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MATTHEW BOYLE

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Active Belief

MATTHEW BOYLE

The man who changes his mind, in response to evidence of the truth of a proposition, does not act upon himself; nor does he bring about an effect. – Hampshire (1965, 100)

I. Introduction

A point of persistent controversy in recent philosophical discussions of belief concerns whether we can exercise some sort of agential control over what we believe. On the one hand, the idea that we have some kind of discretion over what we believe has appealed to philosophers working in several areas. This idea has been invoked, for instance, to characterize the basic difference between rational and non-rational cognition,¹ to account for our epistemic responsibility for what we believe,² and to explain how we are able, normally, to say what we presently believe without relying on self-observation or inference.³ On the other hand, most contemporary philosophers agree that, in one significant sense, what we believe is *not* up to us: we cannot simply believe “at will,” and, although what we wish were so can influence what we believe to be so, this influence hardly amounts to a form of control or agency.⁴

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- 1 See for instance McDowell (1994); Korsgaard (1996); O’Shaughnessy (2003, chap. 3).
 - 2 See, for instance, Pettit and Smith (1996), Burge (1996; 1998), Bilgrami (2006), and Hieronymi (2006; 2009).
 - 3 See, for instance, Moran (2001), O’Brien (2005), and Bilgrami (2006).
 - 4 The *explanation* of the impossibility of believing “at will,” and the precise nature of this constraint, are matters of controversy, but that there is a truth here that

These two ideas about belief do not, of course, stand in direct conflict with one another: it might be that we cannot believe at will and yet that what we believe is under our control in some other sense. But the observation that our beliefs are not under our direct voluntary control suggests a challenge that defenders of the application of agential notions to belief must face: they must give a clear account of what other notion of agency or control is at issue here.

the challenge

My own sense is that this challenge has not yet been met. My aim in this essay, however, is not to criticize particular accounts of the agency we exercise over our own beliefs. It is to query a general assumption that informs much discussion of these issues, an assumption about what *sort* of thing a belief is, and how any exercise of agency might relate to it. The assumption is exemplified in the following quotations:

Judgment is a conscious rational activity, done for reasons.... Beliefs store the contents of judgments previously made as correct contents, and these stored contents can be accessed so as to result in a conscious, subjective state of the thinker which represents the stored content as true. (Peacocke 1998, 88)

A judgment is a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition.... It is an act because it involves occurrently presenting a proposition [as true].... A belief, by contrast, is a mental state of representing a proposition as true, a cognitive attitude rather than a cognitive act. (Shah and Velleman 2005, 503)

[B]elieving something – having the standing belief that so and so is the case – is not an act. Judging, thought of as a mental occurrence rather than a standing state, *is* an act. (Shoemaker 2009, 36)

The authors of these passages share a view about how concepts of agency relate to items in different temporal categories. All assume that an exercise of agency (an “act” or “activity”) must be an occurrent episode (presumably, a conscious event or process).⁵ Belief, how-

needs explaining is not terribly controversial. For discussion, see Williams (1973), O’Shaughnessy (2008, chap. 1), Bennett (1990), Velleman (2000), Hieronymi (2006), and Setiya (2008).

5 The term “occurrent” is frequently used in philosophy to designate the mode of existence of (phenomenally) conscious mental events. I do not think the term

ever, they take to be a standing state, not an occurrent episode. Hence, all of the authors conclude, believing cannot itself be an exercise of agency. If we exercise agential control over our beliefs, this must consist in our performing occurrent acts of judgment which give rise to new beliefs, or cause extant beliefs to be modified. Beliefs can at most “store” the results of such acts. So a person’s agency can get no nearer to her beliefs than to touch them at their edges, so to speak.

the received view
of belief

I want to suggest that this is not near enough – that this picture of rational dominion over belief fails to capture an important sense in which believing itself is an exercise of agency, one for which the subject bears a characteristically agential sort of responsibility. The standpoint I have just sketched appears to leave us responsible only for looking after our beliefs, in something like the way I may be responsible for looking after my bicycle. I have chosen to acquire this bicycle, and I can take steps to ensure that it is in good condition, that it is not left in a bad spot, etc. I am responsible for it as something I can assess and act upon, something in my care. I am not responsible for it, however, in the way I am responsible for my own intentional actions. My actions stand in a more intimate relation to me: they are not things I control by acting *on* them; they are my doings themselves. I want to suggest that my beliefs are in important respects analogous to my actions themselves, rather than to objects on which I act – not because I can believe whatever I will myself to believe, but because both believing and willing are exercises of a more generic power of rational self-determination, a power that lies at the basis of both theoretical and practical self-control. I will refer to the claim that my agential relation to my own beliefs is relevantly analogous to my agential relation to my own actions as the *thesis of active belief*.⁶

the thesis of active
belief

simply means “conscious,” however: it expresses a conception of the temporal character that is required of something present to consciousness. This term seems apt on the assumption that a conscious mental phenomenon must be something ongoing, something that can be continuous or discontinuous, that lasts a certain definite length of time, that has the sort of duration you could measure with a stopwatch. Hence the assumption that a state of belief cannot itself be “occurrent,” although it may manifest itself in various occurrent episodes.

“occurrent”

- 6 For other recent work suggesting that our believing itself is in some sense active, see Rödl (2007, chap. 3), Hieronymi (2009; unpublished manuscript), Korsgaard (2009, esp. 370), and Moran (forthcoming).

I will begin by sketching some intuitive reasons for thinking that we rational animals do have some sort of discretion over what we believe (§II), and then will draw a contrast between an extrinsic and an intrinsic conception of this discretion (§III). The thesis of active belief amounts to the claim that our discretion over our beliefs is intrinsic. To defend this claim, I will first raise some doubts about whether the extrinsic conception can account for the nature of our discretion over our own beliefs (§IV), and then sketch a framework for thinking about the sort of agency involved in believing itself (§V).

II. Our Control over Our Own Beliefs: Intuitive Observations

To see the attractions of the idea that we have some sort of agential control over what we believe, it helps to reflect on two demands we expect a person who believes something normally to be able to meet.

In the first place, we expect a person who understands the term “belief” normally to be able to say, for any given proposition P , whether he believes P .⁷ If he holds a given belief, we expect him to be able to say so; likewise if he does not. It is also possible, of course, for him to answer “I don’t know. I haven’t thought about the matter.” But we do not normally understand this sort of response to mean: “I may very well believe P , or $\text{dis}P$, but, if so, I am not aware of it.” We understand it to mean that the subject does *not* hold any definite belief about P , and knows this about himself.

