., the overly cautious beliefs formed by the operation of highly conservative ‘predator warning’ systems). Yet another such argument is that the question of whether to believe that *p* always gives way, in doxastic deliberation, to the question whether *p* is true, and so the only reason that can tell in favour of believing *p* is evidence for the truth of *p*: this argument is rebutted by examples of doxastic deliberation in which the question of whether to believe that *p* does not give way to the question of whether *p* is true, but rather gives way to the question whether it is now finally time to settle on a view as to whether *p* is true. (Imagine a doxastic deliberator who needs to form a belief as to whether *p*, and needs to do so soon, but who finds themselves unable to make up their mind on the basis of their evidence.)

McCormick concludes that there can be non-evidential reasons to hold a belief. But can such non-evidential reasons also be the reasons *for which* we hold beliefs? The second part of her book argues for an affirmative answer to this question. (Those who think that something can be a *reason to* believe only if it can also be a *reason for which* we believe will see the argument in the second part of her book as crucial to completing the argument in the first part.)

Her case for this affirmative answer falls out of her solution to what she calls ‘The Puzzle of Doxastic Responsibility’. To explain this puzzle, and give some structure to the space of possible solutions, consider 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.
Attributions of responsibility about beliefs are not appropriate.

This argument has a valid form, so the conclusion cannot be false unless one or both premises are false. Some philosophers accept both premises and so accept the conclusion, others reject (1), and still others reject (2). McCormick argues that the conclusion is false, so one or both premises must be false. But which one? Some philosophers have argued against (1) by claiming that responsibility does not in any sense involve voluntary control: on their view, an agent is responsible for just those of her beliefs that express her doxastic character, i.e., her stable belief-forming dispositions. McCormick convincingly argues that this feature of at least some of our beliefs is not nearly sufficient for – let alone constitutive of – our responsibility for those beliefs.

So how does McCormick resolve the puzzle of doxastic responsibility? She distinguishes two notions of ‘voluntary control’, and argues that, on one such notion, (1) is true and (2) is false, but on the other such notion, (2) is true and (1) is false. On no notion of voluntary control are both premises true.

So what are the different notions of voluntary control? On one notion, an agent has voluntary control over their beliefs just in case they can believe simply by deciding to do so. McCormick argues that, with respect to this first notion of voluntary control, (1) is false and (2) is true: people lack the ability to believe simply by deciding to do so, but such an ability is not necessary for responsibility.

On the other notion of voluntary control, an agent has voluntary control over their beliefs just in case they take responsibility for those beliefs, i.e., they come to view themselves as fair targets of reactive attitudes such as praise or blame (or self-reactive attitudes such as pride or shame) for having those beliefs. McCormick argues that, with respect to this second notion of voluntary control (which she calls ‘guidance control’), (1) is true and (2) is false: we have this kind of control over our beliefs, and having such control is necessary for our being responsible for those beliefs. But such guidance control is precisely the kind that McCormick takes to be distinctive of, and constitutive of, all agency, including doxastic agency: our responsibility for our beliefs, intentions, and actions consists in our ability to *take* responsibility for them. Taking responsibility for them involves not merely regarding one’s belief (or intention, etc.) as one for which one is responsible, but also coupling the mechanisms that control one’s belief and the mechanisms that register the reactive attitudes that are prompted in response to one’s belief – the adjustment of one’s belief is thus rendered responsive to the reactive attitudes which are themselves responsive to the belief. Because of this coupling, taking responsibility for one’s beliefs is not merely a matter of adopting a certain attitude towards those beliefs, but also has causal consequences about how those beliefs evolve in response to the reactive attitudes that they elicit, or that the believer thinks they would elicit.

When we take responsibility for our beliefs, we can acquire the ability to adjust those beliefs not only because the evidence doesn’t support them but

also, say, because we feel guilty for having them. Thus, non-evidential reasons to believe can also turn out to be non-evidential reasons for which we believe. And this concludes McCormick's case in the second half of her book.

If McCormick's case for her two main theses strikes you as highly plausible, you are not alone: this book very effectively criticizes much of contemporary orthodoxy. But I want to raise one question here about McCormick's view that doxastic agency consists in guidance control over our beliefs. Guidance control, as McCormick explains it, has two components. The first is attitudinal, and involves thinking of one's belief as something for which one can be praised or blamed. The second is causal, and involves the responsiveness of one's belief to one's attitudes towards the belief. But what if the attitude involved in the first component of guidance control is itself causally irrelevant to the coupling that forms the second component of guidance control? To illustrate, consider your self-esteem. Like many people, you might think of yourself as responsible for your own feelings of self-esteem: for instance, you might think of such self-esteem as an accomplishment on your part, something for which you are praiseworthy. But also, like many people, your self-esteem might be causally connected to the various reactive attitudes that are responsive to it: if you find that you, or others, approve of your self-esteem, this causes the growth of such self-esteem, whereas if you find that you, or others, disapprove of it, then this causes the attrition of such self-esteem. But what if, unbeknownst to you, the causal connection that forms the second component of such guidance control is a connection that would persist quite independently of whether one continued to think of one's self-esteem as something for which one is praiseworthy? Must guidance control involve not simply the presence of these two components, as well as some etiological connection between them, but also a sustaining causal connection between them? And if so, then are there constraints on how this causal connection must be sustained, if guidance control is to be maintained? I hope that McCormick will address these questions in future work.

Anyone henceforth interested in questions about agency, and its relation to normativity, will need to engage with McCormick's important book.

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