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# Kant on Doxastic Voluntarism and its Implications for Epistemic Responsibility<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper shows that Kant’s account of cognition can be used to defend epistemic responsibility against the double threat of either being committed to implausible versions of doxastic voluntarism, or failing to account for a sufficiently robust connection between the will and belief. Whilst we have no direct control over our beliefs, we have two forms of indirect doxastic control that are sufficient to ground epistemic responsibility. It is because we have direct control over our capacity to judge as well as the epistemic principles that govern belief-acquisition that we have indirect control over the beliefs we thereby acquire.

## Introduction

Contemporary discussions of epistemic responsibility have concentrated primarily on the question of the voluntariness of belief, and a popular way of tackling it is to think about belief analogically with action. As Audi writes, “Belief is profoundly analogous to action. Both are commonly grounded in reasons; both are a basis for praising or blaming the subject; both are sensitive to changes in one’s environment; both can appropriately be described as objects of decision and deliberation, and beliefs can appear quite action-like when conceived as formed by assent or by acceptance” (Audi (2001, 93)). However, **is the analogy between belief and action sufficiently sound to support the claim that we are responsible for our beliefs just as we are responsible for our actions?** Since it is often assumed that we can only be blameworthy for actions performed voluntarily, we need to have some voluntary control over our beliefs in order to be blamed

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<sup>1</sup> Insofar as the following works by Kant are cited frequently, I have identified them by these abbreviations: *A*: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, *CJ*: *Critique of Judgement*, *CPR*: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *CPrR*: *Critique of Practical Reason*, *LL*: *Lectures on Logic*. For the sake of clarity in the references to Kant’s writings, I have chosen to use titles rather than the author/date system. I have also included a citation to the English translation in parentheses, followed by a citation to the German text of Kant, Immanuel (1900 ff.): *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. königlich preußische (later German) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin (AA, volume and page reference) in brackets.

for holding them.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, the very possibility of epistemic responsibility is at risk.

Most contemporary philosophers want to hang on to the claim that we can be blamed for at least some of our beliefs, and yet they struggle to account for this possibility given the nature of human cognition. For they commonly believe that by contrast with actions, much if not all of our beliefs are beyond the realm of direct voluntary control.<sup>3</sup> Many settle instead on what they call “indirect doxastic voluntarism”, which claims that we can bring about certain beliefs if we choose to perform a number of intermediate actions, for instance by doing research or gathering evidence. However, it is unclear that this kind of indirect control is sufficient to account for the possibility of epistemic responsibility, especially in light of the fact that in these cases, the will’s connection to belief is somewhat remote.

The aim of this paper is to show that Kant’s account of cognition can be used to defend epistemic responsibility against the double threat of either being committed to implausible versions of doxastic voluntarism, or failing to account for a sufficiently robust connection between the will and belief. There are two reasons why Kant is a particularly good candidate for this task.<sup>4</sup> First, he sets up the problem of doxastic voluntarism in terms that are very similar to its contemporary formulation.

It is customary to use the expressions, *to agree with someone’s judgment*, *to reserve*, *to defer*, or *to give up one’s judgment*. These and similar expressions seem to indicate that there is something arbitrary in our judging, in that we hold something to be true because we want to hold it to be true. The question arises, accordingly, *whether willing has an influence on our judgments*. (LL, 577 [AA 9:73])

<sup>2</sup> As Alston notes, epistemic responsibility “is viable only if beliefs are sufficiently under voluntary control to render such concepts as *requirement*, *permission*, *obligation*, *reproach*, and *blame* applicable to them.” (Alston 1988, 259).

<sup>3</sup> See Shah (2002, 436). For traditional arguments against direct doxastic voluntarism, see Williams (1973).