Secondly, if a person believes P , we expect him normally to be able to answer the question *why* he believes P , in the following sense: we expect him to be able to discuss what convinces him that P is true, what grounds he has for affirming this proposition. I do not mean that we expect a person always to be able to produce specific grounds for his beliefs: plainly, people can hold beliefs for which they do not have specific grounds.

7 The qualification “normally” is important here. I do not mean to deny that, in exceptional cases, a person may hold a belief of which he is not aware, whether as a result of self-deception or for other reasons. I will say more about such cases below. For the moment, let me simply remark that, although such cases are possible, it would involve a drastic revision of our ordinary understanding of a person’s relation to his own beliefs to suppose that this situation is the rule.

But the point we should notice is that, even when a person admits to lacking grounds for a given belief, *he thereby accepts the presupposition of the question* – that he is in a position to speak for whatever grounds he has. We normally expect of a person who believes that *P*, not necessarily that he should have grounds ready to hand for his belief, but rather that – roughly – he should understand the relevance of the question of grounds, should be able to meet reasonable demands for justification, and should in general be able reasonably to discuss whatever grounds he has for holding a given belief.

These are things we expect of a cognitively mature human being, **one who has reached what developmental psychologists call the “age of reason,”** one who can participate in open-ended discourse about what is the case and what claims are credible. We do not, of course, make such demands of nonlinguistic animals or small children. But where we do make them, we indicate something about the way in which we hold the subject accountable for what he believes. We expect such subjects, not merely to hold various beliefs, but to be cognizant of what beliefs they hold; and we expect them, not merely to have their beliefs regulated by the presence or absence of grounds, but to be able themselves to discuss the grounds on which they hold the beliefs they do. These points are often discussed under the heading of “privileged access” to one’s own mental states, but this classification is misleading if it leads us to suppose that they merely show something about our *epistemic* relation to our own beliefs. **We do not merely suppose that cognitively mature human beings can, in the normal case, give expert testimony on what they believe and why. We treat them as in some sense *in charge* of what they believe and why, not merely specially knowledgeable about these topics.**

being “in charge”

To see this, consider how we hold people responsible for their beliefs, and the kinds of criticisms we make of their avowals about them. One telling point is that, in criticizing a person’s avowal of belief that *P*, we normally address ourselves, not to the question whether he has good ground for thinking *that P is something he believes*, but simply to the question whether there are good grounds for affirming *P*. We do not ask him “How do you know that you believe *P*?”, as we might ask him how he knows that his blood pressure is elevated. Indeed, we do not normally entertain any question about a person’s *epistemic* relation to his own beliefs at all. We normally address our

questions and criticisms entirely to the soundness of the propositions he believes, criticizing them or the grounds he gives for them. And we do not merely make such criticisms *of* his beliefs; we address them *to* him: we ask *him* why he believes something so outlandish, why he accepts such a manifestly unreasonable argument, etc. If his belief on a certain point is demonstrably wrong or ill-grounded, we expect him to reconsider the matter – and we expect his reconsideration, not merely to change his self-assessment, but to change his first-order beliefs themselves. We thus seem to treat his believing as a circumstance that is in some sense up to him, one for which he is responsible in a specific way.⁸

Nor is this merely a stance we take toward the beliefs of others. Each of us normally adopts this attitude toward his own beliefs. The recent author who has done most to emphasize this point is Richard Moran, who has argued that this attitude is evinced in our readiness, normally, to treat the question whether we believe *P* as “transparent” to the question whether *P* (i.e., to assume that we can answer the former question simply by answering the latter question and taking our answer to constitute our belief on the matter). To do this, Moran says, is to treat a “theoretical question” about whether I am in a given condition as amounting, from my standpoint, to a “deliberative question” – a question whose answer is not for me to discover, but to decide. Our readiness to treat the question of what we in fact believe as turning on what we see sufficient grounds for holding true is, as Moran puts it, “[a] perfectly homely assertion of [our] freedom” (Moran 2001, 145). And this is a freedom we constantly take for granted in undertaking to answer the kinds of questions about what we believe and why to which I drew attention above.⁹

8 Perhaps not all forms of responsibility presuppose agential control, but we certainly seem to assume such control here. An indication is that we treat the *explanation* of a person’s belief as something for which he is accountable: *he* should be able to say why he believes what he does, and we treat him as accountable, not just for the *accuracy* of his answer, but for its *cogency*, whether it really justifies the belief that *P*.

9 A number of authors have questioned whether Moran is right to claim that my capacity to deliberate and judge can account for all cases of doxastic transparency (see, for instance, Byrne 2005, 84–85, and Shah and Velleman 2005, 506–8). After all, they observe, I can in many cases answer the question whether I believe *P*

III. Two Models of Cognitive Control

I take the foregoing observations to show that we treat cognitively mature human beings as though they have some sort of normal discretion over their own beliefs.¹⁰ It would of course be possible to concede this and still doubt that people really have such discretion: we could adopt an “error theory” of this aspect of our ordinary discourse and practice. In the absence of grounds for doubting these appearances, however, it surely makes sense to try to take them seriously. This requires giving some account of the discretion we have here: in what sense is what we believe normally “up to us”?

A natural first thought is that our discretion over what we believe lies in our capacity to deliberate and make judgments. It is, after all, a familiar fact that I can raise for myself a question concerning the truth of a given proposition, consider grounds for and against, and come to a conscious conclusion – a judgment – about the matter. If I hold no antecedent belief on the question, deliberation can result in my forming one. If I already hold some belief, deliberation can result in my changing it. A creature that could not deliberate and judge would presumably lack this sort of cognitive self-control: its beliefs would simply arise and change in accordance with unreflective dispositions to believe. It would lack the power to “step back” from such dispositions in the manner of someone who can consciously raise a question for himself. Considerations like these lead many contemporary

transparently even though I go through no occurrent process of deliberation: e.g., I can answer the question whether I believe that Geithner is Secretary of the Treasury simply by recalling that Geithner is Secretary of the Treasury, without ever deliberating or considering grounds for and against.

