CLEARING SPACE FOR DOXASTIC VOLUNTARISM

It is common for philosophers to claim that doxastic voluntarism, the view that an agent can form beliefs voluntarily, is false, and therefore that agents do not have the kind of control over their beliefs required for a straightforward application of deontological concepts such as obligation or duty in the domain of epistemology. The role that the denial of doxastic voluntarism plays in an argument to the effect that agents do not have obligations with respect to belief is simply this:

1. If an agent has an obligation to \( \Phi \), then it is possible for him to \( \Phi \) voluntarily.
2. Doxastic voluntarism is false.
3. Therefore, an agent does not have any obligations with respect to his beliefs.

Philosophers who are in favor of applying deontological concepts in epistemology for the most part have either focused on denying premise 1 by trying to assimilate obligation in belief to other kinds of obligation for which the "ought implies can" principle does not hold, or they have accepted the argument and claimed that in the first instance we apply deontological concepts to those cognitive activities that are undertaken voluntarily, such as the activity of inquiry. But nobody seems to want to stand up for doxastic voluntarism.

I believe that this is because philosophers have accepted an erroneous conception of doxastic voluntarism, which requires that agents have decisional control over their beliefs. While I agree with these philosophers that agents don't have the capacity to decide what to believe, I disagree that the application of deontological concepts requires this kind of control. In fact, I think that a close examination of the most fundamental connection between deontological concepts and belief would reveal an alternative conception of doxastic voluntarism, a conception that represents a kind of control that we do exercise regularly over our beliefs.

This paper is a precursor to the articulation of such an alternative conception of voluntary belief. In what follows, I will attempt to clear space for thinking more open-mindedly about doxastic voluntarism by pointing out a mistake in one influential route that seems to have led many to reject it. By displaying the inadequacy of the conception of voluntary control upon which this argument relies, I hope to motivate a fresh look at the assumptions governing our thinking about the possibilities for agential participation in the formation of belief.

Here is an oft-cited quotation from Bernard Williams's essay "Deciding to Believe," that I think has prompted some philosophers to think that belief-formation is fundamentally a passive, involuntary affair:

If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I can seriously think of it as a belief, i.e. as something purporting to represent reality.

The key idea here is that one could not, in full consciousness, acquire a belief irrespective of its truth, and because of this fact one cannot acquire a belief at will. Now, there might be an interpretation of "at will" under which this is true. However, the interpretation that is relevant to the thesis of doxastic voluntarism requires interpreting "at will" in such a way that an inability to do something at will entails an inability to do it voluntarily. So it is the failure of this version of the argument that I now will try to demonstrate.

The problem with the argument, so interpreted, is the claim that in order to acquire a belief at will one must be capable of acquiring the belief whether or not one thought it was true. In order to illustrate the defect of this claim, I will construct a parallel argument to that of Williams's to the effect that one cannot lie at will. Since lying is a paradigm case of voluntary activity for which an agent is responsible, this parallel argument is a reductio ad absurdum of Williams's original argument, interpreted in the way that I have indicated.
So here is the parallel argument to the effect that lying at will is impossible:

If I could lie at will, then I could lie whether or not I deceived anyone; moreover I would know that I could lie whether or not I deceived anyone. If in full consciousness I could will to lie irrespective of deceiving anyone, it is unclear that before the event I can seriously think of it as a lie, i.e., something purporting to deceive.

The problem with this argument is in the very first line. I cannot be said to be lying unless I am aiming to deceive someone; this is the sense in which lying has the constitutive goal of deception. But it surely doesn’t follow that because I must aim to deceive if I am to count as lying, lying is a speech-act that I cannot perform voluntarily.

