

## Parity of Belief and Intention

A.K. Flowerree

Word Count: (6328: text) (8179: text, notes, references)

Many traditional debates over epistemic agency have presupposed a conception of agency and argued that belief does/does not fit this conception of agency. Philosophers in the literature who reject epistemic agency generally fall into one of two camps. Either they reject epistemic agency because they assume that agency requires voluntary control (voluntarist conception of agency), and they reject doxastic voluntarism.<sup>1</sup> Or they reject epistemic agency because they think belief does not admit of a rationalizing explanation (RE conception of agency).<sup>2</sup> Both camps argue that there is some necessary feature of agency, call it *F*, that belief lacks.

Alongside these arguments is often an implicit or explicit affirmation that there is an asymmetry between belief and other mental attitudes, especially intention. For example, Juan Comesaña, when discussing belief and intention, notes that while many epistemologists reject doxastic voluntarism, “everyone should agree that intentions are voluntary (at least as voluntary as the corresponding action)...”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Keiren Setiya writes that belief and intention fundamentally differ because “what we intend can always be completed, as belief cannot. So there is no possibility of intentional belief.”<sup>4</sup> While we may have agency over certain aspects of our mental life, the thought goes, we do not have agency over our beliefs.

In this paper, I argue that belief and intention are equally agential. If we are agents with respect to our intentions, we are agents with respect to our beliefs. I show that the arguments for rejecting agency of belief are also arguments for rejecting agency of intention. The arguments that

---

<sup>1</sup> See Alston (1985, 1988), Kornblith (2012), Audi (2013), Engel (2013), Steup (2000, 2008), and McCormick (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Setiya (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Comesaña (2015), p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Setiya (2014). See also Setiya (2008).

support agency of intention also support agency of belief. We should treat agency of belief and intention alike. Either we are agents with respect to both, or with respect to neither. Finally, I diagnose why there has been such resistance to epistemic agency. Epistemic agency is problematic, but its problems are problems with *agency*, not problems with *epistemic* agency.<sup>5</sup>

### The Parity Thesis

(CP) If we are agents with respect to our intentions, then we are agents with respect to our beliefs.

I will argue for (CP) by arguing for its contrapositive.

(CP') If we are not agents with respect to beliefs, then we are not agents with respect to our intentions.

To prove this, I suppose the antecedent of (CP'):

- (1) Suppose we are not agents with respect to our beliefs.
- (2) If we are not agents with respect to our beliefs, it is because there is a necessary feature *F* of agency that believing lacks.
- (3) Intention likewise lacks *F*.
- (4) Thus, we are not agents with respect to our intentions either.

My defense of (3) is via inductive argument. I will consider four candidates for the necessary feature of agency, *F*: *Voluntariness*, *Up-to-me-ness*, *Dynamic Structure*, and *Rationalizing-Relation*. In the literature, arguments against epistemic agency have focused on these features. While I cannot rule out the conceptual possibility that there is some *other* feature of agency that intention has and belief lacks (and thus cannot provide a deductive argument), these arguments canvas the well-recognized contenders defended in the literature. Thus, these are the most plausible options for feature, *F*, and the burden of proof is on those who would deny the parity thesis. The first three features, *Voluntariness*, *Up-to-me-ness*, and *Dynamic Structure*, I argue that both intending and believing lack. The

---

<sup>5</sup> In a longer version of this paper, I also argue for a categorical version of the parity thesis: we are agents with respect to our beliefs and intentions. We ought to view our agency as including not only our actions, but also our attitudes and identities.

final feature, *Rationalizing-Relation*, I argue is a feature of believing, intending and acting. Thus, I conclude, if we are not agents with respect to our beliefs, then we are not agents with respect to our intentions. And by contraposition, if we are agents with respect to intention, then we are agents with respect to belief.<sup>6</sup>

### **Parity of Voluntariness**

Here is a commonly invoked argument against epistemic agency:

- (A1) For any  $\square$ , S is an agent with respect to  $\square$  only if S can  $\square$  directly on the basis of an intention.
- (A2) It is impossible (or extremely rare) for S to believe directly on the basis of an intention.
- (A3) Thus, S cannot be an agent with respect to believing.

The second premise is a near-orthodoxy in epistemology. We cannot, or we hardly ever, directly come to believe  $p$  by forming an intention to believe  $p$ .<sup>7</sup> Premise (A2) has a few detractors,<sup>8</sup> but even those detractors do not think we have arbitrary discretion over our beliefs.

The first premise is not widely articulated, but it is implicit in many critiques of epistemic agency. For example, Richard Feldman (2006) equates agency with voluntary control. He writes, “Epistemic deliberation does not result in effective intentions to believe. Except in rare cases, we don’t form intentions to believe. But such intentions are essential to voluntary control.”<sup>9</sup> To exercise epistemic agency, we need voluntary control over our beliefs. Voluntary control requires believing on the basis of an intention. Belief does not have this intentional structure, thus epistemic agency is rare or even impossible. Examples of this way of thinking abound.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> While many epistemologists have rejected the parity thesis, some are sympathetic to it. See especially Hieronymi (2009b) and McHugh (2012, 2013, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> See the literature on believing at will, including Hieronymi (2005, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), Bennett (1990), Williams (1970), and Setiya (2013). See also Alston (1985, 1988), Kornblith (2012), Audi (2013), and Engel (2013) for epistemologists who reject doxastic voluntarism.

