

'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason

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Thinking has more resemblance to coming to rest or arrest than to a movement; the same may be said of inferring. — Aristotle, *De Anima*, I. 3 (407a34–35)

Every belief implies conviction, conviction implies being persuaded, and persuasion implies reason. — *Op. Cit.*, III. 3 (428a20)

1. Introduction

1.1

According to a venerable philosophical tradition, the fact that we human beings can make up our minds makes for a deep difference between us and other sorts of conscious creatures. A creature that can make up its mind is one that does not just perceive and react instinctively to its perceptions; it can judge. It is one that does not just desire things and unthinkingly pursue them; it can choose. It is one that does not just habitually associate one thing with another; it can reason. These and other familiar philosophical contrasts hang together with the thought that rational creatures are distinguished by their capacity for a special sort of cognitive and practical self-determination, a capacity which makes their relation to their own mental lives fundamentally different from that of a nonrational animal.

This way of drawing the distinction between rational and non-rational mentality has a long history, but it is not just of historical interest. It is reaffirmed in important recent work in both practical and theoretical philosophy. Thus, in an influential discussion of why human action is subject to moral requirements, Christine Korsgaard traces this subjection to the following contrast:

A lower animal's attention is fixed on the world. Its perceptions are its beliefs and its desires are its will... But we human animals turn our attention on to our perceptions and desires themselves, on to our own mental activities, and we are conscious of them... I desire and I find myself

with a powerful impulse to act. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I act? Is this desire really a *reason* to act? [Korsgaard 1996, p. 93]

And similarly, in a widely-discussed series of contributions to the philosophy of perception, John McDowell has argued that a crucial constraint on an account of human perceptual experience derives from the fact that perception must give us reasons for belief, and that

we should make sense of the idea of believing for reasons, like the idea of acting for reasons, in the context of the idea of a subject who can take charge of her beliefs and actions — hence, a subject who can step back from candidate reasons and acknowledge or refuse to acknowledge their cogency. [McDowell 2001, p. 183; cp. McDowell 1994, pp. 10–13]

The common theme of these passages is that a rational intellect is characterized by a special sort of freedom, one that permits it to “step back” from the sorts of mental goings-on that would directly determine the beliefs and actions of a nonrational creature, and instead to determine itself for reasons recognized as such. For both authors, this conception of rationality has its roots in Kant; but the idea that there is a close connection between reason and self-determination is hardly restricted to Kantians. The thought that **we must represent** the actions of a rational creature not as the mere outcome of a battle between conflicting impulses but as the product of free choice, and that we must represent the beliefs of a rational creature not as the mere consequence of sensory intake but as the product of free judgment, is widespread and has roots in ordinary intuition.

A simple way to provoke the relevant intuition is to reflect on the fact that, if we want to know why a person believes something or is

doing something, we normally ask that very person. That is, we normally expect a person who believes something to be able to account for his believing it, and we normally expect a person who is doing something to be able to account for his doing it. We treat such accounts as real explanations: in accepting what a person says about why he believes something or why he is doing something, we accept that the reasons he cites explain his holding the relevant belief or performing the relevant action, and we commit ourselves to the counterfactual proposition that, other things equal, he wouldn't believe this or do that if he didn't accept these reasons. And we do not ask a person to account for his own beliefs and actions merely because we suppose that he is in a specially good position to observe himself and make hypotheses about their causes. We suppose that the efficacy of the relevant causes is in some sense up to him, and we are ready to subject him to associated kinds of blame and criticism if we judge the reasons he gives to be inadequate.¹

1.2

But what does it mean to say that we can “make up” our minds? In what sense are judging and choosing things that we do rather than things that merely happen to us?

When we try to answer this question, we are immediately confronted with well-known difficulties. For one thing, if judging that P involves taking P to be true, then it is not obvious in what sense it can be “up to me” whether to judge that P. For if the evidence for P looks conclusive to me, then I do not seem to be at liberty to judge as I please: in this case, judging that P seems irresistible. And if the evidence looks inconclusive, then I do not seem to be at liberty either: I

1. There are of course philosophers who deny that there is a difference of principle between the cognition and action of so-called “rational” creatures and the cognition and action of other animals. My aim here is not to make a case that would persuade such skeptics, but to address those philosophers who take the sorts of familiar facts described above at face value. A reader who is skeptical of the idea that “rational” creatures are in a special way cognitively “self-determining” can view what follows as an investigation of the commitments that come with accepting this idea.

cannot simply make myself judge that P in spite of a recognized lack of evidence, for I cannot simply take something to be true “at will.”²

Explaining the sense in which judgment and choice are self-determined by appeal to the idea of deciding to judge or to choose also seems unhelpful for another reason. For to say that a subject is able to decide to do something, rather than merely being driven to do it by unreasoned impulse or instinct, is presumably to say that his doing it is an expression of a capacity to make up his mind to do things. Deciding to do something thus seems to be an instance of the very phenomenon we were hoping to understand.

The freedom I exercise when I “make up my mind” thus does not seem to be a sort of freedom we can illuminate by appealing to the ideas of decision or voluntary action. But then how can we explain it? When Korsgaard speaks of our “distancing” ourselves so that we are not “dominated” by given impulses, when McDowell speaks of our “stepping back” from candidate reasons and “taking charge” of our beliefs and actions, these formulations encourage us to picture a rational subject as having the power to survey a set of options and then choose one. But although this may be an evocative picture, we cannot count it as an explanation, for it incorporates the very thing that is to be explained: this supposed act of choosing which reasons to accept or which impulses to go along with must surely be an instance of the very sort of rational self-determination we wanted to understand.

1.3

One sort of reaction to these difficulties would be to question the traditional association between rationality and self-determination; but that is not the reaction I want to urge here.³ The present essay is provoked, on the one hand, by sympathy with the conception of

2. The explanation of the impossibility of judging or believing “at will” is a matter of controversy, but that there is a truth here that needs explaining is not terribly controversial. For discussion, see Williams 1973, O’Shaughnessy 1980, Chapter 1, Bennett 1990, Velleman 2000, Hieronymi 2005, and Setiya 2008.
3. For versions of this reaction, see Owens 2000 and Strawson 2003.

rationality expressed by Korsgaard and McDowell, and on the other hand, by dissatisfaction with existing explanations of it. My aim is to show that a significant part of our difficulty in making sense of this conception derives from our tendency to make certain natural but unwarranted assumptions about the structure of rational agency. In particular, I want to query a widespread conception of the temporal structure of such agency. According to this conception, which I call *the Process Theory*, a subject exercises her capacity for rational self-determination only on certain discrete occasions, when — to focus on the case of rational control over belief — she goes through a process of deliberating about whether P, a process that terminates in a special sort of act, her “making a judgment” about whether P, and thereby effecting a *change* in her state of belief.⁴

the Process Theory

The Process Theory of doxastic agency can seem to follow inevitably from the observations that belief is some sort of standing condition of a person, whereas deliberation is an activity in which we engage only occasionally, and through which we can come to hold new beliefs, or reject ones we formerly held. I want to suggest, however, that the Process Theory adds something to these indisputable facts, and that the addition is disputable. I will argue that although deliberation may take time, the primary form of agency we exercise over our beliefs in deliberation is not an agency exercised over time. Moreover, once we appreciate the nature of this agency, we will be able to recognize it at work, not merely on occasions when we deliberate, but also in our simply holding beliefs without conscious thought or deliberation. I will close by sketching an alternative framework in which to think about doxastic agency, a framework that draws on some intriguing but relatively neglected ideas from Aristotle.

4. For the remainder of this essay, I will restrict my attention to the sort of control a rational subject can exercise over her own beliefs. (I will use the terms and “doxastic agency” and “doxastic self-determination” interchangeably as labels for the sort of control at issue.) I think similar points apply to the control a rational subject exercises over her own choices, but to elaborate the similarities while giving due consideration to the differences would require another essay.

2. Judgment, Belief, and the Process Theory

2.1

The Process Theory consists of a set of assumptions about the temporal structure of doxastic agency, and its relation to deliberation on the one hand, and to belief on the other. To bring out these assumptions, it will help to begin with some quotations. Here are three remarks by recent authors that exemplify the conception of the relation between judgment and belief I want to question:

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, p. 88]

A judgment is a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition... . A belief, by contrast, is a mental state of representing a proposition as true, a cognitive attitude rather than a cognitive act... . Exactly how one accomplishes the transition [from the act of judgment to the state of belief] is of course ineffable, but it is a perfectly familiar accomplishment, in which a proposition is occurrently presented as true in such a way as to stick in the mind, lastingly so represented. [Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 503]

Belief is a state rather than an action or process. To say that S believes that P is to report on S's mental state rather than on something that S is literally doing or undergoing... . Judging is a mental action... . Suppose that I am presented with a sound and valid argument for some proposition P. I go through the argument and conclude

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that P... . Concluding that P is just judging that P, so here we have a case in which the formation of belief is *mediated* by judgment. [Cassam 2010, pp. 82–83]

Although their terminologies differ somewhat, these authors evidently share certain general views about the nature of belief and judgment, and how concepts of agency relate to them — views that are, I believe, widespread in contemporary philosophy of mind.⁵ All assume that an exercise of agency (an “act” or “activity”) must be an occurrent event or process. Belief, however, they take to be a standing state, not an occurrent event or process. Hence, all of these authors conclude, believing that things are thus-and-so cannot itself be an exercise of agency. If we exercise agential control over our own beliefs, they maintain, this must consist in our performing occurrent acts of judgment that give rise to new beliefs, or cause extant beliefs to be modified. **Beliefs can at most “store” the results of such acts, as Peacocke puts it.**

The core of what I will call the Process Theory (PT) consists of this set of assumptions about how concepts of agency relate to items in different temporal categories:

Core Process Theory:

Judgment is an occurrent act. Belief is a state — a standing, non-occurrent condition. States are not themselves acts.