It appears that according to Williams’s argument, being unable to view a belief except as something that purports to be true, blocks one from forming a belief at will. Here is an argument that might be implicitly supporting this thought:

The concept of belief is the concept of an attitude that is governed by a standard of correctness, truth. In order for a conceptually contentful mental state to qualify as a belief, as opposed to a fantasy or a mere entertaining of a thought, it must be governed by this standard of correctness. Therefore an agent cannot form a belief unless he takes considerations relevant to the truth to be reasons in his deliberation. For if he were to take non-alethic considerations as reasons, then he would be unable to view his deliberation under the guise of belief-formation, since he could not see his deliberation as governed by the standard of truth. But believing at will requires that an agent be unconstrained by truth-regarding considerations in his deliberations about what to believe. Since a deliberation won’t count as belief-formation if it isn’t constrained by truth-regarding considerations, it follows that one cannot believe at will.

If Williams’s argument goes through for the case of belief, then it will go through for any aim-constituted activity. This is because it is the mere fact that belief has a constitutive aim which blocks one from engaging in belief-formation irrespective of concern for that aim. And this is true of all aim-constituted activities. Unless one treats the falsity of a proposition as a reason to assert it, one does not count as attempting to lie. That is, one does not count as having the end of lying if one is not moved to take the means necessary to achieve the end of deception. More generally, if one does not see the relevance of a move with respect to the objective of a constitutively aim-governed activity, one does not count as engaging in the activity; at most one is pretending to engage in the activity. It is part of what it is to be governed by an aim that one is sensitive to considerations or means relevant to achieving the aim in such a way that one is motivated to undertake those means or be guided by those considerations. If one were not moved by considerations relevant to achieving an aim, absent mitigating conditions, one would not count as having the aim. Surely baking a cake or building a house are activities that involve voluntary action by their participants, such as mixing ingredients or putting up a roof. But one cannot make a cake without mixing ingredients, and therefore one cannot will to engage in behavior meant to produce a cake, such as mixing flour, without taking account of its relevance to the goal of making a cake. This does not show, however, that when one mixes flour in order to make a cake, one’s action is involuntary.

Furthermore, if it were the case that it followed from the mere fact that an activity is constitutively governed by an aim that the activity could not be engaged in voluntarily, action itself would be rendered involuntary according to a prominent conception of action. It is a common view in the philosophy of action that action is distinguished from mere behavior by the fact that action has a constitutive aim. This aim has traditionally been thought to be The Good, but so long as one accepts that action has some constitutive aim or other, there is a Williams-style argument in the offing to the effect that action itself cannot be undertaken voluntarily. I will assume that action is constitutively aimed at The Good in producing this argument, but any aim will do, so long as all actions, in virtue of their nature, have it. So here is a Williams-style argument with respect to action:

If I could perform action x at will, then I could perform x whether it was good or not; moreover I would know that I could perform x whether it was good or not. If in full consciousness I could will to perform x irrespective of its worth, it is unclear that before the
event I can seriously think of it as an action, i.e., something I have chosen to perform because of its connection to The Good.

Now I seriously doubt that any philosopher who has claimed that action constitutively aims at The Good, or the satisfaction of desire, or whatever, thought that this would render action involuntary, since many of the same philosophers have thought that it is the central mark of action that it is undertaken voluntarily. In fact I would venture to say that some of these philosophers have hoped to explain the voluntary nature of action through its constitutive aim. Similarly, I think we can get a handle on the voluntary nature of belief-formation through understanding the way that the constitutive aim of belief structures theoretical deliberation, and thereby determines the shape that the will must take if it is to participate in the formation of belief. But I will have to leave this task for another occasion.

II

Up to this point, I have merely been concerned to argue that Williams's argument cannot be used to deny that belief-formation is a voluntary activity, because it entails the incorrect claim that any constitutively aim-governed activity cannot be undertaken voluntarily. In this section, I wish to describe the conception of voluntary behavior that I think underlies the rejection of doxastic voluntarism, and explain why I think this conception is too strong. Richard Feldman (2000) argues that action is voluntary in virtue of being caused by an intention, and since intentions are not causally implicated in the formation of belief, belief is not voluntary. I think this notion of voluntary behavior explains why those who rightly think, with Williams, that an agent cannot decide what to believe, conclude that belief is involuntary. For rational agents, intentions are the normal conclusions of practical deliberations, and therefore represent their decisions. A rational agent then executes his intentions through his actions. In this way, his actions are the outcomes of his decisions. But, unless a rational agent has a truth-directed intention, his beliefs cannot be the executions of his intentions and thereby the expressions of his decisions. This is because if only a non-truth directed intention directly (and consciously) moved one to entertain a thought, that thought would not have been formed by the aim of truth, and therefore would be disqualified from being a belief.