I think this objection to Moran depends on the conception of our discretion over our own beliefs that I want to contest, and I will return to it below. For now, it will suffice if it is conceded that we normally *can* exercise some sort of discretion over our beliefs. The authors who make this objection generally do not deny this: they grant that we *can* make up our minds to believe something, and that we do so on at least some occasions.

discretion as control 10 I will use the term “discretion” to refer to the relevant sort of control, whatever it may be. I am not suggesting we have *voluntary* control over our beliefs. The striking thing is that, although we do *not* have anything like voluntary control over our beliefs, nevertheless concepts of agency seem to get some sort of grip here.

philosophers to identify our free discretion over our beliefs with our capacity to take this sort of step back, i.e., consciously to pose a question to ourselves, and to answer it by making a judgment.¹¹

Now, I do not want to deny that this identification is sound, but I do want to ask what exactly it comes to. If my agential control over what I believe consists in my ability to deliberate and make judgments, what sort of agency is this, and how does it relate to my believing itself? The authors quoted earlier, who maintain that judging is an act whereas believing is not, seem to imply that the sense in which I am in control of my situation when I am consciously judging is quite different from the sense in which I am in control of my situation when I merely hold a certain belief. In the former case, they maintain, I am actually exercising my capacity for control. In the latter case, I am only potentially in control of my situation, inasmuch as I *can* undertake to reconsider the question. Whereas my judgments are themselves my acts, my beliefs, it seems, are merely things my agency can affect. So we can say that, on this view, my agential control over my beliefs is *extrinsic*: I exercise it, not in believing itself, but in doing certain other things that affect my beliefs.

extrinsic control

In attributing the extrinsic control view to the authors I quoted earlier, I may be reading into their words a more definite and contentious conception of our discretion over our beliefs than they have in mind. Their discussions of this issue are brief, and I am not certain that their classifications of judgment as an act, and belief as a non-act, are intended to carry the sorts of implications I draw from them.¹²

11 For an influential expression of this idea, see Korsgaard (1996, 92–93) and cf. McDowell (1994, Lecture 1), Moran (2001, chap. 4, §7), O’Shaughnessy (2003, chap. 3), and Hieronymi (2009).


the “reflective distance” approach

12 Peacocke in particular presents a difficult case. On the one hand, he speaks of beliefs “stor[ing] the contents of judgments *previously made*” (1998, 88, emphasis added) and allows that “[s]omeone can make a judgment, and for good reasons, but it not have the *effects* that judgments normally do – in particular, it may not result in a stored belief which has the proper influence on other judgments and on action” (1998, 90, emphasis added). In later work, he classifies judgment as an event that “constitutively involves a trying,” and *seems* to suggest that it is specifically a trying “to bring yourself to believe that *P*” (though his position on this point is not altogether clear to me – see Peacocke 2007, 361). These remarks all suggest the sort of view of the relation of judgment to belief that I want to

But even if they should not be understood as advocating the extrinsic control view, I think it will be worthwhile to articulate this view and ask what an alternative to it might look like. As I said earlier, my aim is not primarily to criticize the views of particular authors but to take a step toward clarifying the sense in which we might be said to have discretion over our beliefs by ruling out one intelligibly tempting conception of this discretion and bringing another, different conception into clearer focus. To the extent that I object to the sorts of remarks quoted earlier, my main complaint is, not that they unambiguously endorse a wrong view, but that they do not unambiguously endorse a right one.

At any rate, I want to raise the possibility of a different view, one on which our discretion over our own beliefs is not extrinsic but *intrinsic*. On this view, we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination, not primarily in doing things that affect our beliefs, but in holding whatever beliefs we hold. Defenders of this view can grant that there is an important difference between someone who merely holds a belief and someone who is now consciously considering the truth of some proposition. They can acknowledge that, when a person deliberates and judges, he exercises his power to reflect on what is the case, whereas when he simply holds a certain belief, he is not presently exercising his power to do this. But defenders of this standpoint must resist the idea that, in the sense of control that corresponds to our observations about the way in which we hold ourselves responsible

intrinsic control

resist. But, on the other hand, Peacocke also suggests that “when all is working properly, knowledgeable self-ascriptions [of belief] track the property of belief for this reason: the very means by which they are reached are ones whose availability involves the thinker’s having the relevant belief” (1998, 89). If this means that, when all is working properly, one cannot judge that *P* (which, according to Peacocke, is part of one’s means of knowing that one believes *P*) unless one has the belief that *P*, then that is close to the view that I myself will defend below (though I would want to resist the idea that one’s knowledge that one actively judges *P* is epistemically prior to one’s knowledge that one believes *P*). But if that is Peacocke’s view, then I am not sure I understand the sense in which, according to him, one’s judging that *P* “will, when all is working properly, be an initiation (or continuation) of a belief that *P*” (ibid.). If, when things are working properly, judging that *P* expresses an extant belief that *P*, then, when things are working properly, it does not initiate belief, and neither does it “continue” belief if that means: make it the case that belief continues. 

for what we believe, a person starts to exercise control over his beliefs only when he initiates this sort of reflection. They must maintain that the person has been exercising *this* power all along, in holding whatever belief he holds. **When a person reconsiders his view about some topic, this must be understood, not as his beginning to exercise control over his belief, but rather as his focusing his attention on a sort of active self-determination in which he was already engaged, and perhaps altering *what* he is up to, what belief he self-determinedly holds.**

At this point, these characterizations of the idea of intrinsic control over belief are merely slogans. They still need both motivation and clarification. We need, first of all, to see grounds for thinking that the notion of extrinsic control does not adequately capture the discretion we have over our beliefs. And we need some positive account of what “intrinsic control” could be. **What could it be to understand belief, not as something controlled via certain special acts, but rather as *itself* an act or activity? What notion of agency could be at issue here?**

The latter task – that of clarifying the very idea of an active condition, and the notion of agency corresponding to it – is formidable. I will try to make a start on it in §V. §IV will seek to motivate this attempt by raising some problems for the extrinsic control view.

IV. Against the Extrinsic Control Model

On the extrinsic control view, our discretion over our own beliefs consists in our capacity to engage in deliberation and judgment, where these are conceived as special activities by which we can affect what we believe. Judgment is conceived as an act by which we bring about a change in our own state. Shah and Velleman give a particularly clear statement of this idea:

Ordinarily, the reasoning that is meant to issue or not issue in a belief is meant to do so by first issuing or not issuing in a judgment ... [i.e.,] a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition.... Reasoning aims to issue or not issue in a belief that *P* ... by first issuing in a judgment that *P*.... (Shah and Velleman 2005, 503)

Perhaps not every act of judgment leaves a belief in its wake, but normally, at least, an act of judging that *P* produces a state of belief

that *P*. That indeed is the point of this act, according to the extrinsic control view.¹³