Given these assumptions about the elements involved in doxastic agency, it is natural to make certain further assumptions about how these elements are related when we exercise agential control over our

5. For similar views of the relation between judgment and belief, see for instance Soteriou 2005, McHugh 2009, and Shoemaker 2009. See also the elaboration of Peacocke's position in his 2007 and 2009. It is more difficult to find instances of explicit dissent from the Process Theory, but there are a few recent authors who have suggested that believing itself can be understood as active in some sense: see Hieronymi 2006 and 2009, Korsgaard 2009, Moran forthcoming. A principal aim of this paper is to clarify what this suggestion could come to, and how it contrasts with the Process Theory.

beliefs. If we exercise such control by making judgments, but holding a given belief is not itself an exercise of such agency, then it seems that control over our own beliefs must consist in our power to act on our own belief-state, installing new beliefs or modifying existing ones. Deliberation — the activity of consciously considering whether a certain proposition is true — will accordingly be conceived as a process that culminates, when things go well, in an act of judging a certain proposition true, an act that results, at least normally, in one's believing the relevant proposition. We thus arrive at the Full Process Theory:

Full Process Theory:

Deliberation whether P is a process that culminates, if things go well, in a judgment on the truth of P. Judgment is an occurrent act by which a subject installs a new belief in herself, or modifies one she already holds. Belief itself is not an act but a state.

This articulation of the Full Process Theory leaves open the question exactly how the act of judgment relates to the resulting state of belief. One possible view would be that the act of judging that P normally *causes* a corresponding state of belief that P to come into existence. Another would be that the act of judging is not normally a cause of belief, but rather a certain sort of event of *starting* to believe, an event that does not precede but coincides with the initial moment or moments of belief. Some authors use language that suggests the causal view. Thus Shah and Velleman maintain that “the reasoning that is meant to issue or not issue in a belief is meant to do so by first issuing in a judgment” which then “typically induces” a corresponding belief (2005, p. 503), and Cassam speaks of the formation of a belief being “mediated” by a judgment (2010, p. 82). Other authors speak in ways that suggest that judgment does not precede belief and bring it about but is itself the commencement of belief. Peacocke, for instance, holds that “when all is working properly,” a judgment may

be “an initiation ... of a belief that *p*” (1998, p. 89), while Matthew Soteriou characterizes judging as “a distinctive way of acquiring a belief” (2005, p. 93). These formulations suggest that the act of judging is a certain sort of event of starting to believe, an event that does not precede but coincides with the initial moment or moments of belief. It is not immediately clear what speaks for holding one of these views as opposed to the other. Nevertheless, the possible difference of opinion here will be worth bearing in mind: it will turn out to be a symptom of an instability in the model.

The authors quoted above certainly subscribe to the Core Process Theory, and it is natural to understand them as thinking of our capacity for doxastic agency along the lines of the Full Theory. Their characterizations of this agency are brief, however, and it is not clear to me that they would accept every element of the Full Theory once it was spelled out. I will continue to treat them as advocates of PT (*i.e.*, the Full Theory, which will henceforth be the object of my discussion except where noted), but for my purposes, it is not crucial that any of these authors would agree to the details of my formulation. PT is, at any rate, an intelligibly attractive conception of what it is to exercise rational control over our own beliefs. My primary aim is to query this conception and to bring a 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.

2.2

What makes PT attractive is that it can seem to be simply a summary of evident facts: that deliberation is an activity in which I can engage at my discretion, that it can take time, that it is finished when I make a judgment, that by deliberating and judging I can change what I believe, that not all of my beliefs are the result of this sort of activity. It is hard to see how any of this can be denied. But if it is admitted, how can the control we have over our beliefs consist of anything but a power to form new beliefs or modify existing ones?

These intuitive considerations are commonly reinforced by two further observations. In the first place, in support of the idea that belief is a state rather than an act, it is commonly pointed out that believing that P is not something a person can be said to *do*.⁶ 'To believe' is a stative verb, ascribed in the simple present ("S believes P"), not in the continuous present tense ("S is believing P"). Ascribing a belief to a person seems at most to imply something about her dispositions, about what she would do if __, not about what she is actually doing. We retain our beliefs even in dreamless sleep, when — on the usual understanding of "doing", at least — we are not doing anything. Believing thus appears to be, not any sort of occurrent activity, but rather a kind of standing condition.

Secondly, in support of the idea that judgment must be conceived as an act of forming or modifying a belief, it is argued that judgment can fail to give rise to a "stored belief". Peacocke gives a widely-discussed example:

Someone may judge that undergraduate degrees from countries other than their own are of an equal standard to her own, and excellent reasons may be operative in her assertions to that effect. All the same, it may be quite clear, in decisions she makes on hiring, or in making recommendations, that she does not really have this belief at all. [1998, p. 90]

Similarly, Shah and Velleman observe that "[o]ne may reason one's way to the conclusion that one's plane is not going to crash ... and yet find oneself still believing that it will" (2005, p. 507). The conclusion standardly drawn from such examples is that a person can make a sincere judgment and yet not produce in herself a corresponding belief.⁷ And this, in turn, reinforces the idea that, when things do

6. Compare Soteriou 2005, p. 84; McHugh 2009, pp. 246–7; Cassam 2010, p. 81.

7. See Peacocke 1998, p. 90; Shah and Velleman 2005, p. 508; Cassam 2010, pp. 81–2.

proceed normally, the act of making a judgment is an act of forming or producing a belief.

2.3

I believe that each of these observations contains a core that is indisputable, but that in each case PT adds to this core a disputable assumption about where exactly our capacity for doxastic agency is exercised, and what form this exercise takes.⁸ Because PT holds that judging is an act whereas believing itself is not, it is forced to represent our actually believing that P as at most a product or result of our agency. Its emphasis on the distinction between cases in which we actually go through a process of deliberation and cases in which we merely hold a belief without deliberation, its focus on activities of "forming" or "acquiring" beliefs, its characterization of extant beliefs as "stored" or "standing" — all these features of PT point to a picture of our doxastic agency on which it consists in a capacity to act *on* our beliefs, a capacity whose exercise is finished as soon as a new belief is installed (unless, of course, the subject begins a new process of deliberation).⁹ So we might say that, according to PT, our agency can get no nearer to our beliefs than to touch them at their edges.

I want to suggest that this leaves our agency standing in a too-extrinsic relation to the condition of belief itself. At the foundation of PT is an assumption about what an exercise of agency must be: that it must take the form of an event or process, rather than of the obtaining of a state. Having made this assumption, Process Theorists must look for the exercise of our capacity for doxastic agency, not in our

8. I return to these observations below in §4.

9. This point must be distinguished from the idea that a subject who deliberates and judges must *aim* to have an effect on her own belief state. Advocates of PT generally acknowledge that a subject can deliberate about whether P, make a judgment, and acquire a new belief while keeping her attention wholly focused on the first-order question whether P. But although they admit that the subject need not at any point aim to have an effect on her own beliefs, they are committed to the view that this is what she in fact accomplishes by deliberating and judging.

believing itself, but in processes or events by which we act on our own belief-state. Hence they focus, naturally enough, on processes of deliberation and events of judging. But though there are such processes and events, and though we do exercise a kind of agency over them, I will argue that an exclusive focus on these phenomena distorts our understanding of the basic sense in which we are capable of doxastic self-determination and gives rise to difficulties about the very rationality of this activity. The next two sections (§§3–4) develop these criticisms of PT.

3. Moran's Constraint and the Temporal Structure of Doxastic Agency

3.1

To bring out the difficulties facing PT, it will be useful to reflect on some observations about doxastic agency emphasized by Richard Moran in his influential *Authority and Estrangement* (2001). Moran has done as much as any recent author to focus philosophical attention on our capacity to “make up our minds”, and the way this capacity informs our relation to our own beliefs. He does not offer a detailed theory of such agency, but his observations do, I think, set an important constraint on such a theory. Seeing this constraint will help us to appreciate some features of the temporal structure of doxastic agency that are difficult to capture within the framework established by PT and that suggest the possibility of a different sort of account.