<sup>8</sup> See Steup (2008), McCormick (2014), and perhaps Peels (2014).

<sup>9</sup> See Feldman (2006), p. 85.

<sup>10</sup> See Kornblith (2012) and Engel (2013) for an articulation of this view.

However, (1), if correct, will also rule out agency with respect to a whole range of other attitudes, especially intention, but also hoping, fearing, trusting, etc. Here, I will focus only on intentions. In just the same way that we do not standardly form a belief directly on the basis of an intention, we do not standardly form an intention directly on the basis of an intention. In order to see why this is so, consider Gregory Kavka's toxin puzzle.<sup>11</sup> Kavka offers the following thought experiment:

You are feeling extremely lucky. You have just been approached by an eccentric billionaire who has offered you the following deal. He places before you a vial of toxin that, if you drink it, will make you painfully ill for a day, but will not threaten your life or have any lasting effects. (Your spouse, a crack biochemist, confirms the properties of the toxin.) The billionaire will pay you one million dollars tomorrow morning if, at midnight tonight, you intend to drink the toxin tomorrow afternoon. He emphasizes that you need not drink the toxin to receive the money; in fact, the money will already be in your bank account hours before the time for drinking it arrives, if you succeed.<sup>12</sup>

Kavka's conclusion is that you cannot directly form the intention to drink the toxin. Though you have reason to form the intention, this is not sufficient for you to do so.<sup>13</sup> Intentions are not under our direct voluntary control, and thus, you cannot directly form the intention to drink the toxin. So we cannot directly intend to  $\square$  on the basis of intending to intend to  $\square$ . There are, perhaps, indirect things we can do to manipulate ourselves into forming the intention. But this is a direct parallel with belief. We could undergo brainwashing to form beliefs. However, what we cannot do with respect to either belief or intention is to form the attitude on the basis of an intention.

But perhaps it is the unusual nature of the Toxin Puzzle that is doing the work here. Consider a more mundane example from Thomas Pink, who gives the example of intending in

---

<sup>11</sup> See Kavka (1983).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 33 – 34.

<sup>13</sup> This point is contentious. See, for example, Hieronymi (2005). One might think that the reason to form the intention to drink the toxin is the wrong kind of reason and thus is not properly understood as a reason at all. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

precisely five minutes' time to intend to raise his hand.<sup>14</sup> Five minutes from now, one of two things will happen. Either he will defer to the earlier intention and raise his hand, in which case he has not made a new intention, or he will open deliberation over whether to form an intention to raise his hand, in which case the previous intention plays no determining role over the formation of the new intention. So, he can intend in five minutes' time to raise his hand, but he cannot intend in five minutes' time that he form the intention to raise his hand.<sup>15</sup> To form an intention on the basis of an intention, it would have to be the case that the first intention in some way determines the second. But Pink's example shows that instead it either obviates the second intention, or it has no power of determination over it. Either way, intentions are not based on other intentions.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if we are not agents with respect to our beliefs because our beliefs are not voluntary, then we are not agents with respect to our intentions either.

### Parity of "Up to Me"

Here is a cousin of the Voluntarism objection. Call it the "Up to Me" objection.

(B1) For all  $\square$ , I am an agent with respect to  $\square$  only if it is "up to me" to  $\square$ .

(B2) Belief is not "up to me."

(B3) Thus, I am not an agent with respect to my belief.

The impulse behind this argument is intuitive. Suppose I am at the grocery store deliberating whether to get lemon sorbet or rocky road ice cream. Suppose I go with lemon sorbet. That was my choice, and thus the decision is mine. It is "up to me." By contrast, suppose I am looking out my window at the sky, and it is raining. I deliberate whether to believe it is raining. I cannot bring myself to believe that it is not raining. It is not up to me what I believe; rather it is up to the evidence. I

---

<sup>14</sup> Pink (2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106. Pink concludes, "Motivations such as intentions and decisions to act are not voluntary. They are not directly subject to the will. Intentions cannot be formed or decisions be taken just on the basis of prior decisions or desires so to decide."

<sup>16</sup> Here is an unproblematic way that intentions can lead to other intentions. I can decide in five minutes time that I will decide *whether to raise my arm*. But this is not a case of forming an intention on the basis of another intention. Rather, it is a case of deciding to open inquiry at a future time.

can't go against definitive evidence that stares me in the face. It is not "up to me" in this way.<sup>17</sup> Belief is not "up to me," but is rationally determined.

In the case of intending, our attitude is rationally underdetermined. If I have two equally good choices in front of me, I may pick either. To illustrate, consider Buridan's Ass, confronted with two identical, equidistant bales of hay. If rationality required that we can act only on what we have *most* reason to do, then the ass would starve to death. It seems that given two equal options, the ass may pick either of them. In cases of belief, by contrast, our attitude is rationally determined. Suppose I were in the epistemic equivalent to a Buridan's Ass situation. If I have equal evidence for  $p$  and  $\sim p$ , then I should suspend belief with respect to  $p$ . It is not permissible to form a belief either in  $p$  or in  $\sim p$ .<sup>18</sup> "Up to me" is not a universal feature of intending.