Now, one *prima facie* oddity about this view is that it seems hard to square with our ordinary conception of what we are up to when we deliberate and judge. For deliberation and judgment certainly do not seem to be activities I engage in *with a view to* affecting my beliefs. In the basic case, at least, my focus in deliberating and judging is not on my own beliefs at all but simply on the truth or falsity of a certain proposition about the world. Of course if I understand what judging is, and what belief is, I will know that to make a new judgment is (normally, anyway) to settle on a new belief, but to suggest that I judge *in order* to achieve this end seems to mis-describe the orientation of my activity. **On the face of it, the final aim of theoretical deliberation is simply to discover the true answer to a certain question, and to make a judgment is to take oneself to have reached this aim. The suggestion that my act of judgment has the further aim of inscribing this truth in my mind in the form of a belief seems both overcomplicated and excessively self-involved as a description of my activity. Intuitively, I do not judge in order to have a certain effect on myself.¹⁴ The act of judgment is the completion of my project, not a step towards it.**

By themselves, however, these observations need not worry defenders of the extrinsic control view. They can admit that judging is not an act *undertaken* as a means of inducing belief but insist that nevertheless, when our cognitive mechanisms are functioning normally, this is its effect. So even if my aim in judging is not to have a certain effect on my psychology, it may nevertheless be correct to characterize the act of judging as having this function in my cognitive economy.¹⁵

13 I take this to be implied by Shah and Velleman's talk of reasoning "aiming at" or being "meant to" issue in belief by first issuing in judgment.

14 Indeed, it is not clear that judging is a sort of act I can perform *in order to have a certain effect* at all. For judging, like believing, seems to be something that cannot be done "at will": I can judge that *P* only if I take *P* to be true, and this arguably rules out my judging that *P* in order to have a certain effect. I will not attempt to defend this claim here, however.

15 I suspect this would be the response of Shah and Velleman. They write: "Exactly how one accomplishes the transition [from judging that *P* to believing that *P*] is of course ineffable, but it is a perfectly familiar accomplishment, in which a

A more telling objection to the extrinsic control view starts from the question: Does judging that *P* require believing that *P*? If judging that *P* does require believing that *P*, then it seems that I cannot produce a belief that *P* in myself by making a judgment that *P*, for the act that is supposed to produce this state in fact presupposes that the state obtains. In that case, it cannot be right to say, as Shah and Velleman do, that reasoning issues in a belief by *first* issuing in a judgment: my judging may be a conscious expression of my belief, but it is not an act by which I bring about belief in myself. So it seems that a defender of the extrinsic control view must hold that judging that *P* does not require believing that *P*. But the idea that I might judge that *P* while not believing that *P* is hard to understand. For to say that I judge that *P* is presumably to say that I take *P* to be true. If I did not take *P* to be true, it is hard to see how any conscious thought I might think could constitute a judgment. For judging that *P* surely requires not merely affirming to myself that *P* (whatever that might mean) but affirming *P* in the conviction that it is true. My conscious act of judging *P* must be expressive of my having settled on a view about whether *P*, namely: Yes, indeed, *P*. But it is hard to see how this can mean anything less than: it must be expressive of my believing that *P*. So it is hard to see how I can judge that *P* unless I believe that *P*.

There is a kind of example that convinces some philosophers that it must be possible to judge that *P* without believing that *P*. For it seems possible for a person sincerely to assent to the proposition *P* while betraying other signs that *P* is not his settled belief.¹⁶ For instance,

proposition is occurrently presented as true in such a way as to stick in the mind, lastingly so represented" (Shah and Velleman 2005, 503). When Shah and Velleman say that the transition from judging to believing is "ineffable," I take them to mean that we do not have immediate insight into *how* judging brings about believing. It would be natural for them to add that the subject also need not have a personal level aim of judging *in order* to effect this transition: the whole business might occur automatically, without conscious awareness or intent.

- 16 Thus Peacocke writes: "Someone can make a judgment, and for good reasons, but it not have the effect that judgments normally do – in particular, it may not result in a stored belief which has the proper influence on other judgments and on action" (Peacocke 1998, 90). Peacocke's own example is of an administrator who judges that graduates of foreign universities are as well qualified as graduates from her own country but who in making hiring decisions tends to assume

someone may sincerely assent to the proposition that there is no good reason to be more fearful of travelling by plane than of travelling by car – and may do so even while in flight – and yet his behaviour when flying (sweating, gripping the armrests, constantly inquiring of the flight attendants whether the engines are functioning normally, etc.) may indicate that he believes otherwise. **If a person can sincerely assent to P , and yet the best explanation of his behaviour can require positing that he believes not- P , then, these philosophers conclude, it must be possible to engage in the act of judging that P while not believing that P .**

I concede the possibility of such phenomena, but I do not think they show that a person can judge P without believing P . They may seem to show this if we assume that believing P requires having a representation of P as true “stick in the mind, lastingly so represented” (as Shah and Velleman put it), for then a subject who sincerely judges P but is not lastingly governed by a representation of P as true cannot have believed P . **But what is correct is, not that all beliefs must stick in the mind, but that beliefs are *such as* to stick in the mind. That is to say: beliefs are *conditions* that persist other things being equal, not *occurrences* which are *such as* to last only a limited, definite amount of time.** The truth underlying the idea that beliefs are “lasting” concerns the metaphysical category to which beliefs belong: they are states.¹⁷ But what qualifies something as a state is not how long it actually lasts, for other things may not be equal, and persisting states may be cut short. So the fact that a sincere judgment may not last does not show that a judgment may occur in the absence of belief. For all the fear of flying case shows, the subject may have a *wavering* belief in the safety of air travel, one that comes when he turns his attention to the evidence and goes when he stops.

I do not mean that this is how we must understand all such cases. I do not think there is one universally correct view about them: what

that individuals coming from her own country are better qualified. I choose a different example for simplicity, but the same general points apply in both cases.

17 In a very abstract sense of “state.” Below **I will question whether beliefs are rightly classified as states if this classification is understood to imply inactivity. Beliefs are not states in *that* sense. But this does not affect the point about their tendency to persist, other things being equal.**

it is right to say will depend on the details. In some cases, the right view may be that the subject did not genuinely judge that *P*, although his claim to have judged was not a product of insincerity but of a deeper pathology. In others, the right view may be that the subject at one and the same time both believes *P* and believes not-*P*: this is not a contradiction, after all, though it is a description whose application requires a quite special surrounding. No doubt there are other ways of understanding such phenomena.¹⁸ But **what I think cannot be right is the idea that a person can judge *P* without then believing *P*.** For if a person does not take *P* to be true, it does not seem that anything he thinks or says to himself can constitute his judging that *P*. But “*S* takes *P* to be true” has the logical grammar of a state ascription: it describes, not an occurrent event, but a condition of the subject in which an event of judging can occur. And now, I submit, to say that someone who judges *P* must take *P* to be true is just to say that such a person must believe that *P*. Someone could avoid this conclusion by building further substantive requirements into the notion of belief (it must last a certain length of time; it must have certain specific behavioural consequences, etc.), but these would be *ad hoc* manoeuvres, and, in any case, they would come at the cost of losing touch with the basic conceptual issue: whether an act of judgment can be conceived as an event that *produces* a state of accepting a proposition as true.