3.2

Moran's discussion of doxastic agency takes its departure from the observation that, if I am asked whether I believe P, I can normally answer this question simply by answering the question whether P. That is, although I am asked a question about a state of my own mind (*e.g.*, about whether I believe it will rain tomorrow), I can answer the question by focusing my attention on an apparently different question about whether a certain mind-independent fact obtains (*viz.*, whether it will rain tomorrow). On the face of it, this “transparency” of a question

about my belief to a question about the world at large is puzzling: how can there be a state such that determining whether it holds requires, not considering how things stand with the subject whose state it is, but rather considering a wholly other state of affairs?

It is in response to this question that Moran invokes the idea of making up one's mind:

What right have I to think that my reflection on the reasons in favor of P (which is one subject-matter) has anything to do with the question of what my actual *belief* about P is (which is a quite different subject-matter)? ... [M]y thought at this point is: I *would* have a right to assume that my reflection on the reasons [for P] provided an answer to the question of what my belief ... is, if I could assume that *what* my belief here is was something determined by the conclusion of my reflection on those reasons. [Moran 2003, p. 405]

In this passage, Moran claims that the transparency of the question whether I believe that P to the question whether P is intelligible if the conclusion of my reflection about whether P determines what I believe about P. Elsewhere, Moran suggests that this transparency is intelligible *only if* my deliberation normally amounts to determining what I believe in this way: “[O]nly if I can see my own belief as somehow ‘up to me’ will it make sense for me to answer a question as to what I believe about something by reflecting exclusively on that very thing, the object of my belief” (Moran 2001, pp. 66–7). For, Moran argues, it is reasonable for me to treat the question whether I believe P as transparent to the question whether P only if I am entitled to assume that what I reflectively conclude about whether P is what I now believe about whether P. But to assume this is to assume that my belief is “up to me” in the sense that my reflection about what there is adequate reason *to* believe about the topic determines what I *do* believe about it. Thus, according to Moran, what explains the transparency

of questions about my present belief to deliberative questions about what is the case is precisely my capacity for knowing doxastic self-determination – for “making up my mind”.

These observations are not a full theory of the agency we exercise when we deliberate and judge, but they do set an important constraint on such a theory. If Moran is right, the sort of agency I exercise when I deliberate must be one that normally puts me in a position to know, on the basis of my drawing the conclusion that Q, that I believe Q. Moreover, it seems that a related point must apply to my knowledge of my grounds for drawing that conclusion: if I reason “P, so Q”, this must normally put me in a position, not merely to know *that* I believe Q, but to know something about *why* I believe Q, namely, because I believe that P and that P shows that Q. If I could not assume that all of these commitments undertaken from the standpoint of deliberation correspond to first-order “matters of psychological fact”, then I could not assume that I am reasoning from my present view of things to further beliefs which will become parts of this total view. We can thus summarize the full force of Moran’s constraint as follows:

Moran’s Constraint (MC):

My reasoning “P, so Q” must normally put me in a position to know that I believe that Q because I believe that P.¹⁰

Three points about this constraint require further comment. In the first place, although I have stated MC on the assumption that successful deliberation normally gives us knowledge of what we believe and why we believe it, nothing in my discussion will hinge on the idea that it gives us knowledge as opposed to some weaker positive epistemic status. What will be crucial for my argument is not the question

10. I adopt the convention of using quotation marks to indicate the elements involved in a subject’s reasoning. Obviously what are in question here are not spoken or written sentences but propositional contents that the subject sees as rationally related in the specific way marked by “so”.

whether PT can account for my coming specifically to know that I believe P because I believe Q, but whether PT can explain why the proposition *I believe P because I believe Q* captures the content I come to know, or justifiably believe, or whatever.

Secondly, the idea of reasoning’s “putting me in a position” to know something needs clarification. The point of including this phrase is to leave room for the fact that a subject who reasons “P, so Q” need not actually form any view about the explanatory relation between her own beliefs. Indeed, for all that MC says, a subject who did not even possess the concept *belief* might consider the question whether Q and resolve it by reasoning “P, so Q”. Nevertheless, a subject who reasons “P, so Q” must normally be in a position to know of herself *I believe P because I believe Q*, in the following sense: **she must be in an epistemic position such that she normally needs no further grounds in order knowledgeably to judge *I believe P because I believe Q***. In the absence of the relevant concepts she may not be able to frame this proposition, and even if she has the required concepts she may not actually do so, but – if Moran is right – she must normally have sufficient reason to accept this proposition were she presented with it.

being in a position to know

Finally, I include the qualification “normally” in MC so as not to rule out cases like Peacocke’s biased application reviewer and Shah and Velleman’s fearful flyer: cases in which a subject deliberates and judges but does not acquire knowledge of her enduring belief and its grounds because no such enduring grounded belief exists. I certainly do not deny that such cases are possible; I will consider their significance in more detail below. What should immediately be clear, however, is that these are cases in which deliberation does not achieve its own aim. For the point of ordinary deliberation is not merely to determine what one ought to believe about a certain matter, but actually to settle one’s view on the matter. This activity fails by its own standard if one’s deliberation makes no lasting impression on one’s belief-state. MC thus captures how things must normally go in a normative sense: how they must go if deliberation is to live up to its own implicit aim.

The sense of normality at issue is not merely normative, however. Cases in which a subject's reflective judgment and his standing belief come apart are certainly possible, but the capacity to deliberate about one's view of the world can exist only where a subject can in general make reflective judgments in a way that expresses his own beliefs on the matter in question. A subject whose reflective judgments were generally alienated from his standing beliefs, in the way that the reflective judgments of Peacocke's biased reviewer and Shah and Velleman's fearful flyer are locally alienated from their standing beliefs, would be literally possessed of two standpoints on the world, one governing his reflective judgments and another governing the rest of his activity. But then such a subject would not be capable of ordinary deliberation, in which a subject reflects on *his own* beliefs. He would not be capable of referring with a single 'I' both to the standpoint on things expressed in his reflective judgments and to the one embodied in the rest of his activity.

I conclude that MC captures the situation that must obtain, at least as a rule, in a subject with the capacity for deliberation about factual questions. The details of my formulation might be disputed, but there is clearly a fact in this vicinity for which a theory of doxastic agency must account — a fact exhibited in our normal readiness, having reasoned "P, so Q", to say without hesitation that we believe Q, and, if asked why we believe Q, to cite our belief that P as the ground of our conclusion.

3.3

Now, it may at first appear that Moran's Constraint can be met by a wide variety of accounts of doxastic agency, but I believe that Moran's observations actually present difficulties for PT and motivate a fundamentally different view of the structure of doxastic agency.

Consider first the attitude PT encourages us to take toward Moran's observations. Moran appears to hold that our capacity for doxastic agency explains our "transparent" knowledge of what we believe, not just in certain cases but in general. Philosophers who conceive of doxastic agency along the lines of PT, however, must regard

Moran's observations as of more limited significance. They can grant that Moran accurately describes one kind of case of knowing what one believes — the case in which one deliberates about a question of fact and forms a new belief. But since PT holds that believing a certain proposition is not itself an exercise of doxastic agency, and since it is clear that we hold many beliefs, and know ourselves to hold them, without deliberating, it seems that advocates of PT should reject the idea that Moran's appeal to our capacity for doxastic agency provides a sufficient general explanation of why one can normally treat the question whether one believes P as transparent to the question whether P. And this, indeed, is how authors who characterize doxastic agency along the lines of PT have tended to react to Moran's discussion. According to Shah and Velleman, for instance, Moran fails to distinguish two quite different sorts of transparency of the question whether I believe that P to the question whether P:

If the question is *whether I already believe that P*, one can assay the relevant state of mind by posing the question *whether P* and seeing what one is spontaneously inclined to answer. In this procedure, the question *whether P* serves as a stimulus applied to oneself for the empirical purpose of eliciting a response. One comes to know what one already thinks by seeing what one says But the procedure requires one to refrain from any reasoning as to whether P, since that reasoning might alter the state of mind one is trying to assay. Hence asking oneself *whether P* must be a brute stimulus in this case rather than an invitation to reasoning. By contrast, the question *whether I now believe that P* is potentially transparent to the question *whether P* in the capacity of just such an invitation. [2005, pp. 506–507]

The temporal distinction Shah and Velleman emphasize here — the distinction between what I already believe and what I now believe — is

motivated by a basic feature of PT: its assumption that we actually exercise our capacity for doxastic self-determination only on those occasions when we now reflectively make a judgment about whether P, whereas when we merely hold a belief without reflection, we are not presently exercising this capacity. On closer examination, however, I think this assumption should seem suspect, and that this should make us doubt whether PT can accommodate the full force of Moran's observations about the connection between our transparent knowledge of our own beliefs and our capacity for doxastic agency.