However, not all cases of intending are rationally underdetermined. Many times, our reasons highly constrain our intentions. Some of our choices are rationally determined. Suppose I have decided to have dessert, and I'm contemplating my choices: chocolate ice cream or a bowl of slugs. I like chocolate ice cream. I do not like slugs. In fact, I have a strong desire *not* to eat slugs. As a result, eating a bowl of slugs is not a rational option for me. Features about my preferences (that I like chocolate and dislike slugs) determine what reasons I have, which in turn determine the decisions I make. But it is not as though I could conjure up a love of slugs to feel that I am making a real decision about what to have for dessert. Given my preferences, my decision to have dessert, and my options, it is rationally determined that I ought to have chocolate ice cream. Now, it is open to me to be irrational. But this is no different in the case of belief. If its being "up to me" is just the power to be irrational, we can be irrational in the case of belief, too. However, it is a perverse notion of

---

<sup>17</sup> See Owens, (2000). You might think that this simple distinction is inadequate to capture the way we go about our deliberation. We talk about "making up our mind" whether to believe  $p$ . The main point of my argument – and one that the proponent of "up to us" denies – is that the formation of the attitude is "up to us" even if the reasons that determine which attitude is proper are not.

<sup>18</sup> The proponent of this argument is committed to rejecting permissivism, especially permissivism of the sort defended by James (1896).

agency that allows it to be present only when we flirt with irrationality. It seems wrong to say that we are agents only insofar as we flirt with irrationality. The perfectly virtuous agent – the one who responds perfectly to her reasons – would not count as an agent at all. Many cases of intention and perhaps all cases of belief are rationally determined. Thus, if agency requires that  $\square$ -ing is “up to me,” and being “up to me” requires that the reasons for  $\square$ -ing are underdetermined, then many cases of intending will not count as agential.

The proponent of the “up to me” argument might push back. Yes, perhaps many cases of intending are determined. But in cases where the reasons are underdetermined, I have a power of choice. It is up to Buridan’s Ass to pick his bale of hay. The ass, not determined by reason, exhibits the power of choice. Not so with belief. The asymmetry between belief and intention emerges when we consider cases of underdetermined intention.

The argument has limited application. Many cases of intending are not underdetermined. If it is a power that the Ass exhibits when he chooses the right pile of hay, this power is not present in all cases of intention. Furthermore, why think that this exhibition of power is a manifestation of the essence of agency? Instead, it seems that the Ass is making an arbitrary choice. Either would have done just as well. If the Ass had delegated his decision to a coin flip, we would think no differently of his action than if he were just to pick. Why think that paradigmatic cases of agency are revealed in moments of arbitrary choice? If the Ass had only one pile of hay, then he could happily munch, but would have no agency in doing so. Add another pile of hay and suddenly – voila! – the Ass is an agent. If the Ass’s reasons had been conclusive – that is, if the Ass had no reasons to choose otherwise – his intentions would not count as agential at all. To sum up: this view of intention locates agency only in cases of arbitrary choice. But it is hard to see why we would consider arbitrary picking agential at all.

Rather than positing a mysterious power within agency, we can explain the asymmetry between believing and intending by appealing to the internal norms of each attitude. Why is belief rationally determined when intention is not? Answer: When we believe, we are guided by epistemic reasons. Epistemic reasons are considerations that count in favor of the truth of  $p$ .<sup>19</sup> When we intend, we are guided by practical reasons, reasons that bear on the desirability of some action. While  $p$  and  $\sim p$  cannot both be true,  $\square$ -ing and  $\square$ -ing can both be equally desirable. Thus, the difference between belief and intention is not a deep fact about agency but rather a fact about the sorts of reasons that govern each attitude.<sup>20</sup>

### **Parity of Dynamic Structure**

Let's consider a different candidate for the property,  $F$ . In his paper, "Epistemic Agency – Some Doubts," Kieran Setiya argues that there is no interesting notion of epistemic agency.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the arguments we considered above that are motivated by a voluntaristic conception of agency, the arguments of this section and the next involve a rationalizing explanation (RE) conception of agency. In this section, I consider the argument that a belief cannot be agential because it is static rather than dynamic. Setiya argues that the static nature of belief means it cannot be described as an activity, and thus cannot be agential. Belief is not agential, he thinks, because it does not have a dynamic structure.

Setiya situates his challenge within a metaphysical framework for understanding belief.  $S$ 's belief that  $p$  is static. This means that being in the state of representing  $p$  as true is a standing condition of  $S$ . By contrast, when  $S$  acts,  $S$  engages in an episodic activity.  $S$ 's  $\square$ -ing is something that can be completed. Setiya introduces this distinction by making a semantic point about classes of verbs.

---

<sup>19</sup> Here I remain neutral on the sort of entities reasons are: facts, mental states, etc.

believing for a practical reason but instead for a bad epistemic reason (though its propositional content may do double-duty as a good reason for some action).

<sup>21</sup> Setiya (2013).

Some verbs are dynamic. They can take the progressive and the perfective aspect. Thus, we can say “The floor was shaking” and “The floor shook.” The perfective represents a repeated serial action, or an event that will come to a close. Call these *dynamic verbs*. By contrast, some verbs are static. We say, “The fruit is red” and “He owns a car.” We would not say, “The fruit is being red” or “he is owning a car.” There is no distinction between the progressive and perfective aspect. The verb represents a standing condition, or the non-habitual simple present. “To believe,” Setiya argues, is a static verb. To say “John believes that *p*” is to say that John is in the state of believing that *p*.