I have been arguing that we should not conceive of judging as an act that produces a state of belief. Agreeing with me about this does not require rejecting the idea that judging is an occurrent event, and so different in nature from the standing condition of belief. It does, however, require us to rethink the relationship between items in these two categories. My making a judgment after deliberation may express my consciousness of a newly formed belief, but if the preceding arguments are sound, it is not an act by which I produce a belief in myself. It is not something I do *first*, which results in my believing.¹⁹ It does

18 For one interesting recent proposal, see Gendler (2008).

19 In denying that judging produces belief, I do not mean to deny that some beliefs begin with a conscious judgment. But care is needed in interpreting “begin” here. I can consciously judge that *P* at the first moment *when I believe that P*, and I may do so in an awareness that, until now, I did not believe *P*. But for a belief to begin with a judgment in this sense is not for a belief to be produced or initiated

not stand to my believing as means to end or cause to effect, but as expression to condition expressed. If this is right, then the extrinsic control view must be wrong.

Thoughts of this sort have made some recent authors sceptical, not merely of the extrinsic control view, but of the very idea that we have direct agential control over our judgments or beliefs. According to Galen Strawson, for instance:

[T]he role of genuine action in thought is at best indirect. It is entirely *prefatory*, it is essentially – merely – *catalytic*. For what actually happens, when one wants to think about some issue or work something out? If the issue is a difficult one, then there may well be a distinct, and distinctive, phenomenon of setting one’s mind at the problem.... No doubt there are other such preparatory, ground-setting, tuning, retuning, shepherding, active moves or intention initiations. The rest is waiting, seeing if anything happens, waiting for content to come to mind.... There is I believe no action at all in reasoning and judging considered independently of the preparatory, catalytic phenomena just mentioned, considered in respect of their being a matter of specific content-production or of inferential moves between particular contents. (Strawson 2003, 231–33)

I think there is something right in this, and also something wrong. What is right is the observation that judging and inferring are not acts of *producing* beliefs in myself. My *coming* to hold a certain view

by a judgment, for the judgment comes no sooner than the belief. I think that much contemporary discussion of the relation of belief to judgment does not clearly distinguish this conception of a belief’s *beginning* with a judgment from the idea that judgment initiates belief. Loose talk of events of “belief formation” (“coming to believe,” “belief-onset,” etc.) exacerbates this unclarity.

Note also that nothing I say here commits me to rejecting the idea that there can be varying “degrees of belief.” For simplicity, I have spoken as if the only possibilities are: believing “all out” that *P* or not believing that *P*. But if belief admits of degree, this poses no problem for my view, so long as the conviction expressed in judgment also admits of degree. I take no position on the soundness of this gradated conception of belief and judgment; what I oppose is the idea that one can judge *P* true, with whatever degree of conviction, while not believing *P* with that same degree of conviction. I am grateful to Robert Stalnaker for pressing me on this point.

of things is not a process I govern, except in the indirect ways that Strawson mentions. But Strawson's conclusion – that our capacity for active control over our beliefs consists merely in our ability to take certain prefatory or catalytic steps that set our belief-forming mechanisms going – follows only if it is assumed that active control must always take the shape of: producing something, actively governing its coming into being.

This is an assumption Strawson shares with defenders of the extrinsic control view. Extrinsic control theorists, impressed by the indications that we treat cognitively mature human beings as possessing some sort of discretion over their own beliefs, and assuming that exercising discretion over belief must take the form of producing beliefs in myself, are led to conceive of judging as an act of producing a belief in myself. Strawson and other sceptics about cognitive agency, impressed by the thought that I do not seem to produce beliefs in myself (except by indirect means), and assuming that exercising discretion must take the form of producing beliefs in myself, are led to deny that I exercise any direct discretion over my beliefs.²⁰ Now, it would clearly be desirable to find a way of respecting the insight of each party: each seems to be right about *something*. And it would be possible to respect an insight from each side, I want to suggest, if we rejected the assumption that underlies their dispute: that exercising discretion over my belief must take the form of producing beliefs in myself. My aim in the next section will be to sketch a notion of non-productive discretion, a notion of agential control over belief exercised not by acting *on* our beliefs but *in* believing.

Non-productive
discretion over
belief

Before taking up that task, let me make a final critical point. Our original motivation for seeking an account of our agential control over our beliefs was that we wanted to understand the nature of the discretion we treat cognitively mature human beings as having over what they believe. It is clear, I think, that accepting Strawson's view would involve failing to save some of the phenomena here. On his view, we

20 Other authors who are sceptical of the idea that judging is an act include Owens (2000) and Setiya (2008). O'Shaughnessy (2008, II:543–45) also expresses scepticism about this, although he goes on to allow that we have "freedom of belief" in another sense (see O'Shaughnessy 2003, 141, 159–62, and 2008, II:544). Compare also Ryle (1949, 285ff.).

have direct control only over the preparatory activities of setting our mind to a specific problem, focusing our attention on certain facts, etc. The rest – the actual drawing of inferences, accepting or rejecting of conclusions, etc. – is simply a matter of “mental ballistics,” as Strawson puts it. If that is right, it seems we should regard people as directly accountable only for the preparatory activities they perform, and only indirectly accountable for the beliefs that result. We should regard a person who holds an unsound belief, when he might have known better, as guilty of something like *negligence* in respect of his doxastic condition. But if a person takes all the preparatory steps that might reasonably be expected of him, and yet his cognitive mechanisms deliver up a patently unsound belief, we should not blame *him*, or should only blame him in an indirect way, insofar as he has failed to take steps to cultivate good cognitive mechanisms in himself, or insofar as he does not exercise his power to set a reconsideration of the matter underway.²¹ But if he has done what he could, and things have not worked out, it seems we should just regard him as unfortunate. Yet surely that is not our attitude. There is something further for which we normally hold people cognitively accountable, namely their *accepting the specific propositions they accept*. It is not merely that we regard this acceptance as revelatory of the goodness or badness of a person’s cognitive mechanisms. We expect *the person* to be able to account for her attitudes themselves. We ask *her* why she believes such-and-such (and we are not satisfied with the answer: “Well, I took preparatory activities *A*, *B*, and *C*, and this was the result.”). And if her grounds are obviously poor, we think she should not hold the view