One ground for suspicion comes out if we reflect on Shah and Velleman's characterization of asking oneself whether one "already believes" that P as a matter of applying a stimulus to oneself "for the empirical purpose of eliciting a response". Their point, I take it, is that to know what I already believe, I must hold in abeyance my rational capacity now to assess whether P is true. And given PT, it does seem that this is how things must be — for my aim in this case is not now to assess whether P, but to elicit my "stored" assessment of the question. Yet if I put the question whether P to myself simply as a stimulus to elicit the stored result of my earlier assessment of the question whether P, then it seems that it should be an open question for me now whether to believe this assessment, just as it would be an open question for me now whether to believe the propositions I had earlier entered in a notebook of truths I keep for myself. But recalling what one believes must surely be more committal than this: I do not recall what I believe about whether P unless I recall what now looks to me to be the truth as to whether P. What I call to mind must be not merely my past assessment of the question, but my present assessment of it — the answer to the question whether P that presently strikes me as correct. It is difficult to see how PT can make good sense of this notion of present assessment, given its insistence on the distinction between occurrent, forward-looking acts of assessment, in which our capacity for doxastic self-determination is actually exercised, and stored results of past assessments, which express, if anything, a persisting trace of an earlier determination about what is the case.

Another indication that one's capacity for doxastic self-determination plays a role even in one's knowledge of one's extant beliefs is this: we normally expect a person who believes P to be able to address the question why he believes P whether he has consciously deliberated or not.¹¹ A person faced with such a question will not, of course, always have specific grounds for holding a given belief, but the interesting thing is that, even when someone admits to lacking grounds, he accepts the presupposition of the question — that he is in a position to speak for whatever grounds he has. Moreover, if a person produces grounds for belief that are obviously poor, or if he admits to having no grounds in a case where grounds are obviously required, we are ready to criticize his belief and, significantly, we address our criticisms to *him*. We ask him why he believes something so outlandish, how he can accept such a manifestly unreasonable argument, etc. We thus appear to treat a person's believing P on certain grounds (or none) as a posture that expresses his assessment of the reasonableness of believing P, and we do so throughout the duration of his belief, whether or not he has consciously deliberated about it. We seem, in short, to treat a person's simply holding a given belief as expressive of his capacity to determine what he believes by assessing whether a certain proposition is true, in the light of such grounds as he deems relevant.

Could a defender of PT accommodate these observations by noting that, even when we believe P without deliberation, we may recall how it resulted from a past assessment of reasons, and are in any case now capable of exercising agency over this belief by beginning to deliberate about whether P? It is hard to see how either of these points could account for the intimacy of the connection between believing and answerability for one's reasons that obtains here.¹² The relevant

11. We expect this of a subject who can deliberate about what is the case and what claims are credible. We do not, of course, make such demands of non-linguistic animals or small children. Throughout this discussion, my claims should be read as applying to subjects who possess the capacity to deliberate and judge.

12. This is a sketch of a line of thought developed in more detail in Boyle forthcoming (1).

why-question does not inquire into the explanation of his coming, at some past time, to hold the belief in question, except insofar as the subject's knowledge of how he came to hold the belief speaks to the reasonableness of his continuing to hold it now. Our interest is not in his psychological history but in the present basis of his conviction. Nor do we merely expect a person to be able to speak for the reasons why he shall henceforth believe P; we expect him to be able to speak to the question why he presently does believe it, and we hold him accountable for the reasonableness of his answer. Finally, it does not seem that we merely hold him accountable in the manner of someone who might do something about a given situation, as I might be held accountable for the misbehavior of my child, or the explosion of the munitions in my basement. I am not merely accountable for allowing an unreasonable belief to persist, or for having previously brought such a belief into existence; I am myself directly accountable for now holding the belief—for presently taking things to be thus-and-so, in the context of the reasons available to me. We thus seem to treat a person's holding a belief not merely as a situation over which he can potentially exercise doxastic self-determination—as PT implies—but as a situation in which his capacity for doxastic self-determination is actually presently at work.

3.4

So far, I have simply been raising *prima facie* doubts about whether PT recognizes the right sort of connection between our capacity for doxastic self-determination and our presently believing what we do. A more direct objection to PT emerges if we turn from cases in which one calls to mind beliefs one already holds to cases in which one arrives at a new belief by deliberating and making a judgment. Recall that MC says that a person's reasoning "P, so Q" must normally put her in a position to know the following explanatory proposition:

(C) I believe Q because I believe P.

Can a Process Theorist respect this constraint?

'Making up Your Mind' and the Activity of Reason

There is a difficulty here that comes out if we reflect on the temporal structure of (C). Consider the tenses of the two sentences bound together by "because" in (C): they both concern the present. Nor is this a mere accident of formulation; it would mean something quite different to say

(C*) I believe Q because I believed P.

(C*) claims to explain a present situation by reference to a past situation. It is natural to read it as offering an explanation analogous to

(E) The red billiard ball is moving because the white billiard ball struck it.

But in the case of belief, this type of explanation seems decidedly odd: what can it mean to say that I presently believe something because I formerly believed something else? No doubt we can imagine cases in which such an explanation would be apt—for instance, it might count as a kind of explanation of my now believing that Maxwell's equations state the basic principles of electromagnetism that I formerly believed that it would be a good idea to learn some physics. But this is plainly not the kind of explanation on offer in (C), the kind of explanation that one comes to know in making up one's mind that Q on the ground that P.

The reason for the distinctive temporal features of (C) comes out if we reflect on the fact that (C) implies that its subject takes the fact that P to show that Q is true. This is no part of the implication of (C*): that it would be a good idea to learn some physics has no tendency to show anything about the content of the laws of electromagnetism. But (C*) does not purport to capture the subject's ground for taking Q to be true: it simply asserts that a certain earlier state contributed to its coming about that he so takes it. By contrast, when (C) is read in the intended way, it does purport to capture the subject's ground for taking Q to be true: it says what convinces him of this. His conviction that P shows that Q may of course be mistaken, but it is part of the sense of the relevant explanation that this is his conviction. This helps to

explain why both clauses of (C) are in the present tense. For only my present beliefs have a direct bearing on whether I should now accept that Q. The fact that I formerly believed that P, and that if P then Q, has at best an indirect bearing: it may be relevant inasmuch as, if I am generally reliable in my beliefs about what is the case, the fact that I formerly accepted these propositions may be good evidence that they are true. But when I ask myself whether Q, what bears directly on this question is the truth of the propositions that P and that if P then Q, and to ask myself whether these propositions are true is to ask myself whether I now believe them.

The difficulty for the Process Theorist is to reconcile these points with the basic structural assumptions to which his theory commits him. To bring out the tension here, it will help to give separate consideration to the two variants of PT distinguished in §2.1: the variant on which my judgment that Q causes a corresponding belief that Q, and the variant on which my judgment is an event of starting to believe.

3.5

On the causal variant of PT (henceforth: CPT), the objection is straightforward. Suppose I believe that P, and that if P then Q, and on this basis I judge that Q at time t. A cause must precede its effect, so if my judging Q is the cause of my believing Q, then I come to believe Q only after t. What explains my then believing Q? The relevant psychological causes are, it seems, all in the past: the proximate cause is my judging Q at t, and the more remote causes are the beliefs I held at t that gave rise to this judgment. Given these assumptions, it is difficult to see what basis there can be for the intuitively correct explanatory claim expressed in (C). In what sense can I be said to believe Q because I believe P? My belief that P may indeed persist, and it may be true that if it were changed, this would bring about a change in my belief that Q. But it seems that the only actual explanatory connection whose existence is entailed by the fact that I have reasoned “P, so Q” — conceived as CPT conceives it — is a relation between my believing that Q and my

having believed that P at t. How then could reasoning in this way put the subject in a position to know that he believes Q because he believes P?

This objection to CPT can be reinforced by considering how we might explain the rationality of doxastic agency given this conception of its structure. Suppose I believe that P and that if P then Q: this is certainly a reason for me now to believe Q, but is it a reason for me to act in a way that will later leave me with the belief that Q? How do I know I won’t receive new information, or change my assessment of the information I have? If the time at which I act to install a belief that Q in myself precedes the time at which this belief actually exists, then it is at least logically possible that I will have new relevant information, or will have reevaluated whatever beliefs grounded my judgment, by the time my belief that Q arises. In that case, although acting now to install this belief in myself may be a good bet, it does not seem to possess the immediate and unproblematic rationality that drawing a deliberative conclusion intuitively possesses.¹³ If making a judgment after deliberation were an activity whose reasonableness depended on assumptions about the consistency of my views over time or the likelihood that new considerations will present themselves, it is hard to see how a reflective subject could regard this activity as wholly

13. A related objection to the idea that rational requirements can be construed as “process requirements” has been raised by John Broome (2007, p. 368). Broome focuses on a different deliberative transition: he considers whether, if I now believe I ought to do A, I am rationally required to initiate a process which will result in my intending to do A. But the point he makes about this transition is the same sort of point I am making here: my now taking a certain attitude to be reasonable does not rule out my subsequently, and rationally, holding a different view. Hence it is hard to see how reason can require me to act now to determine the attitude I will later hold.

