

EPISTEMIC RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT EPISTEMIC AGENCY

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Abstract

This article discusses the arguments against associating epistemic responsibility with the ordinary notion of agency. I examine the various “Kantian” views which lead to a distinctive conception of epistemic agency and epistemic responsibility, in particular the one proposed by Pamela Hieronymi (2007). I try to explain why we can be held responsible for our beliefs in the sense of obeying norms which regulate them without being epistemic agents

Key words : agency , belief, responsibility, reasons, Hieronymi (P.)

1. Introduction

We often blame people for what they believe – for instance for believing weird, stupid or nasty things. In such cases we disapprove certain contents of thoughts, which we think that a rational, or simply an honest, person should not have. When a person expresses racist beliefs for instance, it is not clear whether we blame the beliefs or the person who is susceptible of having such beliefs. As Lichtenberg said: “Do not blame people for what they believe, but for what their beliefs have made of them”. But in other cases we blame the way beliefs are formed and the believing itself. We say that someone should have, on the basis of the relevant evidence, believed this or that, or that he should not have believed this or that, given that it does not follow from his other beliefs. It is the latter context which seems to licence our talk of epistemic obligations and of people being responsible for what they believe or do not believe, or for what they know or do not know. Of the president of the bank who tells us that he did not foresee the financial crisis, we say that he should have known, given his position, or that he should have had beliefs about the state of the market. Talk of praise and blame for our beliefs, and of epistemic obligations and responsibility, implies, however, that one can make sense of their being epistemic agents, capable of controlling their beliefs. But the idea that we can control our beliefs is notoriously problematic, at least if we mean by this the kind of control that we have ordinarily on our actions. Hence the following well

known “anti-voluntarist” argument (Feldman 2000) against deontology in epistemology and the associated notion of epistemic responsibility:

- (1) If there are epistemic obligations, then belief is under voluntary control
- (2) Belief is not under voluntary control
- (3) Therefore there are no epistemic obligations

There are various ways of resisting this argument, if one wants to maintain the idea that we can be responsible for our beliefs. One can deny (1) that the existence of epistemic obligations implies a voluntary control over belief. One can deny (2) that belief is not under voluntary control. And one can deny that epistemic responsibility entails the existence of, and conformity to, epistemic obligations.

One of the presuppositions of both the defenders of the anti-voluntarist argument and of its opponents is that epistemic obligations imply the performing of certain actions, and that the epistemic *oughts* have the same, or a relevantly similar, meaning as the moral *ought*. But this presupposition is questionable. Beliefs, and epistemic attitudes in general, if they are regulated by certain obligations, need not obey rules for an *ought to do*, which prescribe what an agent should do. Moreover, if there is epistemic agency at all, it need not be of the same nature as ordinary agency. So a number of writers have recently argued that there is a sense of the notion of agency which applies to the epistemic domain and which is distinctive of it. The proponents of this line of thought have suggested that we need not *act*, in the usual sense of the term, in order to be epistemic agents and to be subject to a kind of responsibility which is distinctively epistemic. They reject the idea that the falsity of doxastic voluntarism implies the wreck of the notion of responsibility. For instance, John McDowell writes:

“Judging, making up one’s mind what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible – something we freely do, as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives. Of course a belief is not always, or even typically, the result of our exercising this freedom to do what we think. But even if a belief is not freely adopted, it is an actualization of capacities of a kind, the conceptual, whose paradigmatic mode of actualization is in the exercise of freedom that judging is. This freedom, exemplified in responsible acts of judging, is essentially a matter of being answerable to criticism in the light of rationally relevant considerations. So the realm of freedom, at least the realm of freedom of judging, can be identified with the space of reasons.” (Mc Dowell 1998: 434)

It is easy to recognise here a concept of agency which can be characterised as Kantian, in the sense that it involves the idea that the kind of responsibility that we have over our beliefs and in the epistemic domain is based upon a form of autonomy which consists in our being able to answer the specific kind of reasons which govern the theoretical domain. This kind of agency is different from the ordinary notion in that it does not involve voluntary act of the will, and locates our epistemic freedom in our reflective capacity to think ourselves as agents. There are, of course, several versions of this neo-Kantian view, among which Richard Moran's (2000) conception of beliefs as commitments, Richard Feldman's (2000) modest deontologism, and Pamela Hieronymi's (2006, 2007) conception of evaluative control. In the present article, I shall focus on Hieronymi's version, because it is explicitly based on the distinction between two kinds of agency, and between two different notions of responsibility, among which only one is relevant to the epistemic domain.

Although I agree with this broadly speaking Kantian line about the need to frame a specific concept of responsibility for the epistemic domain, I disagree with its proponents when they claim that it implies a form of *agency*. When we answer reasons for believing, and follow epistemic norms, we do not act, neither in the ordinary sense nor in some special sense, and a conception of correct belief and knowledge does not imply any kind of conformity to norms which could result in our acting in some way.