To see that this notion of voluntariness is too strong, we just need to notice that agents can be causally responsible for their intentions, even though these intentions are not themselves normally the expressions of prior intentions. Although actions are undertaken on the basis of intentions, normally intentions themselves are not formed on the basis of prior intentions. In fact, it is not possible for all intentions to be formed on the basis of prior intentions, since this would require an infinite regress of intentions. While this is logically coherent, it is certainly not psychologically possible for creatures such as us to frame such an ever-escalating series of higher-order intentions. Furthermore, an intention cannot normally be formed on the basis of a prior intention to form that very intention, since ordinarily to intend to intend to \( \Phi \) is already to intend to \( \Phi \).

There is an analogous explanation of why beliefs cannot normally be formed on the basis of prior intentions. To form an intention to believe \( \Phi \) because \( \Phi \) is true, as would be the case were one to form an intention to believe \( \Phi \) on the basis of reasons for the truth of \( \Phi \), is just to believe \( \Phi \). There is no gap between such an intention and the corresponding belief; therefore the belief cannot be formed on the basis of the intention. But it does not follow that agents are involuntary bystanders in the formation of their intentions or their beliefs.

However, the fact that an intention cannot normally be formed on the basis of a prior intention does show that one cannot normally decide what to intend. But since agents can play a role in the formation of their intentions, this just shows that an agent can be causally responsible for things that he does not decide upon. Therefore, the fact that one cannot intend, and therefore decide what to believe, does not entail that one cannot exercise agential control over one's beliefs.

If the attribution of the capacity to decide what to believe was required for agents to be causally responsible for their beliefs, then the attribution of the capacity to decide what to decide would be required in order for agents to be causally responsible for their decisions. Agents are causally responsible for their decisions, but in fact, except in unusual circumstances, they lack the capacity to decide what to decide. Therefore voluntary intention-formation does not entail the existence of such a
capacity, and voluntary belief-formation does not entail a corresponding doxastic decision-making capacity.

III

As I have indicated, I think that there is a role for agency in the very formation of intentions and beliefs. I also think that it is in virtue of this role that agents can be held normatively accountable for their intentions and beliefs. That is, the fact that an intention is not caused by a prior intention does not preclude an agent from being normatively accountable for his intention, and so too the fact that a belief is not caused by an intention does not preclude an agent from being normatively accountable for his belief. In the case of belief, I think this agential-role is compatible with Williams’s point that belief must be conceptualized, from the first-person point of view, as being determined solely by evidential considerations. Very briefly, let me point in the direction of the conception of voluntary agency that makes this compatibility possible. According to this broadly Kantian conception, the capacity to be moved by an appreciation of reasons is that in virtue of which agents exercise control over their beliefs. Now, as Williams brings out nicely, only evidence can provide reasons for belief from an agent’s first-person deliberative perspective. According to the Kantian, this just is the perspective from which an agent exerts direct control over his beliefs. Therefore, on this conception, insofar as we are capable of regulating our beliefs by our appreciation of evidence, we are the agents of our beliefs.

Let me finish by saying something about the connection between epistemic deontology and this way of conceiving of the role of the will in belief. I will do this by way of responding to an objection. It has been suggested by Jonathan Bennett that the will is a capacity to respond solely to practical reasons, not to both practical and evidential reasons. Therefore, it could be objected, the fact that agents can only be moved by evidential reasons in their deliberations about what to believe entails that the will has no direct role to play in the formation of belief. Now one can stipulate the meanings of terms as one likes, but if our interest is in developing a conception of voluntary belief that can support the application of deontological concepts, this stipulation will be of little interest. The fact that deliberative belief-formation can only be guided by evidential reasons limits the content of our obligations with respect to belief, but it does not foreclose the possibility of such requirements. We cannot be obliged to believe in accord with our interests or desires, since these considerations cannot move us in our office as agents of our beliefs. But we do have the capacity to believe on the basis of evidence, and therefore we can be required to follow evidential rules in our doxastic deliberations.