Broome’s paper forms part of a thought-provoking exchange with Niko Kolodny (2007), an exchange which raises complex issues about practical deliberation that I cannot take up here. But I will note in passing that the dispute between these authors, which concerns whether all rational requirements are requirements on the state a subject must be in at a given time, or whether some such requirements are requirements on what a subject must do “going forward” (as Kolodny puts it), takes for granted something that it is the aim of this paper to question: that if a subject is active with respect to his own attitudes, this must take the form of a process carried out over time.

unproblematic. He ought, it seems, to regard the step he is taking as open to a kind of doubt that has nothing to do with his justification for accepting the premises or with the validity of his inference. But in fact we entertain no such doubt: it is not merely that we know that, as a matter of fact, by reasoning “P, and if P then Q, so Q” we will come to believe that Q; we regard this step as rationally irreproachable. To appeal to our consistency over time or the small probability that new considerations will present themselves in the time that elapses seems to introduce irrelevant complications into our account of the rationality of doxastic agency.

This criticism may seem unfair to CPT.¹⁴ After all, given that we human beings accumulate information over time, and that our reasoning takes place in time, it surely must be possible for us to be justified in holding a belief at one time in virtue of having been justified in forming that belief at an earlier time. It is clear, for instance, that we often retain beliefs long after we have forgotten the specific grounds we originally had for accepting them. If we were not justified in retaining such beliefs, and in basing further beliefs on them, we would be deprived of much of our accumulated knowledge about the world. But then how can it be objectionable for CPT to posit cognitive processes in which our justification at an earlier time for making a certain judgment is preserved in such a way as to justify a later belief?

It is undeniable that, as creatures who reason and accumulate information in time, we routinely rely on what Tyler Burge has called the “preservative” function of memory, by which contents reasonably held true at an earlier time continue to be reasonably held true at a later time, not in virtue of our now having some specific ground for retaining belief in them but simply by a kind of rational default.¹⁵ I certainly do not dispute our entitlement to this reliance. But the sort of relation

14. I owe the following objection to an anonymous reader.

15. Compare Burge 1993, pp. 463–5. Burge argues forcefully that we have a default a priori entitlement to rely on contents preserved in this way, an entitlement that does not contribute to the substance of our justification for accepting these contents, but simply preserves whatever justification status they originally possessed.

between time of justification and time of belief that is posited by CPT has a different and more problematic structure. In what we can call the case of “simple preservation”, I reasonably believe P at a certain time, and later continue to be reasonable in believing P simply in virtue of the fact that memory keeps me in the right sort of rapport with the fact, or apparent fact, that P. At no moment here do I act to affect my future psychology on the basis of a reason for belief I have now: I simply continue to believe what I earlier reasonably believed. In the situation posited by CPT, by contrast, I act on the basis of an (apparent) reason for believing P that I now possess, in a way that will only later result in my believing P. Since it is possible for me to acquire new information, or for my assessment of the grounds for P to change, there need not be any time here at which I reasonably believe P. And this means that the reasonableness of my act does not follow directly from the cogency of the argument for P and the reasonableness of my believing the premises of this argument. In the case of simple preservation, my justification is preserved through time in a way that allows me simply to reason on the basis of the contents I believe true, without needing in the normal case to invoke further premises about the history of my believing those contents. In the situation posited by CPT, by contrast, the justification for the step I take cannot simply be grounded in the rational significance of the contents on the basis of which I take it, since my act is not one of accepting a proposition on the basis of reasons I presently possess, but one of forward-looking self-manipulation. My objection to CPT is that this would introduce intuitively irrelevant complications into our account of the rationality of inference and judgment.

I have raised two difficulties for CPT: one focusing on its account of the *explanatory* structure of reasoning, and another focusing on its implications for the *rationality* of judgment. I have framed these points as objections, but they also might be expressed, more modestly, as challenges that an adequate account of deliberation and judgment must meet. Discussions of deliberation, reasoning, and judgment commonly give little attention to the temporal structure of these activities, while speaking, relatively casually, of them as events or processes that

bring about certain results.¹⁶ What I hope to have shown is that there is one natural interpretation of such language on which it has problematic implications. The challenge — not only for Process Theorists, but for anyone interested in these topics — is to give a clear account of the way in which deliberation and judgment take place in time that does not leave their efficacy looking explanatorily counterintuitive and rationally problematic.

3.6

Turn now to the non-causal variant of PT (henceforth NCPT), on which my judging that Q does not cause my believing that Q but is itself an event of forming or acquiring the belief that Q.¹⁷ I consider this proposal so as not to appear to overlook an option available to Process Theorists, but in fact my objection is that the meaning of the proposal is unclear. It is true that many authors describe judging as a certain sort of event of “forming” or “acquiring” a belief, but on reflection, it is hard to see how such an event could be what the Process Theorist needs it to be: an exercise of our capacity for doxastic self-determination.

To bring out the difficulty, it will be useful to focus on the question whether, at the time of this event of forming or acquiring a belief, the subject believes P. If the subject does believe P at the moment when he judges P (or throughout the duration of this event, if it takes time), then it seems that his judging is not an event of “making up his mind” or “forming” the belief that P, for even at the first moment of its taking place, he already believes the proposition in question. His judging may indeed be an instance of his *expressing* to himself his belief as to whether P by consciously thinking that P, and there is no reason why such an event should not occur as soon as he believes that P. But it does not seem that this can be the thing we were looking for — the

16. An important exception is the work of Soteriou (2005, 2009). I cannot discuss Soteriou’s views in detail here, but his suggestion that judging is an event of “acquiring” a belief receives some discussion below in §3.6.

17. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for pressing me to address this proposal.

act of doxastic self-determination by which a subject settles his belief about a certain question. For it occurs when that question is settled.

Suppose, on the other hand, that at the time when the subject judges P (or at some point during his judging P, if this takes time), he does not yet believe P. In this case, it is hard to see how the proposal that judging P is an event of “forming” or “acquiring” the belief that P differs from CPT. If judging P can take place, or at least begin, while a subject does not yet believe P, but it normally results in his believing P, then it must be an act that normally produces this state. But then the objections to CPT apply here as well: judging turns out to be an act by which I affect my future psychology, but this conception of doxastic agency seems both intuitively wrong and rationally problematic.

The dilemma just posed is related to a more general problem about events of starting and stopping that has been discussed by a number of authors.¹⁸ In general, where some object O starts to change, it will be possible to ask, concerning the moment M when O starts to change, whether O is or is not changing at M, and there will be *prima facie* difficulties about either answer (and similar difficulties will arise *mutatis mutandis* concerning the moment when O comes to rest in a state). Some authors have taken these difficulties to show that there is something unsound in the very idea of events of starting and stopping, but no such conclusion follows simply from the considerations I have presented,¹⁹ and it is no part of my agenda here to defend this claim or even the more restricted claim that judging should not be understood as an event of acquiring a belief. In my view, the dilemma posed above simply brings out a constraint on how we must conceive of the event of judgment: if we suppose it to occur at some moment in time — as, it seems, we must if we are to recognize a judgment as a conscious occurrence, one that can occupy our attention — then we are committed to taking a position on how the time of its occurrence

A general temporal problem

18. See for instance Medlin 1963, Hamblin 1969.

19. Any such conclusion would presumably require further assumptions about what starting and stopping must be, and about how to conceive of events and their ontology more generally.

is related to the time at which a corresponding belief is present. My point is that this constraint presents a special difficulty for the Process Theorist, given his ambition of representing judgment as an exercise of agency by which a subject actively forms a certain belief. For it seems that either the relevant belief must exist at the moment of this event, in which case the event is not a forming of a belief but at best an expression of having formed one, or else the event must be related to the belief in the way suggested by CPT, a way we have already seen to be problematic.

If saying that judging that P may be an event of “acquiring a belief” simply means that it may be an event which coincides with and expresses consciousness of the earliest moment of believing P, then nothing I have said tells against recognizing such events.²⁰ Nor does anything I have said rule out the idea that we exercise a kind of free agency over whether to express what we believe to ourselves in this way. My objection is only to the idea that appeal to such events, and the sort of control we exercise over them, can constitute an account of our capacity for doxastic self-determination — an idea that is suggested

20. This may be all that is intended by some authors who characterize judging as an event of “acquiring a belief”. Some of Peacocke’s formulations, for instance, suggest that he conceives of judging, not as an act by which I produce a belief in myself, but simply one by which I (normally) express to myself what I believe. Thus he writes 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, p. 89). If this means that, when all is working properly, one cannot judge P (which, on Peacocke’s view, 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 (though I would want to resist the idea that one’s knowledge that one judges P is epistemically prior to one’s knowledge that one believes P). If this is Peacocke’s view, however, then I do not 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. If judging is simply an act which, when performed in a condition of belief, can express consciousness of what we believe, then this still leaves our problem open: in what sense can we be said to have agential control over our beliefs?

by talk of judging as an event of “forming a belief”, a phrase that suggests some sort of productive activity. If we are tempted to think that the act of consciously judging that P can be an act of forming the belief that P in this sense, we should substitute for this supposed act an event that can take place out in the open, and we should consider whether we can make good sense of its accomplishing what it is supposed to accomplish. Suppose, for instance, that I finish my deliberation about whether P by saying aloud: “P!”. This is certainly an act, and one I can perform intentionally, but in performing it I do not determine myself to believe P. For if I say “P!” in the belief that P is true, I am simply expressing what I already believe; while if I say “P!” without conviction, I am merely doing something that would in other circumstances express this belief, but it seems I have not yet genuinely concluded my deliberation, for I do not yet hold a definite view about whether P is true. It is hard to see how positing an act of inwardly judging rather than outwardly saying could allow the Process Theorist to escape this dilemma.