21 I am of course making an assumption about the connection between responsibility and agency, one that Strawson among others would not accept. Even if one’s judgment is the product of cognitive mechanisms over which one has no agential control, Strawson holds, the judgment is “no less one’s own ... (it is certainly no one else’s). It flows from oneself, from one’s character and outlook, from what one is, mentally” (2003, 247 – the subject of the quoted sentence is actually choice, but the point is the same). But if my judgment flows from what I am, then, Strawson holds, an assessment of it can imply an assessment of me. I do not dispute that we can sometimes be praised and blamed for what flows from what we are mentally. But the intuition I am seeking to rouse is this: even if we can be praised or blamed for the outputs of mental mechanisms, still our responsibility for these outputs is not direct in the way our responsibility for our own beliefs and judgments seems to be direct.

she holds. We do not ask merely “Why didn’t you take more care?” but “How can you believe *that*?”

Such observations are, I think, one of the main motivations for the idea that judging is some sort of act: recognizing a role for agency at this point allows us to understand how a person can be directly accountable, not merely for setting the deliberative process in motion and for nudging it as it proceeds, but for the result of deliberation itself. But if judging is understood in the manner of the extrinsic control view, as an act of producing a belief in oneself, then it is not clear that even the idea that judging is an act will save the phenomena. For if judging is something one does first, in order to produce belief, then the attitude one holds remains something of which one is only indirectly in charge, in virtue of one’s direct control over one’s act of judgment plus whatever “ineffable” mechanisms normally carry one from judgment to belief. And again, there just seems to be something further for which we hold people directly cognitively accountable. **I am not responsible for my beliefs merely in the way I am responsible for my bicycle: I am not just responsible for having left them in a certain location, as it were. That gets the temporal aspect of my responsibility for them wrong in a fundamental way. I am not directly accountable only for *having arrived* at certain beliefs, and hence indirectly accountable for the situation my beliefs are in. I am directly accountable for *believing* what I do, no matter what the antecedents of my psychological condition may have been.** I am not merely expected to be able to say why I *came to* believe something, but why I *believe* it – and my answer here is assessed primarily for its *cogency*, not for my epistemic warrant in giving it. Again, this suggests that our discretion over our beliefs consists, not merely in our ability to control their installation and removal, but in something about the nature of our believing itself.²²

22 Related points are made in Pamela Hieronymi’s “Responsibility and Mental Agency” (unpublished manuscript), to which I am indebted. Hieronymi uses the term “answerability” (I have been using “accountability”) to designate the specific mode of responsibility at issue here – a mode in which the subject is not merely praised or blamed for a certain condition she is in but is expected to be able to justify that condition’s obtaining from her own standpoint. See also Hieronymi (2008).

V. What Intrinsic Control Might Be

But what can it mean to suggest that we normally have *intrinsic* control over our beliefs, that our beliefs are not just things we can act on but are themselves acts? Believing does not seem to be something I do. It is a standing condition, not something that happens or takes place. It is not ascribed in the continuous tense: we say “*S* believes *P*,” not “*S* is believing that *P*.” And with good reason: in ascribing a belief to a person, we do not imply anything about what he is *up to*: he need not be thinking any particular thoughts, or performing any particular (voluntary) actions. Even in a state of dreamless sleep, we retain our beliefs – and that is a fortunate thing, for otherwise we would be utterly disoriented each morning. To ascribe a belief that *P* to a person seems at most to imply something about his dispositions, about what he would do if —, not what he is actually doing.²³ But if a person can believe something without doing anything, how can believing itself be an act?

I grant all of these points. My claim is not that to believe something is to be occurrently up to something; it is that being occurrently up to something is not the only species of the genus: act, exercise of agency. It is true that we will not accept “I believe that *P*” as an answer to “What are you doing?”, but that is only because the formulation of the question here demands an answer in a continuous tense, and that “to believe” is a stative verb that is not ascribed in the continuous tense.²⁴ The fact that I can hold a belief without *doing* anything in this sense does not rule out the idea that holding a belief is an act, an exercise of

23 This point is often treated as a decisive objection to the idea that belief is a mental act. Here, for instance, is John Searle: “Acts are things one *does*, but there is no answer to the question, ‘What are you now doing?’ which goes, ‘I am now believing it will rain’...” (Searle 1983, 3).

24 More generally, where “to do” appears as a main verb in a sentence (not an auxiliary verb, as in “Do you believe what he said?”), only non-stative verbs can replace it. But again, this seems to be simply because “to do” is a generic instance of a verb that takes aspectual modifiers (is *A*-ing, *A*-ed), whereas stative verbs do not receive aspectual modification. No conclusion about the agency-status of stative verbs, or about the activeness of the modes of being they ascribe, follows directly from this. Any such conclusion must be mediated by a theory of agency and of how these grammatical distinctions relate to it.

agency, if there can be such a thing as an exercise of agency that does not take the form of an occurrent process or event. And that is what I hope to argue.

To see what it might mean to think of believing itself as an act, it helps to consider an analogy between the sort of “why?”-question about belief I emphasized in §II and the “certain sense of the question ‘why?’” that is the focus of G.E.M. Anscombe’s well-known discussion of the nature of intentional action (Anscombe 1963). A number of authors have remarked on the parallel here. Thus Pamela Hieronymi observes that

Anscombe ... noted that whenever one intentionally \emptyset 's ... one can rightly be asked, ‘Why did you \emptyset ?’ (or ‘Why are you \emptyset -ing?’) where this question looks, not for an explanation of how it came about that one \emptyset -ed, but rather for the agent’s reasons for \emptyset -ing.... A similar question is given application by belief: whenever one believes that P ... one can rightly be asked, ‘Why do you believe that P ?’ where that question looks, not for an explanation of how it came about that one believes, but rather for considerations that one takes to bear positively on whether P . (Hieronymi 2008, 359)²⁵

I think the similarity here goes even deeper than Hieronymi suggests. It is not merely that we can rightly be asked for justifying reasons for our beliefs as well as for our actions. **It is that, in both cases, the “why?”-question at issue presupposes that we stand in a specific sort of relation to the actuality of the relevant situation (the existence of a certain belief or the progress of a certain action).**

Something that is striking in Anscombe – something that sets her apart from many subsequent action theorists – is her resolute focus on action *in progress*.²⁶ Anscombe’s “why?”-question is first and foremost “Why are you doing A ?” (Hieronymi’s shift to the question “Why did you \emptyset ?” obscures this feature of Anscombe’s approach.) Her assumption, in effect, is that to understand the nature of intentional action, we must describe the specific character of the subject’s relation to it