<sup>4</sup> Kant is also often referred to in this context on account of the postulates of practical reason, which are cases of beliefs that are voluntarily acquired despite the fact that they can never be susceptible of evidential support (CPrR, 238 [AA 5:122]). They are posited on the basis that (1) they fulfil a need of practical reason (based on the command of duty), and (2) theoretical reason cannot prove their impossibility. See Wood (2002, chapter 3) for an enlightening discussion of Kant’s position on rational faith. For a useful discussion of *Glaube* in this context, see Chignell (2007a). This paper focuses solely on the acquisition of empirical beliefs, beliefs that are always, at least in principle, susceptible of evidential support.

Second, and more importantly, he is committed to the two claims that make the idea of epistemic responsibility so problematic. On the one hand, he treats as obvious the fact that we are responsible for, and can be blamed for, our beliefs: “we can of course blame someone who has given approval to a false cognition” (LL, 126 [AA 24:160]). However, he is also adamant in his denial of the possibility of a direct influence of the will on belief, deeming it absurd.

The will does not have any influence immediately on holding-to-be-true; this would be quite absurd. [...] the will cannot struggle *against* convincing proofs of truths that are contrary to its wishes and inclinations. (LL, 577 [AA 9:74])<sup>5</sup>

So Kant must either renounce the possibility of blaming someone for their beliefs, or account for the possibility of some kind of influence of the will on them. I will argue that he chooses the latter option in a way that avoids the pitfalls faced by contemporary versions of doxastic voluntarism whilst maintaining a sufficiently robust connection between the will and belief. More precisely, I will show that he allows for two forms of indirect influence of the will on belief, one positive and the other negative, and that together, they are sufficient to account for the fact that we are epistemically responsible for our beliefs.

## 1 Indirect negative doxastic control: The capacity to judge and doubt

As reflected in contemporary debates on doxastic voluntarism, there is a clear distinction between direct doxastic control, where a belief is brought about directly by the will, and indirect doxastic control, where a belief is brought about indirectly by doing something other than merely willing. Whilst the former is at best controversial, there is a wide consensus amongst contemporary philosophers that we have indirect control of our beliefs both when we have control over, and when we can choose to seek out, the evidence confirming or disconfirming them.<sup>6</sup> For instance, as Alston argues, we do “have voluntary control over whether to keep looking for evidence or reasons, and voluntary control over where to look and what steps to take” (Alston 1989, 130). There is no

<sup>5</sup> See also “In most cases, such a procedure of giving our approval, or withdrawing it, or holding it back[,] does not rest at all on our free choice, but rather is necessitated through and by the laws of our understanding and our reason.” (LL, 123 [AA 24:156]).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the distinction between direct and indirect voluntary control over belief formation, see [Pojman \(1986\)](#) and [Clarke \(1986\)](#).

Direct  
vs.  
Indirect  
control

doubt that Kant would agree with this claim, for “[h]olding-to-be-true pertains to the understanding, but investigation to the faculty of choice.” (LL, 471 [AA 24:736])<sup>7</sup> The will determines whether to investigate a matter, how deep, for how long, what method to adopt, which direction the inquiry takes, when we are satisfied with the results, and so on. In this respect, acquiring beliefs entails the same processes as acting, whether it is deliberating, weighing up options, or selecting between these options the one that is best suited to our end. These acts of will are clear and uncontroversial cases of indirect doxastic control, as is often argued in the literature and as Kant himself notes:

[A]lthough approval does not depend *immediate* on men’s choice, it nevertheless often does depend on it *indirecte, mediate*ly, since it is according to one’s free wish that he seeks out those grounds that could in any way bring about approval for this or that cognition [...] it still requires closer direction of choice, will, wish, or in general of our free will, toward the grounds of proof. (LL, 124–5 [AA 24:158])<sup>8</sup>

Insofar as the investigative process (or lack thereof) is led by the will, we are evidently responsible for it: “[W]hen one judges and accepts something before investigation [...], then this is in fact a punishable prejudice” (LL, 130 [AA 24:165]). However in this case, the role of the will is at best instrumental to the understanding’s acquisition of belief:

Insofar as the will either impels the understanding toward inquiry into a truth or holds it back therefrom, however, one must grant it an influence on the *use of the understanding* (LL, 577 [AA 9:74]).