I conclude that there is a coherent conception of judgment on which it is a conscious event, but that on this conception, it is not clear how it can be the act of “making up one’s mind”. If, on the other hand, judgment is supposed to be an act by which one produces a belief in oneself, then the problems of CPT ensue.

4. Processive activity and the activity of reason

4.1

At the core of PT is an assumption about the form an exercise of agency must take: that an act must be an event or process, something that happens at a time or unfolds over time, not a state that simply persists through time. The account of the relation between deliberation, judgment, and belief given in the Full Process Theory is an attempt to recognize the possibility of doxastic agency while respecting this basic assumption. But we might avoid the need for this account, with its attendant difficulties, if we questioned the assumption that underlies it. Might we recognize a form of agency whose exercise does not consist

The dilemma for the process theorist

in bringing about a change but is manifested simply in the persistence of a certain state?

I think we can and should recognize such a form of agency. Showing this will require responding to the considerations that make PT seem unavoidable, and articulating an alternative conception of doxastic self-determination. This section will focus primarily on the former task; I will turn to the latter in the final section of the paper.

4.2

In §2.2, we noted three observations that contribute to the appeal of PT: first, that deliberating and making a conscious judgment appears to be an activity in which we engage only on certain occasions, one that can result in our believing what we formerly did not believe; second, that believing is not itself something a person can be said to *do*; and third, that judging P can sometimes fail to leave one with a stable belief that P.

I think none of these observations decides the nature of doxastic agency. Let us begin with the latter two points. The observation that believing is not something a person can be said to do is often treated as a decisive objection to the idea that belief is a mental act. Thus John Searle writes, "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'" (1983, p. 3).

Now, it is true that we will not accept "I believe that P" as an answer to "What are you doing?", but that is merely because the formulation of the question here demands an answer in a continuous tense, and 'to believe' is a stative verb that is not ascribed in the continuous tense.²¹ The fact that believing that P is not something one does in this sense

21. 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.

does not rule out that believing that P is itself an exercise of 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: that being occurrently up to something is only one species of the genus *act, exercise of agency*.

What about the observation that making a conscious judgment sometimes fails to leave one with a settled belief? Does this not show that, when judging does succeed, it is an act by which I produce a stored belief in myself? I do not think it does. Cases like that of Peacocke's biased application-reviewer or Shah and Velleman's fearful flyer are certainly possible, but it is contentious to describe them as cases in which judging P fails to produce a stable belief that P. The uncontentious observation is that they are cases in which a person judges P without *having* a stable belief that P, but to describe this situation as one in which judging fails to *produce* belief is to assume PT in one's description of the case, not to prove PT on the basis of it. An alternative interpretation, drawing on the conception of judgment proposed in §3.6, would be this: in such cases, the subject's judgment does not *express* a stable belief. This interpretation is consistent with the facts of the case: that one way to attempt to settle one's belief about a certain question is consciously to review the case in its favor (*e.g.*, "Air travel is statistically much safer than travel by car," etc.) with a view to firming up one's belief, but that in some cases this strategy doesn't succeed, even though in the moment the case looks conclusive. But this interpretation does not cast the act of judgment in the role of making a belief come into being, but of attempting to express a belief that presently exists (albeit perhaps one that has only just now taken root).

4.3

This leaves us with the first and most intuitive consideration in favor of PT: that deliberation seems to be an activity in which we can engage at our discretion, one that concludes when we make a judgment and that can result in our believing what we formerly did not believe. When I

deliberate, I normally do so with the aim of determining whether P, and, to the extent that I am reasonable, I will take means (reasoning about what available information might bear on the matter, making relevant inquiries, employing suitable heuristics, etc.) calculated to achieve this result. These activities can take time, and if I do achieve my aim, this will involve my forming a belief as to whether P (or changing or reconfirming a belief I already hold). Thus, deliberation seems plainly to be an active, goal-directed process which (when things go well) has an effect on what beliefs I hold.

I do not want to dispute these intuitive observations. The question to consider, though, is how much light they shed on the nature of the control we exercise over our own beliefs. Because defenders of PT assume that an exercise of agency must take the form of an event or process, rather than of the obtaining of a state, they must invest these observations with a certain significance: they must suppose that the primary *agency* we exercise over our own beliefs can be explicated by appeal to the idea of actively governing a process or event. On closer consideration, however, I think we should doubt whether appealing to this sort of agency can account for the phenomenon we want to understand.

To see the difficulty, it is necessary to take care about just what a deliberating subject actively governs, and in what sense he does so. There are various things I can do, with a view to determining whether P, that are self-governed actions in an unproblematic enough sense (or at any rate, one we can treat as unproblematic for present purposes). For instance, I can telephone a knowledgeable friend, or boot up my computer and type a query into Wikipedia, or write down a list of relevant considerations. A subject can certainly affect his beliefs by performing such epistemically-oriented intentional actions, but pointing to this fact does not yet clarify the agency we exercise over our own beliefs. For these kinds of actions merely bring it about that I am in a position to determine whether P: they are acts of putting myself in circumstances in which (I suppose) grounds for an answer to my question will be available to me. They are not themselves the supposed act

of determining whether P — that is, of assessing the question in the light of the available grounds.

If we were merely able to act on our beliefs in the former way — by actively putting ourselves in a position in which our capacities for doxastic assessment would be stimulated to operate, so to speak — then it would remain unclear why there is any difference of principle between our capacity to determine our own beliefs and our capacity to determine our own stomachaches or phobias. After all, my disposition to form and retain these kinds of states can also be affected by intentional actions I take, and I can learn how to control the relevant states by performing such actions. But **there is surely an intuitive contrast between my power to govern whether I have a stomachache and my power to govern whether I believe P: whereas in the former case my control over the relevant condition is at best indirect, in the latter, one wants to say, my control may be direct.** It is this intuition — that settling on an answer to a question can itself be an exercise of some sort of capacity for self-determination — that is expressed in the traditional idea that rational creatures have a capacity for free “judgment”, a capacity to “make up their minds”. The question on which we must focus concerns the nature of this basic agency: not whatever agency I exercise in bringing about a situation in which I *can* answer a question, but the agency I exercise over my actually accepting a certain answer to a question, or suspending judgment about it, for certain reasons.²² Once we are focused squarely on this agency, however, it is hard to see how it could be understood as a case of actively governing a process or event.

22. Some will deny that we do exercise agency at this point. It is, however, a working assumption of this paper — one I take to be shared by defenders of PT — that there is some such agency. **Philosophers who deny this are often motivated by the thought that recognizing agency here would require supposing that we can believe at will.** But it would be premature to reject the idea of doxastic agency on these grounds without first considering whether some other sense can be made of the relevant agency, and my project here is precisely to lay the groundwork for a conception of non-voluntaristic doxastic agency, and to argue that uncritical acceptance of PT is one of the factors that prevents us from seeing how this might be done.

To bring this out, it will help to compare our control over deliberation and judgment with a more mundane case of governing an unfolding process. Suppose I decide that my armchair looks bad in its current spot and that it should go on the other side of the room. I can effect this change by intentionally moving it to the desired location. This (my moving the chair from here to there) will be a process that takes time, and at different points in the process, different kinds of propositions will be true. At first it will be the case that

(1) I am moving the armchair to the other side of the room.

And then eventually, if things go well, it will be the case that

(2) I moved the armchair to the other side of the room.