25 Compare also Moran (2001, 127).

26 I owe this understanding of Anscombe, and several other ideas that follow, to conversations with Doug Lavin.

as it unfolds. A similar thought is put more explicitly in a well-known paper by Harry Frankfurt, which maintains that “the most salient differentiating characteristic of action” is that

during the time a person is performing an action he is necessarily in touch with the movements of his body in a certain way, whereas he is necessarily not in touch with them in that way when movements of his body are occurring without his making them. (Frankfurt 1978, 158)

Frankfurt seeks to characterize this way of “being in touch” by appeal to the idea that an agent does not merely set his action going but “guides” its progress. He objects to theories of action which seek to demarcate those bodily movements that are actions by appeal to their antecedent causes, on the ground that such views imply that “actions and mere happenings do not differ essentially in themselves at all,” so that “actions and mere happenings [are] differentiated [only] by something quite extrinsic to them” (ibid., 157). **On the right view, he holds, an action is an intrinsically guided event, one whose unfolding is throughout an actualization of the agent’s power to shape the course of what happens.**

I think Anscombe should be understood as holding a similar view.²⁷ And whereas Frankfurt offers little positive specification of his notion of guidance, Anscombe’s investigation of her “why?”-question can be read as developing the required specification. **The sort of event that is the topic of the relevant “why?” must be one such that the subject knows without self-observation that he is doing it, and concerning which it is possible to ask him why he is doing it, where this question inquires into the point he sees in the relevant activity, why he takes it to be something to be done (cf. Anscombe 1963, §16).** Moreover, the agent’s knowledge of what he

the guidance in question is essential self-conscious

27 This, I believe, is how we should understand her dark claim that “‘intentional’ has reference to a *form* of description of events” whose essential features are “displayed by the results of our enquiries into the question ‘Why?’” (Anscombe 1963, §47, 84). I understand this to mean: an intentional action is not merely an event with certain special causes but a distinctive type of event, one to whose unfolding the subject relates in the way characterized by Anscombe’s “why?”-question.

is doing and why is not, according to Anscombe, a case of theoretical or speculative knowledge – knowledge of something that is thus-and-so anyway, whether it is known to be so or not – but of what she calls “practical knowledge,” knowledge that is “the cause of what it understands” (ibid., §48, 87). I take that to mean: where A-ing is something I am doing intentionally, it is only insofar as I understand myself to be A-ing that I am A-ing, and it is only insofar as I understand myself to be A-ing on account of X, Y, and Z that I am A-ing on account of X, Y, and Z. My understanding makes these things the case, not by causally precipitating certain events whose unfolding does not itself require any contribution from my understanding, but by governing my activity as it unfolds, in light of the concept: A-ing, conceived as in something to be done.

This way of thinking of intentional action is controversial, but I hope it has some intuitive appeal. My purpose here is, not to defend Anscombe’s view in its own right, but to draw a comparison between her understanding of our relation to our own actions and what we have seen about our relation to our own beliefs. The thing to notice is the striking similarity between the questions we can answer about the actions in which we are presently engaged and the questions we can answer about the beliefs we presently hold. The questions in both cases concern, not our past activities or our future prospects, but our ongoing present. They are questions that address us “in medias res,” so to speak: in the midst of doing or believing. In each case, we are normally able, without self-observation, to answer both a “what?”-question and a “why?”-question about an aspect of our present situation. And, in each case, these questions appear to presuppose that we are not merely aware of this situation but in charge of it. My continuing to regard A as to be done (for reasons X, Y, and Z or perhaps for no particular reason) is what makes it the case that I am continuing to do A. Similarly, my continuing to regard P as to be believed (on grounds X, Y, and Z or perhaps without any specific grounds) is what makes it the case that I continue to believe P.²⁸ In each case, we could say, the continuing existence of a certain

28 When I speak of a subject who believes *P* as regarding *P* as to-be-believed, I do not mean that she must hold a further belief with the content: *P is to be believed*. I mean rather to characterize the mode of her relation to the proposition *P* itself:

sort of situation is grounded – not just causally, but constitutively – in **my continuing endorsement** of the existence of a situation of that sort. There is of course a crucial difference between these two sorts of “situations.” An ongoing intentional action is an activity *in progress*, whereas a persisting belief is, we might say, an activity *in stasis*. But important as this dis-analogy is, it should not blind us to a more abstract analogy between these two sorts of situation, in respect of the subject’s relation to them. It is this general relationship between endorsement and actuality, I suggest, that is the crux of rational agency, generically understood: where my present endorsement of X-ing is the ground of my present X-ing, in virtue of a capacity I possess to be through the former the source of the latter, there I am the agent of my X-ing, and X-ing is my act.²⁹ Thus my presently representing *A* as to-be-done, in actualization of a capacity to do what I represent as to-be-done, is the ground of my presently *A*-ing.

she must take it to be true, and thus to meet the standard that any sound belief must meet. This will equip her, if she possesses the concept of belief, to frame the judgment that *P* is to be believed, but even if she has no such thought, her stance toward the proposition *P* – acceptance of it as a true representation of what is the case – already entails that such a judgment would be warranted.

- 29 **This formula (which I frame using gerunds to allow for both occurrent and non-occurrent substituends) is a preliminary attempt to capture an idea that obviously needs further clarification. More needs to be said about the relevant notion of being the ground, about the concept of a capacity, and about the general notion of endorsement. My hope is simply that, in the context of the surrounding discussion, it seems plausible that there is an idea here worth investigating. I hope to pursue this topic further in future work.**

I should emphasize that I offer this formula as a characterization of the generic notion of *rational* agency, not the generic notion of agency-full-stop. **Rational agency is activity grounded in judgment**, in the capacity to endorse something for a reason of which one is cognizant. This is only one, quite sophisticated species of agency: not all agents are judges. A more general notion of agency would, I believe, need to be founded on a more general notion of an individual’s being the ground of its own activity in virtue of powers central to its self-maintenance. In the case of rational agency, the relevant powers are specifically powers to endorse something for a reason of which one is cognizant, but there are other more modest ways of being the ground of one’s own activity. See Boyle and Lavin (2010) for further discussion, and see also the suggestive recent discussion in Burge (2009). Thanks to Gurpreet Rattan for helpful discussion of my formulation.

rational agency

general notion of agency

And thus my presently representing *P* as to-be-believed, in actualization of a capacity to believe what I represent as to-be-believed, is the ground of my presently believing that *P*. In each case, I constitute a present and persisting situation (in the former case, an ongoing event, in the latter case, an enduring state) through persistently representing a certain content as acceptable: something to do in the one case, something to believe in the other. And where I exercise this sort of capacity, I should surely count as an agent: in both cases, I am the ground of the present actuality of something through endorsing the actuality of that sort of thing. It is this relation that gives me charge of my own situation, in a way that I am not in charge of those states that hold of me, and those events that happen to me, whether or not I endorse them. And it is this relation that grounds my responsibility for my own situation, for here the situation would not obtain if I did not endorse it in the relevant way.