Here is another way of putting the point: our agency in belief is realized through our effective theoretical deliberation, which is a form of reasoning that involves being moved by an appreciation of evidence. The content of our doxastic obligations must respect this epistemic form our agency takes in belief-formation; therefore the principles that represent the content of these obligations must be evidential in character.

This explains the nature of the constraints deontological requirements must meet if they are to be applicable to belief, but nothing has yet been said about how such requirements actually come to have normative force in our doxastic lives. That is, nothing has been said about whether we are in fact bound by epistemic obligations. On another occasion I hope to undertake the complementary tasks of uncovering the fundamental connection between belief and deontology that explains the normative force that binds us to our epistemic obligations, and providing a fuller articulation of the Kantian conception of doxastic voluntarism that supports this connection.

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NOTES

1. I am extremely grateful to David Velleman and Alexander George for many helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also want to thank Ward Jones for help in streamlining this paper. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Philosophy Departments at Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the University of Michigan.
4. See Christopher Hookway (1990), and Hilary Kornblith (1983), for examples of this latter strategy.
6. I take no stand on which interpretation Williams himself had in mind.

7. Thanks to Alexander George for suggesting this example. A similar argument can be used to show that one cannot build a house at all because one cannot build a house without regard to whether or not it provides shelter. Of course one can make a building that happens to be a house without intending to build something that provides shelter. For instance, one might follow a set of instructions in order to discover what the instructions are for, and thereby build a house unwittingly. My claim is that one cannot intend to build something that one conceives of as a house, and therefore one cannot engage in the practice of house building, without aiming to build something that provides shelter.

8. See Joseph Raz (1997) for a similar claim that an implicit premise like this is needed in order to make Williams’s argument valid. Raz also finds this premise implausible, however he does not argue against its plausibility, or at least not in the way that I do.

9. Note that I have not said anything about the precise sense in which belief aims at truth. The road to explaining this metaphor is fraught with difficulties, the entangling of which would require a separate, and long, paper. However, it seems to me that it ought to be uncontroversial that there is some sense in which belief aims at truth, even though there is rightly much controversy about exactly what this sense is. See Velleman (2000) for a penetrating discussion of this issue.

10. James Montmarquet (1986) argues that belief and action are alike in being under the controlling influence of reasons. Since action is not rendered involuntary by the controlling influence of reasons, so too belief is not rendered involuntary by the controlling influence of reasons for thinking true. He then goes on to argue that Williams’s argument in “Deciding To Believe,” depends on the unsupported assumption that the controlling influence of reasons for thinking true on belief is incompatible with voluntary belief. Therefore he concludes that Williams has not shown that voluntary belief is impossible. I think Montmarquet is correct that Williams relies on this assumption, but unless this assumption can be demonstrated to be false, I think the argument will continue to have wide appeal. This is because this assumption seems to explain the widespread conviction that belief, unlike action, is involuntary. It might be thought that it is precisely because belief is restricted in the kinds of considerations that can provide reasons for it that belief is involuntary, and that it is precisely because action is unrestricted in the kinds of considerations that can provide reasons for it that action is voluntary. However, as my argument shows, any aim-constituted activity restricts the kinds of considerations that can be reasons for an agent who is engaging in that activity, but those activities are not rendered involuntary because of this restriction. So the restricted nature of reasons for belief cannot be used to argue that belief is involuntary.

11. See Cottingham (2002) for an interpretation of Descartes along these lines.

12. In Shah (in preparation) I argue that reasons are conceptually tied to the first-person deliberative perspective. This means that the evidential constraint on reasons for belief must be respected from any perspective that reason-judgments can be made.


REFERENCES