The shift from “am moving” in (1) to “moved” in (2) — the shift from the progressive to the perfect — reflects a real difference in the truth-conditions of these two propositions.²³ (1) might be true and yet (2) might never come to be true: I might, for instance, suffer a heart attack midway through the process. Still, it would be true for all eternity that at the moment of my misfortune

(3) I was moving the armchair to the other side of the room.

which is how we express the truth of (1) once it is past. (3) would be true in virtue of my having taken steps with a view to moving the armchair to the other side of the room, whether I achieved my aim or not. And in general, where I actively bring about a change, this structure will apply: there will be a result that my activity aims to bring about, and this will supply the basis for a distinction between my activity's having achieved its aim and its being underway but not yet having achieved its aim. Indeed, where a change is brought about, it seems

23. This shift corresponds to the linguist's distinction between two contrasting kinds of verbal “aspect”: imperfective and perfective. On the general notion of aspect, see Comrie 1976 and Galton 1984, and for helpful discussion of the relevance of this notion to the understanding of mind and agency, see Mourelatos 1978, which builds on classic discussions of these topics in Vendler 1957 and Kenny 1963.

there must be room for such a distinction, for if the situation I aim to change is still in its initial state, then I have not yet begun to act on it, while if it is already in the final state, then my activity is finished. My activity occurs only in the intervening period, when a proposition of form (1) is true but the corresponding proposition of form (2) is not yet true. Hence **the bringing about of a change takes time, in the sense that its realization essentially spans a period bounded by the last moment at which the initial state obtains and the first moment at which the relevant change is completed, or is broken off incomplete.**

Now, the point to notice about doxastic deliberation is that, although we may certainly describe it as a process whose overall aim is to determine whether *P*, the elements of this process that we need to understand if we are to understand the nature of doxastic self-determination are not themselves actively governed processes or events in this sense. For we have seen that one exercises doxastic self-determination primarily in determining one's answer to a given question, in the light of available grounds.²⁴ **But if this act of determining (judging, accepting, settling a question) is an exercise of agency, it cannot be the sort of agency characterized above, one whose exercise occurs when the result is not yet reached, and which is directed toward the production of that result. There does not seem to be room for such an act of bringing it about that I accept a certain proposition. For what could it mean to be bringing it about that I accept that *P*? Either I am still undecided about whether *P*, in which case I cannot simply “start judging” that *P*, any more than I can simply believe at will; or else I already hold a definite attitude toward *P*, in which case my mind is made up.**

The act of determining my answer to a question thus cannot be the act of bringing it about that I believe *P*, for there can be no time at

24. This power may be exercised, of course, not only in accepting a final conclusion, but in many phases of the deliberative process — when one weighs the significance of various considerations, when one reasons and draws some subordinate sub-conclusion, when one refrains from reaching a final conclusion because one judges the available considerations not to settle it, etc. I will focus for simplicity on the final act of accepting a conclusion, but similar points apply to such intermediate exercises of one's power of rational assessment.

which I am engaged in realizing this result but the result has not come about. Although time may pass in the lead-up to my determining my a certain answer to a question, and although a proposition I accept may continue to occupy my attention for a time, my act of accepting that P cannot itself take time. And even if there is a first instant at which I consciously accept that P, this instant cannot be one at which I am forming the belief that P; it must be the first moment at which my mind is made up on this point. The act of consciously judging that P is, if anything, an active expression of being resolved, not an act by which I bring resolution about.²⁵

If this is right, then we cannot account for the primary form of agency we exercise over our own beliefs by appeal to the idea of actively governing a process or producing a result. Perhaps deliberation as a whole may be characterized as a process, and the acquisition of a belief as an event that occurs at the end of this process, but these observations cannot bear the weight that PT needs them to bear. For our primary role in governing what we believe is not to be understood in terms of a form of agency exercised over time, one that itself consists in processes or events of changing what we believe. If we actively determine our own beliefs, this determination must take a different form.

5. Conclusion: Beliefs as Acts of Reason

5.1

The arguments of the preceding sections converge on this conclusion: that if we possess the capacity for doxastic self-determination, this capacity is not exercised in acts of changing our belief-state, installing new beliefs or modifying existing ones. This sort of observation has led some authors to conclude that we simply do not have such a capacity — that we cannot be said to exercise direct control over what we believe.²⁶ But the apparent dilemma here — either locate special

25. Compare the argument of §3.6, and for related observations on the temporality of judgment, see Geach 1957, pp. 101–106 and Soteriou 2009, p. 238.

26. See for instance Strawson 2003, esp. pp. 231–33. For further discussion of

acts of installing or modifying beliefs, or else deny that we have the capacity for doxastic self-determination — would be avoidable if there were room for us to recognize another form of agency, whose exercise did not consist in actively changing things to produce a certain result, but in actively being a certain way.

To speak of “actively being a certain way” may sound paradoxical. In what sense can I count as self-determining, not in changing my state, but simply in being in a certain condition? In this final section, I want to offer a brief defense of the idea of that, for a rational creature, belief itself is an active condition. To bring out what this might mean, it will help to consider some intriguing remarks Aristotle makes about a distinction between two kinds of activity.

5.2

In a famous passage of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle distinguishes between two kinds of actualization of a capacity (*dunamis*, sometimes translated as “potentiality”).²⁷ The first he calls *kinēsis* (often translated as “movement” or “change”): the term applies to any actualization of something’s capacity to change in respect of place, quality, or quantity. His examples are: becoming thin, being healed, learning (*i.e.*, learning something), walking (*i.e.*, walking somewhere), building (*i.e.*, building something). Any such change, Aristotle holds, proceeds from something to something: there is a condition from which it starts and a result toward which it proceeds.²⁸ Hence, this sort of actualization is characterized by a certain “incompleteness” (1048b29): while a

Strawson’s view, see Boyle forthcoming (1).

27. The distinction is drawn in *Metaphysics* IX. 6 (1048b18–35), and related distinctions are drawn in various other places in the Aristotelian corpus. The interpretation of Aristotle’s distinction is controversial, however, and it is contested whether the passage from *Metaphysics* IX even belongs in its present location (it is missing from some manuscripts). The account that follows must therefore be taken as an admittedly controversial précis. For comprehensive discussion of the *Metaphysics* passage and the controversies surrounding it, see Burnyeat 2008.

28. Compare *Metaphysics*, IX. 6, 1048b18, *Nicomachean Ethics* X. 4, 1174b5 and *Physics* V. 1, 224b35–225a3.

Avoiding the dilemma

two kinds of activity

kinēsis is occurring, the relevant change has not yet reached the result towards which it is proceeding, and when the result is reached, the *kinēsis* itself is no longer extant.

In just this respect, *kinēsis* contrasts with another sort of actualization of a capacity, *energeia* (often translated as “activity” or “actuality”). An *energeia* is an actualization of a capacity “in which the end is present”: one whose existence does not consist in the unfolding of a process proceeding towards a certain result, but rather in a mode of active *being*, every moment of whose existence constitutes a moment of the completion of this activity.²⁹ Aristotle’s examples here are: seeing, understanding, thinking, living well, being happy. Each of these, he suggests, can be conceived as the actualization of a capacity, but these are actualizations which are complete at every moment of their occurrence, for “at the same time we are seeing and have seen, are understanding and have understood, are thinking and have thought, ... are living well and have lived well, are happy and have been happy” (1048b23–26).³⁰

Aristotle’s topic in drawing this distinction is the actualization of capacities, and he holds that some capacities are passive capacities to be determined by something, not active capacities to determine something.³¹ Various of his examples on each side of the *kinēsis-energeia* divide (*e.g.*, being healed, seeing) seem to be examples of

29. *Metaphysics* IX. 6, 1048b22. Translations quoted in the text are from Aristotle 1984.

30. Aristotle thus seems to imply that an actualization of a capacity is an *energeia* just if its ascription in a verb phrase with imperfective aspect implies its ascription to the same subject in a verb phrase with perfective aspect. Whether this test draws the contrast Aristotle wants is a matter of considerable controversy. For illuminating discussion of Aristotle’s meaning and the difficulties of translating his test into English, see Graham 1980 and Burnyeat 2008. My aim here is to avoid the controversy by treating the test only as diagnostic, not definitive: I think our understanding of the concept of *energeia* must draw on complex connections with the ideas of capacity, completion, etc., connections which cannot be captured in a simple grammatical test. My account of the *kinēsis-energeia* distinction is indebted to Kosman 1984 and 1994.

31. See *Metaphysics* IX. 1 1046a9–20. Aristotle gives a complex account of the distinction between active and passive capacities, applying this distinction in the first instance to capacities for *kinēsis*, and then extending it, in a modified sense, to *energeiai*. I will not discuss his views about this issue here.

being passively determined, not of active determination. This makes the bland term ‘actualizations’ more appropriate than the term ‘acts’ as a general label for his topic. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s distinction has a bearing on specifically active capacities. If his distinction is sound, then whatever account we give of the active-passive distinction, we should leave room for a form of actualization of an active capacity that is energetic in character: one that consists, not in bringing about a certain result, but in being in a certain condition.

What this could mean becomes clearer if we attend to Aristotle’s examples. Take “living well”. A human life well lived will involve the performance of many particular actions, but a person who is living well is in a condition that does not simply consist in the performance of any number of particular actions: he is, in the somewhat stilted idiom of Aristotle translation, “flourishing”. That he is in this condition can itself be regarded as the successful actualization of a high-level capacity he possesses, the capacity to organize his various particular pursuits in a way that constitutes a balanced human existence. The actualization of this capacity is not ordered to the production of some further end; flourishing is itself the end. But it is also by living in this way that the relevant end is achieved: a person sustains a flourishing existence precisely by organizing his various particular pursuits in such a manner. In this sense, living a flourishing life is an activity “in which the end is present”: it is an actualization of a capacity that takes the form, not of change toward a result whose realization completes the activity, but of a self-sustaining condition that is complete in itself. Moreover, it seems to be a kind of *actively* maintained condition: for though it is possible to flourish only if various external conditions are met, the primary ground of a person’s flourishing lies not in the obtaining of these conditions but in his capacity to govern himself.