In what follows, I shall first summarise the arguments against associating epistemic responsibility with the ordinary notion of agency. I shall then examine the various "Kantian" (or proto-Kantian) views which lead to a distinctive conception of epistemic agency and epistemic responsibility. I shall then try to explain why we can be held responsible for our beliefs in the sense of obeying norms which regulate them without being epistemic *agents*.

2. Compatibilism about epistemic responsibility

The reasons which motivate the second premise of the anti-voluntarist argument, to the effect that belief is not under the control of the will, are well known, and I shall not try to rehearse them here¹. They conclude that, since belief is not under the control of the will, we cannot be deemed responsible for them. To this we can oppose two distinct lines of argument. The first consists in rejecting the second premise, and in arguing that belief is indeed under the control of the will (Ginet 2001, Steup 2000). The second line consists in attacking the

¹ Williams 1973, Alston 1989, Bennett 1991, Engel 1999

presupposition of the anti-voluntarist argument, and in arguing for the compatibility of the involuntariness of belief and of responsibility. Those who defend this line (the “compatibilists”) remark that the arguments against doxastic voluntarism are premised upon a conception of responsibility and free agency which rests upon what is sometimes called the notion of “dual control”, that is the power to bring about voluntarily two or more incompatible results. These arguments are also premised upon the principle that *ought* implies *can*. If we drop these presuppositions, we can, as the compatibilists argue, reconcile responsibility for believing with the non voluntariness of belief (Levy 2007). Let us briefly consider the main proposals on this compatibilist side.

a) The principle that *ought* implies *can* has been contested, focusing on examples of cases where the obligation remains although the conditions of realising it are not met, e.g of promises which one is no longer in position to fulfil (Sinnot-Armstrong 1984, Ryan 2005). In order to accommodate the intuition that an *ought* might still commit one although the agent may not be in position to do the relevant actions, Richard Feldman’s (2000, 2007) has proposed that the *oughts* which regulate beliefs are not such that an agent is supposed to do something, intentionally or voluntarily, but such that the agent has to fill a certain *role*. On this view, just as it is the role of a teacher to be competent and to grade appropriately his students’ work, it is the role of a believer to form beliefs according to certain prescriptions, in particular the prescription to believe on the basis of the evidence that one has. One can fulfil a role, and in this sense be responsible and accountable, without actually being able to perform certain actions relevant to it. The problem with this suggestion, as it has been remarked (Kornblith 2001, Levy 2007), is that role obligations are distinct from ordinary *oughts*. Role obligations, such as those attached to a profession, are specialised, and they involve presumably conditional or hypothetical prescriptions (if you are to be a teacher, you ought to do such and such) whereas the obligations to which belief is subject are fully general, and categorical. Moreover one does not choose to be a believer, whereas one can choose to be a teacher.

b) Another compatibilist proposal, in defence of a form of deontology, is Steup’s (2000) distinction between the evidence that one has in favour of believing that P (which gives rise to a belief, which he calls the “verdict” belief) and the actual belief that P. On Steup’s view, the agent deliberates about whether P is justified on the basis of enough evidence (and thus forms a verdict belief), and decides, on that basis, to undertake the belief (“the object belief”) that P. This distinction is close to Descartes’ idea that the understanding presents a proposition as a possible object of judgement to the will which judges whether P or suspends judgement

(Cottingham 2003, Engel 2002). The decision to move from the verdict belief to the object belief looks thus very much like the result of a practical deliberation. But, as Neil Levy (2007: 142) notes, this proposal faces two objections: it would multiply our decisions beyond necessity (if every actual object belief had to be preceded by a decision to believe upon a verdict belief, most of our routine beliefs would have to be the outcome of such decisions, which is implausible) and there is a risk of a regress (don't we need to take a decision upon whether we believe the verdict belief, in which case it becomes an object belief and requires another verdict belief to be undertaken, etc.?).

c) A well known compatibilist line has often been taken by those who remark that although direct doxastic voluntarism is implausible, indirect voluntarism is very likely to be true: we can perform actions which have the effect of causing us to believe something, and we can be perfectly responsible for these actions. Just as we can cause someone to believe that P (say, by presenting him some evidence leading to the belief that P), we could cause ourselves in such a way to have certain beliefs. We can actually take responsibility for such indirectly acquired beliefs for all kinds of reasons, which range from prudential ones (it would be good to have these beliefs) to epistemic ones (having them would enhance our knowledge). Why should there be less responsibility in these kinds of belief formation than there is in the case of ordinary indirect actions, such as, for instance, causing someone to do a certain action (if I hire a gunman to kill you, I am as responsible for your death than he is)?