The grammatical point, Setiya thinks, illuminates an underlying metaphysical point. Static verbs predicate properties or states of their objects. Dynamic verbs indicate events or activities. Events and activities have causal antecedents and thus represent a dynamic structure. When applied to agents, they represent the agent’s *doings*. Having a property (or being a state) is not a manifestation of one’s agency; *doing* something is a manifestation of one’s agency. When applied to agents, dynamic verbs indicate that the agent is doing something. Static verbs indicate states or properties of the agent. We can use this point to formalize the following argument against agency of belief.<sup>22</sup>

(C1) For any  $\square$ , it is necessary that  $\square$ -ing have dynamic structure in order to be meaningfully understood as agential.

(C2) Believing does not have dynamic structure.

(C3) Thus, believing is not meaningfully understood as agential.

For the sake of argument, I grant Setiya his grammatical point.<sup>23</sup> Let us call the purported necessary feature of agency that belief lacks *dynamic structure*. Belief lacks dynamic structure, Setiya thinks, because of its stative nature.

---

<sup>22</sup> Setiya does not explicitly endorse this argument; thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

<sup>23</sup> However, see my manuscript, “Agency and Mental State Verbs” for an argument against Setiya’s linguistic point. Stative verbs often have dynamic readings (See Vendler, 1957 and Comrie, 1974), and stative verbs are interchangeable with dynamic cognate verbs (“She believes the war is just” and “She judges the war is just”). Furthermore, as Comrie notes, mental state verbs are often dynamic in other languages. Setiya seems to think that stative implies passive, which is not the case.

But what about intention? On many common conception of intention, intention likewise lacks this feature. Consider, for example, Davidson's view that an intention is reducible to a primary reason, which is constructed from a belief/desire pair.<sup>24</sup> Intentions may also be understood as distinct propositional attitudes, or attitudes towards a state of affairs or an action-type.<sup>25</sup> If this is correct, then intentions are metaphysically analogous to belief. Furthermore, like belief, there is no difference in meaning between "I intend to tie my shoes" and "I am intending to tie my shoes." There is no distinction between the progressive and the perfective. Thus, if we are not agents with respect to our beliefs simply because they lack dynamic structure, we are not agents with respect to our intentions either.

While Setiya is primarily concerned with the contrast between belief and action, he does argue that belief and intention differ. He argues that the object of intention is dynamic. He writes, "What we intend can always be completed, as belief cannot."<sup>26</sup> Setiya is committed to the view that the object of an intention is a completable action.<sup>27</sup> The object of a belief is a proposition,  $p$ . The object of an intention is  $\square$ -ing, or the action itself. Intentions culminate in action. Beliefs do not culminate in anything.<sup>28</sup> As a result, there is a fundamental difference between believing and intending. To believe is to stand in a relation to a proposition, to intend is to be engaged in a progressive activity.

However, the point Setiya claims is definitive – that what we intend can always be completed – is false. Sometimes the object of our intention is a static condition. Just as we can intend to bake cookies or go for a run, we can intend to be kind or be physically fit. Consider the intention of monks in a Benedictine Monastery. The monks intend to be silent. There is no difference in

---

<sup>24</sup> Davidson (1963).

<sup>25</sup> Setiya (2014).

<sup>26</sup> Setiya (2013). p. 184. Setiya also characterizes the distinction between belief and intention this way in Setiya (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Here, Setiya cites Thomson (2008).

<sup>28</sup> We might resist this point. Beliefs also culminate in actions, as I will argue later.

meaning between “the monks intend to be silent” and “the monks are intending to be silent.” Furthermore, the action that the monks undertake is likewise static. We might say, “The monks are silent” or “the monks are being silent.” There is no distinction between these two elocutions. This silence of the monks is expressed by a static verb, the verb of being.<sup>29</sup> It has no perfective aspect. According to Setiya’s analysis, this could not be agential. But that seems like the wrong verdict. The monks take a vow of silence and actively commit themselves to the discipline of keeping that silence. When a monk is silent in the monastery, it is an intentional action, even though the silence is a state.

Setiya might respond by saying that each moment of silence is an event, and the collection of all the moments could be understood as stative. On this view, then, each moment of silence would be a basic action. But this response does not make sense of the reasons for which the monks act. They do not intend to create a string of silent-event-tokens. Rather, they are engaging in the spiritual discipline of silence, which is a state.<sup>30</sup> And even if we set this aside, there are two additional concerns. First, Setiya’s view was prompted by the grammar of static and dynamic verbs. If we choose to understand the state of silence as a collection of silent-event-tokens, then we have adopted a metaphysics that is at odds with the underlying grammar. Second, this approach could be applied just as well to believing. We could reconstruct the metaphysics of beliefs as individual moments of believings, all of which taken together could be understood as stative.

Even more fundamentally, states can be agential when they are a part of our *identity*. Consider Susan, who is a vegetarian. Susan is in the state of being a vegetarian, and she is not passive with respect to that state. She enters into the state for reasons, and she sustains the state for reasons.

---

<sup>29</sup> Another way to interpret this is that so-called “static” verbs can also have dynamic readings. The command “be silent!” has a dynamic force, though it utilizes the verb of being. Similarly, someone might issue the command “believe me!” Whether we take this to mean that static verbs have dynamic meanings, or that static verbs can be agential, my point still stands: Setiya’s test doesn’t show that belief is not agential. Thanks to Daniel Skibra for helping me clarify this point.

<sup>30</sup> You might attempt to reconstruct the case as an activity of *listening*, rather than *being silent*. I think this does not capture the activity of the monks. They are not just listening, they are disciplining themselves to silence themselves, to achieve tranquility.