The investigative process this voluntary control initiates merely changes the cognitive state of the understanding. Yet as is often pointed out, in order to ground doxastic responsibility – even of the indirect form –, we need a more robust connection between the will and belief.<sup>9</sup> This paper will argue that Kant allows for two such forms of indirect influence of the will on belief, one negative and the other positive, and that together, they are sufficient to account for the possibility of epistemic responsibility. This section will focus on the former.

The indirect negative control we have over our beliefs occurs at the level of judgment and our capacity to control and withhold it: “In *suspensio iudicii* there

*Does control just amount to the ability to withhold?*

<sup>7</sup> See also “*Judicia reflectentia* are those which introduce investigation, which show (i.) whether a matter needs investigation, (2.) how I ought to investigate a matter.” (LL, 473 [AA 24:737]).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Feldman (2001).

<sup>9</sup> See for instance Burge (1995) or Moran (2000).

*Doing & refraining*

lies some freedom.” (LL, 471 [AA 24:736])<sup>10</sup> Kant calls it a form of freedom because it is the capacity to resist the influence of the inclinations upon judgment, a capacity akin to the will’s independence from the determination of desires – what he sometimes calls the “culture of discipline”.<sup>11</sup> To elucidate the role of inclinations *vis-à-vis* judgment, it is helpful to think of it analogously with their role in moral deliberation.

Famously for Kant, affective dispositions including feelings, passions, emotions and inclinations are intrinsically at odds with morality. First, they ought not be used as grounds of moral motivation, for they always give rise to heteronomy. And second, they interfere with moral deliberation, often making it hard for agents to determine what is right and act on it.<sup>12</sup> In the following passage, Kant draws an analogy between the cause of moral vice and that of false beliefs, thereby suggesting that just as they hinder morality, inclinations hinder cognition:

Deviation from the rules of the pure will constitutes the morally evil, and this arises only when and because other effects of other powers mingle with the otherwise pure laws of the will. E.g.: The inclinations and affects. Just in this way, when foreign powers mingle with the correct laws of the understanding, a mixed effect arises, and error arises from the conflict of [this with] our judgments based on the laws of the understanding and of reason. (LL, 79 [AA 24:102])

Insofar as they are “foreign powers”, inclinations are the cause of our errors.<sup>13</sup> First, they interfere with the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties and

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**10** For a contemporary Kantian version of this claim, see McDowell: “the realm of freedom, at least the realm of freedom of judging, can be identified with the space of reasons” (McDowell (1998, 434). Note that the freedom of the power of judgment needs to be distinguished from the freedom of the faculty of thought: “To be able to abstract from a representation, even when the senses force it on a person, is a far greater faculty than that of paying attention to a representation, because it demonstrates a freedom of the faculty of thought and the authority of the mind, in having the object of one’s representations under one’s control (*animus sui compos*).” (A, 243 [AA 7:131]) The latter is purely internal to our cognitive capacities (i.e., it remains within the realm of representation), whilst the former does not insofar as it involves inclinations.

**11** The culture of discipline “is negative and consists in the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires, a despotism that rivets us to certain natural things and renders us unable to do our own selecting” (CJ, 319 [AA 5:432]).

**12** See for instance *Groundwork*, 53 [AA 4:398] and *CPrR*, 261 [AA 5:151].

**13** See also “One of the most outstanding causes, however, that very frequently misleads man into making a false judgment, or even into an error, is the *affects*.” (LL, 126 [AA 24:159–60]) As Stevenson puts it, Kant “can be interpreted as saying that only a belief can be a reason for a belief, i.e. that justification cannot extend outside the space of reasons.” (Stevenson 2004, 243).