These thoughts invite a further comparison between intentional action and belief. If I have agential control over anything, I certainly have it over the things I do intentionally. Whether to perform these actions is up to me. But the control I exercise over my intentional actions is surely not an extrinsic form of control. I do not control them by acting *on* them. Rather, my intentional actions are themselves my acts: they are not extrinsically but intrinsically under my control.³⁰ And our discussion of an agent's relation to his own actions in progress – the relation marked by Frankfurt's idea of "guidance" and

30 I think this is intuitively evident, but the intuition can be reinforced by reflecting on the alternative. If I had agential control over my intentional actions only extrinsically, by doing things to affect them, then I would have control over what I am intentionally doing only in virtue of having control over these other supposed acts by which I affect what I am intentionally doing. And then the question would arise: In what sense do I control *these* acts? If my control over them is once again extrinsic, we must posit yet another set of acts of exercising control, and we are on the way to a regress. But if my control over them can be intrinsic – a control exercised not by acting *on* them but *in* their occurrence itself – then we should presumably just allow that I can exercise intrinsic control over what I am intentionally doing. Compare the following suggestive remark from Frankfurt: "We are not at the controls of our bodies in the way a driver is at the controls of his automobile. Otherwise action could not be conceived, upon pain of generating an infinite regress, as a matter of the occurrence of movements which are under an agent's guidance. The fact that our movements when we are

further specified by Anscombe's investigation of her special "why?"-question – gives us an understanding of what having intrinsic control over one's own actions could be. For we have seen that we exercise a form of control over our actions which does not consist in doing something to produce an event – an event which, having been set in motion, unfolds under its own steam, without any further activity on our part. The primary control we exercise in guiding our actions consists rather in our ongoing active governance of what we are up to in the light of a concept of what is to be done. If my doing *A* is an event I govern in this way, then I do not control it extrinsically by doing things to affect its unfolding. Rather, this event of *A*-ing is underway at all only insofar as I am persistently directing my activity toward completion: having done *A*. Such an event is one I control intrinsically: its very existence is constituted by my persistent active orientation toward a certain aim.

Now, if our relation to our own beliefs is structurally comparable to our relation to our intentional actions, and if we have intrinsic control over the latter, then we should expect that the control we exercise over our beliefs is also intrinsic. And again, the foregoing discussion sheds light on what this could amount to. As in the case of action, so too in the case of belief, a rational subject normally stands in an active affirmative relation to her own present beliefs. Her persisting belief that *P* is grounded in her assent to *P* as meeting the measure that a proposition must meet to merit belief, namely truth. This assent is not an act that precedes her belief and produces it; the very existence of her belief that *P* is constituted by her persisting assent to *P*. Her believing *P*, we might say, just is her enduring act of holding *P* true, and hence to-be-believed.³¹ This act is not occurrent – it need not involve any bustle or commotion, whether in

acting are purposive is not the effect of something we do. It is a characteristic of the operation at that time of the systems we are" (Frankfurt 1978, 160).

- 31 I think this conception of belief as an enduring, non-occurrent act of assenting to a proposition has a venerable history in philosophy and that acceptance of the idea that only occurrent episodes can be acts has hampered much recent scholarship on figures who subscribe to this sort of view. I discuss this more fully in my "Making Up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason" (unpublished manuscript).

Rational Agency in general ✱

the subject's consciousness or elsewhere – but, on the present view, not every kind of rational agency must involve bustle or commotion. What is required for rational agency in general is simply that the subject, through endorsing the relevant sort of engagement with a content (pursuing a represented aim, holding a proposition true), be the ground of the present actuality of a corresponding aspect of her own condition (that she is doing A, that she believes P). This relation of endorsement to actuality holds in the case of a rational subject's beliefs, even if the subject does not at any moment occurrently consider the question whether P. Still her attitude toward the question whether P is persistently affirmative, and still she maintains this stance in the readiness to meet reasonable demands for justification, to consider relevant objections, etc. This relationship between her believing and her sense of what is reasonable is brought to the forefront of her attention when she occurrently considers whether she accepts P and what grounds she has for doing so, but it is present – actually, not merely potentially – even when she does not occurrently reflect. Her holding the belief she does is itself an enduring act of her power to assent to whatever proposition she deems reasonable.³² Her control over her beliefs is intrinsic.

Attention

It should be clear that, on the present view, the notion of rational activity is broader than the notion of voluntary rational action: the latter stands to the former as species to genus. What distinguishes voluntary rational action, roughly, is that it is a form of rational activity that is structured by the pursuit of an aim, something not yet realized but whose realization is desired or intended. I am not suggesting that we are the agents of our believing in *this* sense: believing is neither an aim we pursue nor an activity structured toward an aim. But that should be a welcome result: it confirms the widespread idea that believing is not the sort of thing that can be done “at will.”

rational activity as genus & voluntary action as species

32 Anscombe makes a parallel point about the relation between the power of practical rationality and intentional action. Commenting on Aristotle's account of practical reasoning and its role in intentional action, she remarks that if Aristotle's account were supposed to describe actual mental processes, it would in general be quite absurd. The interest of the account is that it describes an order that is there whenever actions are done with intentions (Anscombe 1963, §42, 80).

The suggestion that the notion of rational activity is more general than the idea of voluntary rational action is hardly unprecedented. Perhaps its most famous occurrence is in Kant, who held that the rational part of our cognitive faculty is characterized in general by its "spontaneity," its power self-consciously to determine itself rather than being determined through affection. Kant distinguished two deployments of this spontaneous power, a theoretical one in which it is brought to bear on objects it does not produce, and a practical deployment in which it is operative in producing the object it represents. He called the latter deployment of reason an exercise of "autonomy," but he reserved the term "spontaneity" itself for a more generic kind of rational activity, one that is exemplified not only in practical freedom but also in self-determined cognition of given objects. We have arrived, by what is certainly a more mundane path, at a similar thought.³³

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