The main objection to this line of thought is that although indirect voluntarism gives us a perfectly acceptable sense in which one can be responsible of one's beliefs in the same sense as one can be responsible of one's actions, this is still not a case of *epistemic* agency and of *epistemic* responsibility. For there to be agency and responsibility which would be properly epistemic, one would have to answer directly and constitutively *epistemic* reasons. One thing is to have reasons to want to believe, and to be able to cause or to manipulate oneself into believing, and another thing is to have reasons to believe. The former are typically practical reasons, and call for the performance of actions. They are epistemic reasons only by courtesy, or extrinsically, in that epistemic states of beliefs are their outputs. But they are not constitutively, or intrinsically, epistemic. Constitutive reasons for believing are reasons which bear directly on the question whether P is true, and issue directly into believing that P. Extrinsic reasons are reasons which one has to believe that P independently of whether P is true or justified, and which bear on the question of what kind of state of affairs one can bring about to make it the case that one believes that P. A good test for recognizing a reason for a belief as extrinsic is that it is instrumental to the realisation of a certain aim or goal which one

intends to reach (say, being happier, or feeling more comfortable) whereas intrinsic reasons do not involve any kind of instrumental or means-end relation between the believer and his goal. When I believe something on the basis of evidence, I do not ask myself whether it would be good, or beneficial, to believe on the basis of evidence. I believe on the basis of evidence because evidence is constitutive of what it is to believe for a reason. Even when I set myself the goal of having only true beliefs, or of acquiring knowledge, my relationship with the goal is instrumental (I commit myself to doing whatever leads to it) in a way in which my simply believing that P because I take it to be true is not. ²

It seems *prima facie* that this distinction reinforces the anti-voluntarist position, since the anti-voluntarist claims that our beliefs are not responsive to *practical* reasons. But in fact it threatens the voluntarist position as well, for the voluntarist, at least in the version defended by Steup, wants to say that

“There is a reason-responsiveness in either case. Thus there is a strong *prima facie* case for thinking that there is voluntary control in either case. If opponents of doxastic freedom wish to resist this line of reasoning, they need to justify the chauvinist premise that responsiveness to epistemic reasons does not count as freedom grounding kind of responsiveness (Steup 2008:388)

But if the distinction between constitutive and extrinsic reasons for believing is a real one, the reason responsiveness is not the same in each case. And we cannot say that beliefs can be the objects of voluntary control even when they answer epistemic reasons, for either there is no control at all, or it cannot be the same kind of control.

It is at this point that another option is open. If epistemic responsibility cannot rest upon the notion of voluntary control, either of a direct or of an indirect kind, it is still open to us to say that it rests upon another notion of control. But before that, it would be useful to say more about what could count as epistemic agency.

3. *Epistemic agency*

There seems to be little doubt that a number of epistemic terms designate actions. Verbs and phrases like *judging, deciding, reasoning, calculating, conjecturing, supposing,*

² There are several ways of explaining this distinction, which is implicit in Williams' (1970) seminal article, by Bennett (1991) when he distinguishes between reasons that bear on what to make true (extrinsic) and what makes true (intrinsic), and which has been elaborated by Owens (2000), Shah (2003) and Hieronymi (2005, 2006, 2007). The present remark is an allusion to the “transparency” feature of belief elaborated by Shah. See below.

assuming, guessing, accepting, presuming, making up one's mind, imagining, remembering and their corresponding nominalisations seem to designate actions, things that we do, rather than things that simply happen to us, at least in a number of cases. Although these epistemic episodes are clearly mental actions, or involve mental actions, which do not issue necessarily in a bodily movement, they seem to be closer to being actions than such events as tripping on the carpet, sliding on a wet floor, sneezing or coughing. The latter are, in a loose sense, things that we do, but they are not intentional actions. But are the former intentional? Certainly engaging into certain intellectual tasks, like solving a problem, deliberating about one's next destination for a holiday, are intentional *actions* in their own right. But it is not clear that reasoning or calculating *always* involve an intention to reason or to calculate, and the same is true of guessing and of supposing. I can find myself engaged in a guess or a supposing without having intended to do so, although it is correct to say that in such cases I am not completely passive. It seems to be obvious that there are unintentional actions, actions which are neither the product of a decision nor of an intention like scratching one's head, walking across the room while one talks or crossing one's leg. Such mental actions as being attentive, for instance, have an obvious epistemic relevance, but they are not obviously, or at least not always, instances of intentional actions. These are things that we do, but that we do not do on the basis of an intention. We can call these *activities* rather than actions³. These mental actions and these activities share, however, with bodily actions, a certain phenomenology: the agent is aware, in the first person mode, and in the present tense mode, that he is performing the action, and he can also have the experience of trying to ϕ (one can try to be attentive, to calculate, to guess, or to imagine just as one can try to reach for an object or to play a sonata). These shared phenomenological features have led some thinkers to claim that mental actions are actions in their own right. Thus Christopher Peacocke says:

A thinker's awareness of those of his mental events that are mental actions is a species of action-awareness. If mental actions are literally actions, it should not be surprising that a subject's awareness of them is of the same kind as other examples of action-awareness. (Peacocke 2007:)

Such claims raise at least three questions. In the first place, even if it were true (and I think it is true) that mental actions and activities display a number of the features of ordinary actions, it is not clear that the same can be said about belief and knowledge, for a familiar reason. Belief and knowledge are more readily conceived as states than as acts, and more