When she is offered a bowl of tantalizing gumbo, she turns it down because her reasons for being a vegetarian outweigh the delicious smell. This way of understanding Susan's activity is parallel to her believing that vegetarianism is the way to go. She forms this belief for reasons, and she sustains it for reasons. Also, her vegetarianism is not an activity to be completed, or an activity with an end point. Susan identifies deeply as a vegetarian. It would be backwards to say that her vegetarianism was merely a collection of meat-abstaining instances. Rather, the meat-abstaining instances are unified and explained by the fact that she is a vegetarian. Vegetarianism is a part of her *identity*.

Setiya might respond that while there are such states, the agency comes in at dynamic junctures. When Susan decides to become a vegetarian, she decides to enter into the state of vegetarianism. While the state may be folded into part of the activity, the reasons guide action only at the dynamic points of creating and dissolving the state. However, if this is the response, then it becomes even more difficult to see why belief is not agential. Beliefs are formed, sustained, dissolved. A natural parallel between belief and action would be to say that believing for a reason is exactly the same relation as acting/intending for a reason, when the action or object of the intention is stative. Reasons cause and sustain the belief. This response commits Setiya to the view that the monk's intention to be silent is agential because there was a moment when he took a vow of silence, but the monk's belief about the value of silence – though equally traceable to a moment of formation – is not agential. But why should we accept this? It cannot be the stative nature of belief, since some actions and intentions are also stative.

In this section, I have argued that dynamic structure cannot be necessary for agency, since it would rule out some actions and intentions as agential. Instead of focusing on the dynamic structure of belief and intention, we might instead focus on the way belief and intention figure into rationalizing explanations. Since actions and intentions can be stative, perhaps the *nature* of belief, intention, and action is not what is at issue here. Rather, it is the *relation* of belief/intention/action to

the *reasons for which they are done*. Intention and action figure into rationalizing explanations, but belief does not. Setiya argues for precisely this. In the next section, I will consider this objection.

### **Parity of standing in the Rationalizing-Relation**

In the previous three subsections, I showed that the arguments against epistemic agency applied equally against agency of intention (and, in the case of dynamic structure, against certain actions as well). There is one further candidate to consider for feature, F, one that I am calling the *Rationalizing-Relation*.

Davidson begins his seminal paper, “Actions, Reasons, Causes,” with the question, “What is the relation between a reason and an action when the reason explains the action by giving the agent's reason for doing what he did?”<sup>31</sup> The answer, Davidson thinks, tells us how to construct a *rationalizing explanation*. Call this relation – whatever it is – the Rationalizing-Relation. On the standard Davidsonian causal model, S's  $\square$ -ing stands in the Rationalizing-Relation to a reason, R, iff R (non-deviantly) causes (or sustains) S's  $\square$ -ing.<sup>32</sup> But the Rationalizing-Relation need not be understood in causal terms; the action could also be explained counterfactually or psychologically. The basic idea is that the Rationalizing-Relation must capture that reason, R, in some way *grounds* S's  $\square$ -ing. Another way to gloss this is to say that S's  $\square$ -ing comes about (or is sustained) *because of* S's reason, R.<sup>33</sup> R stands in some further causal, counterfactual, or psychological relation to S's  $\square$ -ing. The Rationalizing-Relation, plausibly, is a necessary feature of agency.

A parallel question arises for belief: “what is the relation between a reason and a belief when the reason explains the belief by giving the agent's reason for believing what she did?” We can distinguish between S believing that *p* for a reason S has, and S believing that *p* merely *in accordance* with

---

<sup>31</sup> Davidson (1963), p. 685.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> “Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action *because* he had the reason” (*Ibid.*, p. 691).

a reason S has. This intuitive distinction grounds the distinction between doxastic and propositional justification. A belief is propositionally justified just in case S has sufficient justification to believe  $p$ . A belief is doxastically justified just in case S believes  $p$  for a good reason.<sup>34</sup> Doxastic justification, it is commonly accepted, is necessary for knowledge. Mere propositional justification is insufficient. Call the relation of believing *for a reason* the basing-relation. Many prominent accounts argue for a Rationalizing-Relation View of the Basing-relation. That is, they accept that the basing-relation is causal, counterfactual, or psychological.<sup>35</sup> On these views, believing for a reason is just as agential as acting or intending for a reason.

Setiya, by contrast, argues that while we believe for reasons, the relation of believing for a reason is different from the relation of intending or acting for a reason. Setiya advocates a “deflationary” view of the basing-relation: S’s belief that  $p$  is based on a reason, R iff (a) S believes that  $p$  and (b) S believes that the fact that R is evidence that  $p$ . To believe that  $p$  for a reason, R, is simply to have the conjunction of two beliefs of these kinds. There is no further sense in which S believes that  $p$  *because of* reason R. Rather, S believes  $p$ , and S believes that R is good evidence that  $p$ . Call this the Doxastic View of basing. The structure of Setiya’s argument is captured here:<sup>36</sup>

- (D1) In order to count as agential, S’s  $\square$ -ing must stand in a rationalizing-relation to a reason, R.
- (D2) Belief does not stand in a rationalizing-relation to a reason, R.
- (D3) Thus belief is not agential.

In order for Setiya’s argument to be successful, he must show that the Doxastic View of basing is sufficient to capture believing for a reason. I will argue that belief requires a Rationalizing-Relation View of basing, and that Setiya’s Doxastic View is too anemic to capture doxastic justification. Once

---

<sup>34</sup> I recognize that different views will want to quibble over whether we use the term “reason” or “justification” here. I think the translations are unproblematic, but more could be said on the topic.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Turri (2011) for a causal account, Evans (2013) for a counterfactual account, and Fumerton (1995) for a psychological acquaintance view.