Now, Aristotle himself suggests that thinking, knowing, and understanding are to be understood as *energeiai*.³² It would be rash to equate what Aristotle means by ‘thinking’, ‘knowing’, and ‘understanding’

32. Compare also the remark from *De Anima* I. 3 quoted at the head of this paper, and also *Physics* VII. 3, esp. 247b1–2.

with what we mean by these terms. Nevertheless, his classification is suggestive. It raises the possibility that the dilemma we seemed to face – either locate special acts of installing or modifying beliefs, or deny that we have the capacity for doxastic self-determination – results from a too-narrow conception of the forms that activity might take. Our rational powers might be actualized, not in events or processes of coming to believe something, but in “energetic” activities of holding rationally-grounded attitudes toward particular propositions.³³

5.3

With this possibility in mind, let us return to our observation that reasoning “P, so Q” normally puts a person in a position to know an explanation in which both explanandum and explanans are in the present tense:

(C) I believe Q because I believe P.

We have been trying to understand the shape that our acts of doxastic self-determination might take. Our recent reflections suggest that we might regard (C) as itself reporting such an act. A person of whom (C) is true is in a certain condition: he believes something on a certain basis. His being in this condition may be the outcome of conscious reasoning, but it need not be. Regardless – as we noted in §3.3 – we seem to treat his condition as self-determined, inasmuch as we expect him to be able to address the question why he holds the relevant belief, and hold him accountable for the cogency of his answer. This suggests that his **believing something on a certain basis is itself an active condition, the *energeia* of an active capacity to determine what he believes by assessing grounds for holding a given belief.** And I think further reflection on (C) bears this out. For (C) reports a connection in the subject’s view of things (1) which he is normally in a position to know through his capacity to reason, and (2) whose very existence depends

33. My use of “holding” to capture the active character of rational belief is indebted to Engstrom 2009 (pp. 103–4), which attributes to Kant a conception of the activity of reason quite similar to the one defended here. For a quite different invocation of a broadly Aristotelian notion of an active power to explicate the notion of rational self-determination, see Pink 2009.

“holding” as a technical term

on his normally being in a position to know it in this way. Let me say something about each of these points.

(1) A subject of whom (C) is true is normally in a position to know this through his capacity to reason. This is evident if we think of the subject’s arriving at knowledge of (C) by consciously asking himself whether Q and reasoning “P, so Q”. But even if (C) holds without the subject’s having deliberated, we expect the subject normally to be able to produce the relevant rationale if queried. A person who cannot cite P when asked why he believes Q apparently does not see a rational connection between P and Q. But then – unless he is in the sort of necessarily abnormal condition in which there is division between his reflective standpoint on how things are and his first-order beliefs – he does not presently believe that Q *because he believes that P*.

(2) The explanatory connection asserted by (C) is a kind of connection whose existence depends on the subject’s normally being in a position to know it to obtain through his capacity to reason. **For whether or not a person’s being in the condition expressed by (C) is the outcome of actual reasoning, his being in this condition has implications about how he would be disposed to reason if he reflected.** He must – at least in the necessarily normal case, in which there is not a division between his reflective standpoint and his first-order beliefs – be disposed to answer the question whether Q by appeal to P and its connection with Q. If he does not have such a disposition, then even if he believes P, this is not the explanation of his now believing Q, and in that case (C) is not true of him.

What these observations suggest, I think, is that **any normal case of a person’s believing something on a certain basis is, in a perfectly good sense, an *energeia* of her capacity for doxastic self-determination.**³⁴ For

34. I continue to use the word ‘normal’ to leave room for the possibility of beliefs that are not accessible to rational reflection. Although I will not defend the claim here, I think that even such beliefs, as beliefs of a rational creature, must be understood as acts of a capacity for doxastic self-determination, albeit ones that have not achieved full realization. For, I would argue, the capacity for belief in a rational creature just is the capacity actively to hold a belief, and so to explain what it is for a rational creature to believe something, we need to refer to what is the case when this capacity *is* fully actualized. This, I think,

her being in such a condition is an enduring actualization of her capacity to hold a proposition true for a reason she deems adequate. And this kind of condition is normally active, inasmuch as its obtaining normally depends on and thus manifests the subject's continuing acceptance of the rational correctness of its obtaining. **Whereas a person who is in pain, e.g., is in a state that holds whether or not she endorses her being in this state, a person's believing P because she believes Q is a condition whose obtaining normally depends on her taking Q to be a proposition that is true, and thus correct to believe, on the ground that P. Her condition is thus active or self-determined in an intelligible sense: its ground lies in her accepting the rational correctness of this very condition.**³⁵ This act of accepting is not, however, an act she performs to produce a grounded belief in herself; it is the very fact in which her having a grounded belief consists. The relationship between her belief and her sense of what there is reason to believe is brought to the forefront of her attention when she consciously considers whether Q, but it is present, not merely potentially but actually, even when she does not reflect.

Once we allow that a person may be active in holding a belief on a certain basis, moreover, the same sorts of considerations recommend taking the condition of belief itself to be an actualization of her capacity for doxastic self-determination, even when the subject does not have some specific ground for holding the belief in question.³⁶ For

is just an instance of a general fact about how capacities and their acts must be characterized: cases of successful actualization are conceptually prior to cases of failed actualization, however common the latter may be.

35. The notion of self-determination invoked here obviously needs further discussion. My aim has simply been to suggest that, whatever the details of our account of what makes something an active capacity, there is no reason why all such capacities must be ones whose actualization takes the form of *kinēsis*.
36. **If the term "belief" is reserved for acts of a capacity for doxastic self-determination, then in this sense, only rational animals can have beliefs. This is not to deny, and it is no part of my agenda to dispute, that nonrational animals can have beliefs in a closely related sense. It is simply to propose that belief in a rational animal actualizes a richer sort of cognitive capacity than it does in a nonrational animal.** For more on this issue, see Boyle forthcoming (2).

even if a person has no specific ground for a given belief, still her holding this belief will involve her being persuaded that it is true and thus correct to believe — perhaps simply because she assumes that it is a bit of information she has acquired and retained in memory, although she does not remember the occasion of her acquiring it or the grounds that originally persuaded her. Even in this sort of case, her belief will rest on general convictions about her cognitive powers (to acquire and retain information) and will be only as stable as her confidence in those convictions. It will thus still be, in a perfectly good sense, a rationally self-determined condition. So we can say, in general, that a rational subject's believing what she does is itself her enduring act of holding it true.

These observations help us to see the point in the Aristotelian claim quoted at the head of this paper, according to which belief "implies conviction, conviction implies being persuaded, and persuasion implies reason." The claim that belief implies being persuaded would be absurd if it meant that every belief must be the outcome of a process of consciously becoming persuaded; but our discussion has equipped us to see that it need imply no such thing. The point is this: **for a rational subject to believe something is for him to have his power to be persuaded by reasons actualized in a present and persisting act — where an act in this sense is not a species of event or process but an act of an altogether different type, whose structure we have been seeking to specify.**

5.4

To accept this re-conception of the primary act of doxastic self-determination does not require us to deny that there are self-determined activities of consciously deliberating and judging. There is plainly such a thing as consciously seeking to determine whether P, an activity that may conclude with one's consciously thinking to oneself: Yes, P. These activities — intentionally seeking out grounds that enable one to determine whether P, and consciously expressing to oneself the answer one accepts — are ones in which a person can normally engage at her discretion, and in this respect, they are similar to the tangible acts of

discussing aloud whether P and asserting: Yes, P. Nothing I have said should be taken to denigrate the importance of our ability to engage in such activities. It seems likely that this ability is a crucial precondition of our capacity to govern our doxastic state in the special sense that authors like Korsgaard and McDowell highlight (§1.1).³⁷ But although this ability may be a precondition of the capacity for doxastic self-determination, appealing to it does not by itself account for the basic form of agency we exercise over our beliefs: our power, not merely to put ourselves in circumstance in which our capacity for doxastic assessment is brought into operation, nor again to express to ourselves our answer to some question, but actually to determine what answer we accept.

I have argued that the latter agency is actualized, not primarily in our deliberating or consciously judging, but in our holding the beliefs we do. If we accept this, we do not lose our entitlement to hold that rational believers are capable of a special sort of cognitive self-determination. On the contrary, it is precisely through accepting this idea that we put ourselves in a position to make sense of the relevant self-determination. Our problem (§1.2) was that the idea of such self-determination seemed dark on reflection, and that our initial temptation — to explain what it is to make up one's mind by positing some activity that brings it about that one's mind is made up — gave rise to a series of difficulties (§§3.3, 3.5, 3.6). But if holding a belief might itself be an "energetic" act of rational self-determination, we avoid the difficulties. The relevant agency is at work not primarily in the installation or modification of beliefs, but in the kind of believing characteristic of rational creatures as such. This believing is self-determined, not in virtue of some precedent process or event, but by being the special kind of self-affirmed condition that it is.³⁸

37. One merit I would claim for our discussion is that it enables us to see that there is a real topic for investigation here: exactly how does our capacity for conscious thought contribute to our being the sorts of creatures who do not merely have but hold beliefs?

38. This paper has been in the works a long time, and I am indebted to many people for comments and advice: Alp Aker, Phil Clarke, Jim Conant, David

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