³ Martine Nida-Rümelin (2008) has an extensive analysis of these episodes

easily classified among dispositional states than among mental episodes. *Pace* those who claim that there is a distinctive phenomenology of believing⁴, it is difficult to apply Peacocke's criteria to belief: there is no distinctive awareness of believing in the first person present tense (except perhaps for beliefs about oneself), and no distinctive phenomenology of trying to believe (unless one identifies, wrongly, belief and judgement). This sets an important limitation to the claim that epistemic attitudes fall under the scope of the notion of agency. In the second place, although Peacocke does not claim that mental actions involve any sort of responsibility, we can ask whether they do involve responsibility, and the answer is negative for a wide range of mental actions. Certainly certain mental actions like judging, deciding, deliberating and other clearly intentional mental actions can be ascribed to an agent who can be praised, blamed, or criticised for having judged, decided or deliberated about something, but it is far less clear that one is responsible, for instance, for (all of) one's imaginings, guessings or rememberings, including when they manifest a form of activity. In the third place does the existence of a common phenomenology shared by ordinary bodily actions and mental actions show that mental episodes such as judgments, reasonings or guessings are mental actions in their own right? Having the feeling that we act is one thing, actually acting is another (compare: we may have the feeling of knowing something, but it does not show that we actually know⁵). We need to invoke stronger criteria of agency.

Besides the criterion of awareness – an agent is typically aware of his own actions and capable of reflecting upon them – the ordinary criterion for an action is the familiar (more or less Davidsonian) one of the presence of a reason and of an intention which causally produces a bodily movement, *i.e.* an agent A ϕ s if :

- 1) A has a reason to ϕ which is at least constituted of an intention to ϕ
- 2) the reason and the intention cause in the appropriate way a bodily movement

but this definition is notoriously defective, perhaps circular, and as we have just seen it does not apply to activities. Now if we include the notion of intention and voluntariness among our criteria, not only it is not clear that it applies to such episodes like judging, guessing or reasoning, but also it is, for the familiar reasons, not applicable to beliefs. More substantial conceptions of action are not applicable either. The anti-voluntarist arguments applies as well

⁴ For recent accounts of this kind, see Strawson 1994, Schwitzgebel 2002.

⁵ See the numerous studies on the “feeling of knowing” and the “tip of the tongue” phenomenon, e.g. Koriat 2005

against more demanding conceptions of action, such as conceptions which require that an agent be capable of having second-order motives (Frankfurt 1969) or conceptions which require that an agent should stand behind his motives (Velleman 2000): doxastic voluntarism does not presuppose that we can be agents with respect to our beliefs in such demanding and strong senses⁶. These conceptions, however, certainly correspond more closely to our ordinary conception of responsibility, which implies that our actions are ascribed to an agent, who is supposed to be in control of his actions, and answerable for them, so that they can be praised or blamed for them.

It is not clear what is required for distinctively epistemic *agency*. We seem to be stuck between two equally unsatisfactory conceptions of agency: on the one hand, if all that we require for being an agent is that he performs certain activities which fall short of being intentional, our concept of agency is too weak to imply that the agent can be responsible for his actions, and if, on the other hand, we use a thicker notion of agency involving second-order motives or the full-blooded notion of an agent who projects himself in the future, only a very small range of mental actions will fall under this categorisation. There certainly are epistemic episodes, such as accepting a hypothesis, taking something for granted, adopting a theory, which manifest all the full-blooded features of agency, and which, for this reason, have been taken rightly to belong to the active part of the mind, and which qualify clearly as epistemic actions (Cohen 1992, Engel 2000). But it is far less clear for belief.

At this point the Kantian notion of freedom seems to offer the promise of the intermediary view that we need.

4. The Kantian stance

I call Kantian, although it would be better called quasi-Kantian, a conception of agency and autonomy which insists, in both the practical and the epistemic domain, upon two main features: (a) an agent is responsible only if he can be answerable in the sense that we can be asked for his or her *reasons*, and (b) the agent is capable of *reflection* upon his or her reasons. These two features are quite common Kantian requirements in the domain of actions. What interests me here is whether they can be defended for the epistemic domain too. They are clearly emphasised by McDowell about beliefs in the quote given above in § 1. His point is that an agent is free and responsible of what he thinks in the sense of holding to his reasons in

⁶ One conception actually presupposes such a full-blooded concept of agency: Mark Heller's « Hobartian voluntarism » (2000). But precisely, Heller explains how it differs from ordinary voluntarism.

a reflective mode. They have been equally emphasised the epistemic domain by a number of writers, among whom: Burge (1995), Pettit and Smith (1996), Scanlon (1998), Moran (2000), Hieronymi (2005, 2006). But not all of them lay emphasis in the same way upon the two features. In particular they do not answer in the same way the following question: “Does the fact that an agent is attentive to the reasons for his beliefs and reflectively aware of them in the epistemic domain in general implies that he is genuinely active and free *in the sense in which he can be said to be so in the practical domain?* McDowell seems to answer positively. This view seems to be shared by Tyler Burge:

“To understand fully the fundamental notions associated with reason, including the notion of reasoning, judgment, change of mind, propositional attitude, point of view, one must have and employ a first person concept.... A subject, or a ‘critical reasoner’ in this full sense not only must understand the evaluative norms that provide standards that count reasoning good or bad, but also that a subject who is able to understand these norms of reasons must ‘immediately be moved by reasons.’ To understand reasons one must understand their force and application. So to be aware of these norms involves a tendency to be immediately motivated by them.” (Burge 1995: 249, 252).