<sup>36</sup> I am extrapolating this argument from Setiya’s text.

we accept a Rationalizing-Relation View, we can see that belief, intention, and action are open to the same sort of rationalizing explanations.

Setiya argues that we should reject the Rationalizing-Relation View of the basing-relation for belief. Beliefs have causal antecedents, but these antecedents are not the sorts of things that matter for whether we believe for a reason, Setiya thinks.<sup>37</sup> The causal antecedents of belief do not matter because reasons for belief can be updated after the belief has been caused. For example, John could believe  $p$  because his visual system caused him to form the belief. Then John acquires a defeater for the belief, and wonders whether he should give up the belief that  $p$ . He then receives testimony that  $p$  is in fact true. He retains the belief that  $p$ , but no longer for the reasons that caused it. With an action,  $S \square$ -s *because* of some reason,  $R$ . But with belief,  $S$  could believe  $p$  and trade out multiple reasons for believing it. Metaphysically speaking, we cannot believe for reasons in the way we act for reasons. When  $S$  believes  $p$ ,  $S$  cannot be *guided* by reasons for belief in the same way that  $S$  is guided by reasons to act. Thus, Setiya concludes, belief cannot stand in the same rationalizing explanation as action.

However, we can see the same pattern in temporally extended actions.  $S$  could believe  $p$  for reason  $R$  at  $t_1$ , lose  $R$  at  $t_2$ , and gain reason  $R'$  at  $t_3$ . Take a temporally extended action, like Jane going for a run. At  $t_1$ , Jane is running because it is a beautiful day and she wants to be outside. At  $t_2$ , Jane is overheated and wishes she was in air conditioning, but now she runs because it is good for her health. At  $t_3$ , she starts wondering if there aren't better ways of self-care, but she keeps running because she doesn't want to be a quitter. The reasons that sustain Jane's intention to run change as she engages in a temporally extended activity. The same can be true for belief. We can form a belief for one reason, but sustain it for another.

---

<sup>37</sup> Setiya argues as though the only alternative is a causal alternative. However, as noted above, rationalizing-relation basing-relations could be causal, counterfactual, psychological, or dispositional. The important point is that the relation points to something *additional* that connects the agent to her reason.

This brings me to my final point. Setiya's proposed Doxastic View of the basing-relation does not have the conceptual resources to give an adequate account of doxastic justification. For a range of cases, Setiya cannot distinguish mere propositional justification from doxastic justification. Recall, Setiya's Doxastic View holds that S believes  $p$  for a reason,  $q$ , just in case S has a conjunction of two beliefs: (a) S believes that  $p$ , and (b) S believes that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ .

Consider the following three cases: Let  $p$  be "I will win the lottery,"  $q$  be "The lottery is rigged in my favor," and  $e$  be "The fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ ."

*Ann*

Suppose Ann is standing on the golf course and gets struck by lightning. The electrical surge causes her to form the beliefs  $p$ ,  $q$ , and  $e$ . She doesn't reflect on these new beliefs.

*Ben*

Suppose Ben is talking to a friend. The friend testifies, "The lottery is rigged in your favor," and points out that  $e$ . Ben believes  $p$ ,  $q$ , and  $e$ . However, Ben is a wishful believer. He believed  $p$  before his friend had said anything. And had the friend testified "The lottery is not rigged in your favor; you will likely lose," Ben would still have the belief that  $p$  because Ben is highly optimistic and always believes he will win.

*Cal*

Cal is likewise talking with a friend. The friend testifies, "The lottery is rigged in your favor," and points out that  $e$ . Cal comes to believe  $p$ , and Cal would not have believed  $p$  if he did not have evidence for it.

According to Setiya's analysis, Ann, Ben and Cal satisfy the Doxastic View of the basing-relation. They all count as believing  $p$  for the reason  $e$ . If believing for a good reason is sufficient for having a doxastically justified belief, then all three of them count as justified.<sup>38</sup> On Setiya's view, Ann, Ben, and Cal all believe  $p$  for the same good reason. However, Ann and Ben do not seem to be doxastically justified. Consider Ann. If Setiya's conditions were sufficient, then Ann is justified in her

---

<sup>38</sup> Setiya seems committed to this conclusion. He writes, "When you have sufficient evidence that  $p$ , in the fact that  $q$ , and you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , this evidence justifies your belief that  $p$ . In other words, believing for a reason, in the sense that involves beliefs about evidence, is sufficient for justification by evidence, where the ground of one's belief belongs to one's evidence and is sufficiently strong." (*ibid.* p. 188).

belief that  $p$ . This seems like the wrong verdict. In order to get the right verdict, one possible modification of Setiya's view would be to add an additional layer to the requirement of believing for a reason.<sup>39</sup> In addition to believing  $q$  and  $e$ ,  $S$  must have reasons for those reasons. But this requirement will yield an infinite regress of reasons. She must believe  $e$  to believe  $p$  for a reason. But in order for her to see  $e$  as reasonable, she will need  $e'$ , and so on ad infinitum. Setiya is faced with a dilemma: either accept that Ann is justified even though she (and we) would find her own beliefs unintelligible, or require that Ann have reasons for her reason, which leads to an infinite regress. Either way, Setiya's analysis is unsatisfying.