But in what sense can we say that being aware of one’s reasons for reasoning, judging, or believing involves a form of *agency*? Burge says that they involve a “tendency to be immediately motivated by them”, but it is not clear that this tendency amounts to having, in the required sense for agency, a control over the propositions which are attended to reflectively in judging, reasoning or believing. Burge, however, thinks it does:

One must be susceptible to the force and implement normative evaluations in guiding thought and other acts that fall under such those evaluation and (to understand reasoning), one must regard reasons as effective in one’s judgements. Doing so amounts to acknowledgement of one agency... in recognizing the effect of reasons on one’s judgements and inference, one cannot think of oneself as powerless. (*ibid*)

In what sense does the fact that one can reflect upon one’s attitudes give one any control over one’s attitudes? Consider the familiar situation of becoming conscious of those one’s beliefs that one was not previously aware of. For instance I have plenty of perceptual beliefs, which I do not notice when I have them, and which I may come to attend consciously if I attend to them. Or I may discover that I am surprised of P being the case, and infer from this that I actually believed that not P, and reflect upon why I had this belief. Or I may find, that,

on reflection, my belief that P is based on insufficient evidence. In all such cases, my attending to my belief that P gives me a kind of control over my beliefs, in the sense that my being aware of them gives me a grasp of these beliefs which I did not have when they were merely tacit and when I did not attend them consciously. Indeed in the case where I think that my belief is based on insufficient evidence, I am normally led to doubt the truth of my belief, and perhaps to revise it or to withdraw it. But does that amount to having a control over my beliefs in the sense of, to speak like Burge, being able to “move my mind” and “not to be powerless”? On the Kantian-or quasi Kantian view that we are considering, the very fact that one is conscious of one’s first-order belief, and forms a second-order one, is enough for controlling the belief, and the recognition of the norms which it obeys gives the subject a sense of his autonomy. But is it enough?

Is it enough to ascend to a second-order belief and to attend to one’s reasons in order to control it? Certainly, awareness of reasons is a common feature of actions, as we have seen. But in what sense can this ascent to a reflective belief and one’s awareness of a reason can affect what one believes in a sense which would be required for agency? The mere fact that I become conscious of my belief or attend to it does not in itself make me an agent with respect to my belief. In particular the psychological piece of self-reflection does not make me change my belief. It can make me change my belief, however, if I discover that, upon confronting it with my other beliefs and with the evidence at my disposal, this belief is unjustified. If I form the second-order belief that my first order belief is unjustified, I certainly am disposed to revise it, in so far as I comply by the requirements of rationality. If *this* is what the Kantian view means, there is clearly a sense in which I can be said to control my beliefs in this way. But does that mean that I control my own mind? Not at all, since, my belief that that evidence goes against my first-order belief is forced upon me, as well as the requirements of rationality. In this kind of episode one can be said to be “changing one’s mind” with respect to P or to be “making up one’s mind” whether P, and these phrases suggest activity on the part of the agent. But does it show that the agent is in control of his beliefs? Not at all, if only in a purely metaphorical sense.⁷

Let us focus more specifically on the condition (a) of answerability to reasons and of attending to one’s reason. A number of Kantian inspired writers suggest that our attending to reasons in the reflective mode is what makes us epistemic responsible agents. For instance Pettit and Smith write:

⁷ I here concur with David Owens in his criticism of the principle of reflection, in Owens 2000. See also Engel 2002, 2007

“Responsible believers and desirers are orthonomous subjects, in the sense that their recognise certain yardsticks of right belief and right desire and can respond to the demands of the right in their own case” (Pettit & Smith 1996: 430)

The condition that responsible belief requires that the agent has reasons for his beliefs is indeed a mandatory one. As Judith Thomson says about the case of inferential beliefs:

. . . it might be asked why a man who says, ‘ p , so q ’ must believe that p is a reason for q . . . ‘Surely he must believe that p is a reason for q or he can’t mean his “so”.’ ‘So’ (and its cognates) rules out a guess. But if he does not believe this then he is at best guessing. For, for all he knows, it would be an accident if q , and a stroke of luck for him if he were right in saying that q . His ‘conclusion’ is not a conclusion at all (Thomson 1964 : 296).

But the fact that an agent is aware of certain normative standards (say, those of logical inference), and that he conforms to them is not the product on any decision on his part. If it were, we would be stuck in the familiar Carrollian regress: forming a higher-order judgement about the norms does not in any sense allow us to be *moved* to a conclusion.⁸

It seems here that the Kantian view confuses two things: being actually an agent in control of one’s beliefs, and the necessary conditions for such a control. If epistemic agency is to be conceived upon the model of moral agency, the reflective condition on reasons which the Kantian emphasises is indeed justified. But it is at best a necessary, and certainly not a sufficient condition in the epistemic case, that agents are aware of their reasons for believing and capable of reflection. Indeed it seems that in many cases one can be sensitive to reasons without being necessarily aware of them. For instance in reasoning, in the sense of inferring one belief from another, we do not attend reflexively to norms or rules, but someone who reasons correctly can certainly be said to have arrived at his beliefs responsibly through a correct appraisal of the reasons for this belief, without having any reflective awareness of them.

5. Evaluative control

⁸ Carroll 1895, For a recent account of the problem with respect to responsible believing, see Leite 2007, and Engel 2005

Pamela Hieronymi's (2005, 2006, 2007) proposal is meant to remedy these difficulties, and to avoid both the pitfalls of the view which identifies epistemic agency to a kind of voluntary control and of the Kantian view. This implies, according to her, an account of a distinctive kind of control.

Hieronymi takes her starting point from the notion of responsibility as answerability which she shares with the Kantian account. To be responsible for one's beliefs is to be able to be asked for one's reasons, in the minimal sense of an answer to the question "Why did you ϕ ?", and by being able to take into account one's reasons. To intentionally ϕ for certain reasons is, in her phrase, to have settled the question whether to ϕ for those reasons (Hieronymi 2008:360). But "settling a question" is very different from bringing it about, causally, that one ϕ s. One can make it the case, for a given reason, that one ϕ s, by performing a certain action. In such cases, we do indeed control the result, but this control is, in Hieronymi's phrase, merely "manipulative" or "managerial". In the epistemic case, one can set oneself to believe that P through various causal routes (drugs, indoctrination, etc.), or simply by performing actions of which one knows that they will lead to the result that one believes that P. In some cases, the reasons upon which one acts in order to control one's beliefs can be practical (these beliefs will bring relief, or comfort, for instance). In other cases they can be epistemic in the ordinary sense that they conform to evidence. For instance one can manipulate oneself into believing that Rome is a beautiful city by simply going there. But in neither case this kind of voluntary control amounts to "settling a question" whether P. We cannot control our beliefs and other epistemic attitudes in the way we can control our actions because our epistemic attitudes embody a distinct kind of question. To "settle a question whether P", in the epistemic domain, is to determine whether P for reasons which one takes to bear on the truth of P, and be able to answer by giving these reasons if one is asked. This involves undertaking a *commitment* towards P. As Hieronymi puts it :

"If an attitude embodies our answer to a question or set of questions, then it seems we will form or revise such an attitude in forming or revising our answers to the relevant question(s). if you become convinced that p , and so settle for yourself the question of whether p , you therein, *ipso facto*, believe p . Likewise, if you settle (positively) the question of whether to ϕ , you therein, *ipso facto*, intend to ϕ . Moreover, if you change your mind about whether to ϕ , or about whether p , in such a way that you are no longer committed to ϕ -ing or to the truth of p , then you no longer intend to ϕ or believe that p . We might say that we control these aspects of our minds because, as we change our mind, our mind

changes—as we form or revise our take on things, we form or revise our attitudes” (Hieronymi 2008, ms)

According to Hieronymi, this involves a distinctive kind of control and of agency, which she calls *evaluative control*. In forming our beliefs by making up our mind, in changing and revising them we are not passive:

“Because our attitudes embody our take on the world, on what is true or important or worthwhile in it, we control them by thinking about the world, about what is true or important or worthwhile in it. Because our minds change as our take on the world changes – because our minds change as we change our minds – we can be said to be “in control” of our commitment-constituted attitudes. (2008a : 370)

It may seem that Hieronymi’s account is just a variant of the Kantian view, and this talk of “take” on the world might well seem as metaphorical as the notion of control of the Kantian view. But it is distinct from it in two important respects. First she insists on the fact that the control that we exercise in the evaluative mode, and the commitments that we undertake about our beliefs, are not the product of an intention or of a decision, as it can be the case with a promise for instance. The attitude which is the result of this commitment is not taken through any kind of decision. In this respect, believing is not voluntary, and it is more like feelings and emotions such as fearing, being grateful, caring or resenting (Hieronymi 2008: 367). So the existence of control and agency here is compatible with the essential passivity of the attitude. Second Hieronymi insists that our attending to the reasons which “bear upon a question” that we “settle” does not involve any higher-order reflective judgment as whether the proposition believed conforms to certain standards. The agent simply *arrives* at the judgement in the first-personal mode, but not through an intermediary mental state:

“The appeal to “settling the question” is not meant to introduce a new mental state or event. By “settling the question” I do not mean, e.g. consciously entertaining the question. The mental state or event that corresponds to settling the question whether P is nothing over and above than believing P. The claim simply makes explicit the uncontroversial conceptual connection between believing P and a positive answer to a certain question – whether P. Insofar as one agrees that one’s belief represent the world as one takes it to be, and that the question whether P asks whether the world is as P would have it, then one should have no trouble with the claim that to believe that P is to have settled for oneself the question of whether P.” (2008: 360)