Now consider Ben. Ben acquired the beliefs  $q$  and  $e$  in a respectable way, via testimony. However, Ben's belief that  $p$  is indifferent to the evidence. He believed  $p$  before he had the evidence. He would believe it without the evidence. But nonetheless he possesses evidence. Does this mean that Ben is justified in believing  $p$ ? Intuitively not. While Ben correctly believes that  $e$  and that  $p$ , it is a matter of luck that he stumbled on the conjunction of those two beliefs. What is wanted is some further relation between the two.

But Setiya disagrees. He presents a case similar to Ben's:

Suppose that I am prone to wishful thinking, and I will continue to believe that I will win the lottery even if I had no evidence. As it happens, I know that the lottery is rigged in my favour and regard this as proof that I will win. Although the belief that I will win is not sustained by my belief that the lottery is rigged, and is counterfactually independent of it, that does not prevent me from believing that I will win on the ground that the lottery is rigged, or from having a justified belief that I will win. Asked "Why do you believe that you will win the lottery?" I can cite conclusive proof. What more could knowledge demand?<sup>40</sup>

Here, Setiya sounds like he is conflating propositional and doxastic justification. Having access to conclusive proof is a mark of propositional justification. Like Ben, Hypothetical-Setiya has a recalcitrant belief, and he possesses evidence that supports that belief, and he acknowledges that the

---

<sup>39</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this possibility.

<sup>40</sup> Setiya (2013), p. 191. See also Lehrer's Gypsy Lawyer case (Lehrer, 1971).

evidence supports the belief. But the correct analysis seems to be that though he has reason to believe  $p$ , in the form of  $e$ , he does not believe  $p$  *because of*  $e$ . A further condition needs to be met.

Consider the dogmatist. The dogmatist has a set of utterly recalcitrant beliefs. To appear respectable, he goes around and collects evidence for these beliefs. Suppose some of this evidence is fairly decent (though the dogmatist cherry-picks only the evidence that supports his belief, and ignores the rest). The dogmatist has beliefs, and he believes that certain facts are evidence for these beliefs. Or consider the racist employer, who cites respectable reasons for his hiring decisions. Though he cites good reasons, he is actually moved by considerations of the applicants' race.<sup>41</sup> He might even be deeply unaware of his racist motivations. Setiya's account flattens the complexity of the racist employer's beliefs and doesn't allow space to capture the epistemic dimension of the employer's racism.

On Setiya's Doxastic View, these beliefs would count as justified, perhaps even knowledge. This cannot be right. If the wishful thinker, the dogmatist, and the implicit racist have justified beliefs, then something has gone awry. This is why we need a Rationalizing-Relation View of the basing-relation. Though we may disagree on what exactly it is, we can identify a dependence relation between a belief and a reason. For assessments of justification and knowledge, we intuitively rely on this relation. The fact that  $S$  would believe  $p$  in any situation whatsoever shows that  $S$  is not basing her belief on the evidence.  $S$  is propositionally, not doxastically, justified.

Thus, we should reject the Doxastic View of the basing-relation. Our reasons for belief can be obscure to us. We can be wrong about what grounds our belief. We need a model of doxastic justification that can connect reasons for belief in a psychologically plausible way. We should reject a view of the basing relation that predicts wishful thinkers, dogmatists, and racist employers who are lucky enough to cite good evidence are nonetheless justified in their beliefs.

---

<sup>41</sup> Numerous psychology studies have shown that this happens routinely. E.g. Steinpreis, Anders and Ritzke (1999).

The Rationalizing-Relation View can account for Setiya's worry that our reasons for belief change over time. By contrast, the Doxastic View is unable to capture the way in which our psychology is connected to believing for a reason. The result is that the Doxastic View assesses beliefs as justified in an implausible way. The Rationalizing-Relation View presumes that our psychology is importantly tied to our believing for reasons. We ought to accept the Rationalizing-Relation View. While this section only explored whether the Rationalizing-Relation View was a necessary (and not a sufficient) condition on agency, we can now see a *prima facie* reason for accepting epistemic agency. In exactly the same way that we construct rationalizing explanations for intentions and action, we construct rationalizing explanations for belief. These explanations are constructed to show how particular instances of  $\square$ -ing are properly attributable to the agent herself, as a manifestation of her agency. Thus, if believing for reasons shows how believing is a manifestation of agency, we have reason to accept agency with respect to belief.

## Conclusion

Where does this leave us? The task of a theory of agency is to explain of some agent's  $\square$ -ing how that  $\square$ -ing is the *agent*  $\square$ -ing. What we are seeking is an account of when some feature of an agent is properly described as *the agent's doings*.<sup>42</sup> A satisfactory account of agency must be able to explain how concepts like freedom, responsibility, control, activeness, and reasons fit together. This is no easy task, and many find it genuinely perplexing how an agent could be identified with her doings in some given instance. My aim in this paper is to argue that there is no unique challenge facing epistemic agency that is not also facing agency with respect to intention. There is no special problem of voluntariness, up-to-me-ness, dynamic structure, or the rationalizing-relation that is not also a problem for agency of intention.

---

<sup>42</sup> See Reed (2016) and Velleman (1997).