Here Hieronymi obviously takes her inspiration from the feature of belief which a number of recent writers have called “transparency” (Evans 1981, Moran 2002, Shah 2003, Shah and Velleman 2005). Beliefs have this feature in virtue of the fact that when one ascribes oneself the belief that P one does not typically ask oneself, in the second-order mode: “Do I *believe* that P”, but simply by asking oneself : “Is P the case”, or more simply : “P?”. In other words when one settles for oneself the question whether P, one does not ascend to the second-order belief whether one believes that P, but one asks oneself whether P. Since the *truth* of P is a property – the most paradigmatic one - relevant to one’s having epistemic reasons for believing that P, whether P *is the case* is so relevant. It is only when one wants to attend to *other* properties than the truth of the belief or its evidential status (whether P is desirable, worth having, etc.) that one needs to ascend to a second order belief about one’s reason’s for believing that P. In the evaluative control we do not need to reflect upon the extrinsic reasons for which we might believe that P, and we do not even need to reflect upon the intrinsic ones: they are, so to say, directly present in our deliberation (Shah 2003).

Hieronymi explicitly advocates a “minimal” notion of responsibility as answerability, which is actually quite close to Scanlon’s (1998: ch. 6) notion of “attributively” and “judgement sensitivity”. She distinguishes clearly this notion of responsibility from the claim that responsibility entails voluntariness (see also Moran 2000: 120). To be responsible for a belief is to be sensitive to the appropriate kind of reasons and to be able to assess it through an “evaluative control”. One is responsible for the beliefs for which one has “settled for oneself the question that it answers. To “settle for oneself” the question whether P is not voluntary, but it is not involuntary either. It is active, in the sense that one undertakes a commitment towards the belief.

But, like with the Kantian conception, and in spite of the differences between this conception her account, it is hard to understand how the commitment implies an active control of one’s beliefs. Hieronymi uses the metaphor of the “take” that one has on this. But here the doubts raised above about the Kantian conception can be reproduced. If one “controls” one’s belief through being sensitive to the constitutive reasons which justify it, and if one is “active” when one changes one’s mind in the light of new evidence, it is difficult to see how there be here a form of “agency” at all. Perhaps one can understand the commitment which one undertakes as a voluntary or intentional act, like a promise. Some descriptions by Shah and Velleman (2005) of this commitment seem to suggest this: a subject, in “deliberating” about whether to believe that P, *decides* to qualify his attitude as a belief that P. This would be

closer to a mental act like a *judgement* than to a belief.⁹ If one wants to keep the two attitudes separate – as I think that one should – then one has better not describe things in this way. Actually other writers who use the notion of commitment, like Moran, explicitly deny that the responsibility that one exercises over one’s attitudes implies a form of “control”, although he takes it too as a form of activity.

6. *Epistemic responsibility without epistemic agency*

At this point three options, apparently, are left open. We can try to propose another conception of epistemic agency and epistemic responsibility. There are important candidates for such accounts within virtue epistemology. Although I cannot discuss this here, it is not the option which I shall take, and I shall stick to versions which suppose that epistemic responsibility is associated to a form of specific normativity which goes with belief. A second option consists in denying that we have any epistemic responsibility over attitudes such as belief, knowledge and other mental episodes such as judging. This is a venerable tradition, from Spinoza and Hume to Dennett (for a recent view of this kind, see Levy 2007). It is most plausible for a very large majority of our beliefs, which are caused in us in ways which we cannot control at all, and of which we cannot easily be said to be responsible. But the non-responsibility account is also very implausible with respect to a perhaps limited, but significant set of our beliefs. So we are left with a third option: we can be responsible for our beliefs *without being epistemic agents at all*.

As I said at the beginning, some of our beliefs – such as those which manifest racism, malignity and other attitudes that are the object of our blame- are taken to be under our responsibility when they have a direct or an indirect bearing over our actions, or because they express our character. But then it is not clear that our reprobation for the beliefs is not of the moral, rather than the epistemic kind, as the Lichtbenberg quote given above implies. The

⁹ See Shah and Velleman 2005: “Some philosophers (Wallace [2001], 10, Korsgaard [1997], 248, Moran [2001], 52) have tried to express the normative relation between belief and truth by saying that believing that *p* involves a *commitment* to the truth of *p*. We find this locution less than perspicuous. If committing oneself to the truth of *p* means *doing* something—performing a mental act—then it sounds to us like a judgment that *p*, not a belief that *p*. If committing oneself to the truth of *p* means accepting the norm of truth in application to one’s attitude towards *p*, then it would rule out toddlers and lower animals from having beliefs, as they don’t have the requisite normative concepts. The way to avoid this consequence is to locate the commitment to truth, interpreted as acceptance of a norm, in the *concept* of belief: unless one accepts the norm of truth for one’s acceptance that *p*, it will fail to be a belief that *p* *in one’s own eyes*; but failing to be a belief in one’s own eyes is not the same as failing to be a belief in the eyes of the universe. Making the commitment to truth a condition on *conceiving* an attitude as a belief rather than a condition on an attitude’s *being* a belief wouldn’t exclude toddlers and lower animals from having beliefs; it would just rule out their being able to classify their beliefs as such” (p.)

kind of responsibility we are interested in is epistemic, and it is distinct from the moral one, and results in a distinct kind of *ought*, otherwise it makes no sense.

One can perfectly agree with the Kantians that the kind of responsibility which one can associate to beliefs is not tied to any voluntary feature, not only because doxastic voluntarism is false, but also because the kind of voluntary control that one can have of one's belief is only indirect and "manipulative". There can be "epistemic blame" with such a kind of control, as when a wishful believer believes contrary to evidence. Perhaps, what is described as "epistemic *akrasia*", the capacity to believe voluntarily that P while believing that one ought not to believe that P – if it exists, which not everyone agrees upon- is similarly subject to be blamed, by the agent own standards. But, as we have seen, it is very difficult to consider direct or evaluative control as the manifestation of any kind of active power of the human mind, to speak like Thomas Reid.

On the account of epistemic norms for belief which I favour (Engel 2005, 2007), there are specific norms for belief, which all derive from the fundamental norm *One ought to believe that p iff p*¹⁰. For instance the evidentialist norm that one ought to believe what is justified by one's evidence (Feldman 2000, 2008) depends upon this norm. But the norm itself is one thing, and the way it is regulated is another thing. The norm of truth is a fundamental truth about belief. When an agent believes that P, he implicitly obeys the norm, but he need not attend to it reflectively. In order to form a belief that P, one needs to have reasons to believe that P, which need not be conceived in the internalist sense in which one have access to one's reasons. No mental act, in the form of an intentional commitment, is needed. In this respect the situation is quite different from the one pictured by Steup (2000) when he distinguishes the "verdict" belief about evidence which then gives rise to the belief proper. Neither is there any kind of reasoning on the part of the subject, who would contemplate the norm for belief and reason thus :

I will believe that P iff P is true
 P is true
 Therefore let me believe that P¹¹

I agree with Shah, Velleman and Hieronymi that the norm of truth is regulated by the transparency feature : the subject asking herself simply the question whether P, and by her

¹⁰ There are important difficulties in formulating this norm, on which a large literature exists. But I do not need to go into this here.

¹¹ Shah and Velleman 2005 :

capacity to take a positive answer to this question as actually yielding a belief that P. None of this is effectuated by moving to a second or higher-order kind of belief about one's belief, nor by consulting rules or norms explicitly. But is "settling the question" and becoming thus "answerable" to questions about one's reasons to believe that P a form of action that a believer takes? Is it the manifestation of any kind of agency? The neo-Kantian view here answers in the affirmative, by distinguishing a the minimal sense in which the agent recognises the belief as his or hers. This may seem enough for the "attribuability" or "imputability" that all writers recognise as the necessary condition for responsibility. But otherwise the agent might have formed the belief that P quite irresponsibly, for instance by not having enough evidence for his belief. Now if the believer changes his mind does he change his commitment and does he "therefore" act? I do not see why we would have to describe what happens in a change of mind in this way, except for the most reflective kinds of such episodes. A perceptual belief, in particular, where one first experiences things as if P where the case, forms the belief that P, and then, having been exposed to more evidence changes one's belief into a belief that not P, does not imply any more "commitment" from the part of the subject than the minimal commitment to a positive answer to the question: "Is P the case?". One might feel that in order to be responsible, the subject has to be an agent in some stronger sense, in order to be able to be blamed for his belief, or excused of believing it. In this I concur with the Kantians when they say that there can be responsibility without voluntary choice. But why should one insist that there is *control* and *agency* here? There is epistemic responsibility because there is belief, and a minimal capacity on the part of the subject to recognise his mental state as a belief and to be sensitive to the norm for belief. In other words, the subject is not a dumb brute, who observes the passing show. But that does not imply that the believer has to be an agent even in a weak sense. Here again the example given above of transitions from a belief to another within a logical inference is telling: a conscious reasoner can move from premise to conclusion without having either the kind of reflectivity which the Kantian account presupposes, or with committing himself to the propositions that he accepts or to the laws of logic.

None of this is to deny that a more substantive conception of responsibility can exist in the epistemic domain. But it applies at another level than the level of mental attitudes like beliefs. I take what I have said to apply to basic attitudes like belief and knowledge. They apply all the more to knowledge that the suggestion that knowledge could be voluntary or the product of a kind of agency is even less tempting than for belief (and even more so if one takes belief to aim at knowledge). But none of this is incompatible with admitting that other epistemic

attitudes than belief and knowledge can manifest the features of agency and responsibility that usually suit actions. Judging, accepting, taking for granted, hypothesizing, and many other attitudes are indeed voluntary and intentional, and lend themselves easily to a description in terms of actions. In so far as *inquiry* is concerned, mental actions and attitudes are attitudes of which we are epistemically responsible, in way that many writers in the pragmatist tradition have described. But if what I have claimed is correct, the basic attitude of belief lends itself only minimally to the talk of responsibility and of agency¹².

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