Agency is problematic. We want to know how the agent is related to her own □-ing. I have considered two families of accounts in this paper: voluntarism and rationalizing explanation. Voluntarism seeks to answer the question, “how is it that the agent herself – not merely some causal force acting on her – is the *source* of her □-ing?” Voluntarism answers this question by requiring that the agent must have chosen to □. We do not choose to believe, in the right sense. But we do not choose to intend in the right sense either. Similarly, rationalizing explanations of action have sought to answer the question, “how is it that the agent □-s *because of* reason R?” While this question may be difficult to answer, there is no reason to think that the answer will be different in the case of belief. While I do not here offer a full theory of agency, I have shown that such a theory should plausibly include action, intention, and also belief. Once we recognize that epistemic agency is genuine, we can make legitimate use of concepts like responsibility and blame, as they apply to belief. A goal of such an account would be to offer a unified explanation of the legitimacy of such assessments. More work needs to be done in order to give a complete account (epistemic) agency. However, the problems are not problems with *epistemic* agency. They are problems with *agency*.

## Works Cited

- Adler, Jonathan. (2002). *Belief's Own Ethics*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Alston, William P. (1985). "Concepts of Epistemic Justification." *The Monist* 68 (1): 57–89.
- . (1988) "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification." *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 1988 Ridgeview Publishing Company: 257–99.
- . (1993) "Epistemic Desiderata." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (3): 527–51.
- Audi, Robert. (2013). "Knowledge, Justification, and the Normativity of Epistemology." *Res Philosophica* 90 (2): 127–45.
- Bennett, Jonathan. (1990). "Why Is Belief Involuntary?" *Analysis* 50 (2).
- Boghossian, Paul. (2009). Epistemic Rules. *Journal of Philosophy* 105: 472–500.
- Comesaña, Juan. (2015). "Can We Believe for Practical Reasons." *Philosophical Issues: Special Issue No. 15. Normativity*: 189-207.
- Davidson, Donald. (1963). "Actions, Reasons, and Causes." *Journal of Philosophy* 60 (23): 685-700.
- Engel, Pascal. (2013). "Doxastic Correctness." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 87 (January): 199–216.
- Evans, Ian. (2013). "The problem of the Basing Relation." *Synthese* 190: 2943-2947.
- Feldman, Richard. (2000). "The Ethics of Belief." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (3): 667–95.
- . (2008). "Modest Deontologism in Epistemology." *Synthese* 161 (3): 339–55.
- Fumerton, Richard. (1995). *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. (2005). "The Wrong Kind of Reason." *Journal of Philosophy* 102 (9): 437–57.
- . (2008). "Responsibility for Believing." *Synthese* 161 (3): 357–73.
- . (2009a). "Believing at Will." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39: 149–87.
- . (2009b). "Two Kinds of Agency." In *Mental Action*, edited by Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou, 138–62. Oxford University Press.
- . (2011). "Reasons for Action." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 111 (January): 407–27.
- James, William. (1896). "The Will to Believe." *An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities*. Published in the *New World*.
- Kavka, Gregory S. (1983). "The Toxin Puzzle." *Analysis* 43 (1): 33–36.
- Kolodny, Niko. (2005). "Why Be Rational?" *Mind* 114: 455: 509-563.
- Kornblith, Hilary. (1993). "Epistemic Normativity." *Synthese* 94 (3): 357–76.
- . (2012) *On Reflection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lehrer, Keith. (1971). "How Reasons Give Us Knowledge, or the Case of the Gypsy Lawyer." *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (10): 311–13.
- McCormick, Miriam Schleifer. (2014). *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*. New York: Routledge.
- McHugh, Conor. (2012). "Control of Belief and Intention." *Thought* 1 (4): 337–46.
- . (2013). "Epistemic Responsibility and Doxastic Agency." *Philosophical Issues* 23 (1): 132–57.
- . (2014). "Exercising Doxastic Freedom." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88(1): 1-37.
- Owens, David. (2000). *Reason Without Freedom: The Problem of Epistemic Normativity*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Peels, Rik. (2014). "Believing at Will Is Possible." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 93(3): 1–18.
- Pink, Thomas. (2009). "Reasons, Voluntariness, and Moral Responsibility." *Mental Actions*. Lucy O'Brien and Matthew Soteriou, eds. Oxford University Press: 95-120.
- Reed, Baron. (2016). "Who Knows?" *Performance Epistemology*, ed. by Miguel Ángel Fernández (forthcoming), Oxford University Press.
- Setiya, Keiren. (2008). "Believing at Will." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 32:
- . (2013). "Epistemic Agency: Some Doubts." *Philosophical Issues* 23 (1): 179 - 198.
- . (2014). "Intention." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2014. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/intention/>.
- Steinpreis, Rhea; Anders, Katie A.; and Ritzke, Dawn. (1999). "The Impact of Gender on the Review of the Curricula Vitae of Job Applicants and Tenure Candidates: A National Empirical Study." *Sex Roles*. Vol 41, issue 7-8. p. 509-528.
- Steup, Matthias. (2000). "Doxastic Voluntarism and Modest Deontologism." *Acta Analytica*. 15 (1): 25-56.
- . (2008) "Doxastic Freedom" *Synthese*. 161 (3): 375–92.
- Thompson, Michael. (2008). *Life and Action*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Turri, John. (2011). "Believing for a Reason." *Erkenntnis* 74 (3): 383-397.
- Williams, Bernard. (1970). "Deciding to Believe." In *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Velleman, J. David (1992). "What Happens When Someone Acts?" *Mind* Vol 101: 403 pp. 461-481.

Vendler, Zeno. (1957). "Verbs and Times." *The Philosophical Review* 66 (2): 143-160.