thereby hinder the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Second, they preclude thorough epistemic investigations by giving us an unwarranted feeling of certainty and thereby corrupting our cognitive diligence.<sup>15</sup> Finally, they prompt us to adopt beliefs on illegitimate grounds, for instance because they suit our taste or our wishes.<sup>16</sup> The inclinations are thus an illness of the mind, at least as far as cognition is concerned. They produce illusions, unwarranted beliefs, and false cognitions; they give rise to illegitimate epistemic procedures: wishful thinking, unreliable grounds, warped standards, bias and partiality. They interfere with, misguide, and distort the operations of our cognitive faculties in their pursuit of knowledge:

Many a judgment is accepted out of habit or connected through inclination: but since no reflection preceded or at least critically succeeded it, it is [taken to be] one that has received its origin in the understanding. (*CPR*, 366 [A 261/B 317]; transition modified)

However, crucially, just as the influence of desires on the will, **inclinations do not have a direct causal effect on judgment**. Since they affect us but do not determine us, if they impede, intrude upon or bypass cognitive processes, it is because we let them. Because of our failure to control them, the inclinations weigh on judgment in such a way that approval is immediately given on a subjective rather than an objective basis. The mind becomes passive, and therefore un-free, through a mechanism that leads it to produce unwarranted judgments for which we are responsible:

[T]he responsibility for error we have to assign to ourselves. [...] We are misled into this by our own inclination to judge and to decide even where, on account of our limitedness, we are not able to judge and to decide. (*LL*, 561 [AA 9:54])

Our mind thus has the capacity to resist the influence of the inclinations and withhold judgment until we have reached objective certainty.

⇒ choice is downstream from the causal source requirement

**14** For instance “Through these [inclinations] we are transposed into a condition most unsuitable for judging.” (*LL*, 297 [AA 24:842]) “Everything that stimulates and excites us serves to disadvantage our power of judgment.” (*LL*, 44 [AA 24:60]).

**15** For instance, “In young minds this inclination to accept the seeming as true is so great that they find it very hard to withhold their judgment.” (*LL*, 312 [AA 24:860]).

**16** For instance, “[I]nclination occasions us always to undertake examinations and investigations only from one side, and of course only from the side where we wish that it were so and not otherwise, and thus it occasions us to leave the other side, which might perhaps provide us with grounds for the opposite, completely uninvestigated.” (*LL*, 131–2 [AA 24:167]).

the role of inclination in unwarranted judgment

This view misdiagnoses the relevant notion of control in terms of choice rather than source guidance

objection
 However, whilst we may be able to withhold judgment in cases when evidence is wanting or we lack a sufficient degree of certainty, one could object that we are unable to do so when propositions are either obviously false or obviously true. In these cases, it seems that we do not have a choice between withholding judgment and adopting the belief, for our capacity to judge is determined directly by our cognitive state. If this is correct, it would entail that since we have no control over judgment, we cannot be held responsible for the beliefs we thereby acquire.<sup>17</sup> Kant actually alludes to this view when he distinguishes between cases where “approval does not arise immediately through the nature of the human understanding and of human reason”, and cases where it does (*LL*, 125 [AA 24:158]). In the former cases, judgment is withheld and the will is called upon to orient the inquiry. But in the latter cases, not only is the will not called upon, judgment is immediate and “it is always very hard, if not utterly impossible, to withhold one’s approval.” (*LL*, 124 [AA 24:158]) Does it entail that in these cases, we have no control over our judgments and thus cannot be blamed for the beliefs they give rise to?

reply
 Far from it, since Kant also believes that owing to our capacity to doubt, we are able to suspend belief whenever necessary, even in cases where the faculty of judgment is immediately triggered by our cognitive state.<sup>18</sup> This capacity can take two forms. The first one, “universal or absolute scepticism”, consists in “the maxim that cognitions are to be treated with the intention of making them uncertain and showing the impossibility of attaining certainty.” (*LL*, 585 [AA 9:83–4])<sup>19</sup> The second one is called the “skeptical method”. It is

[...] useful and purposeful, provided one understands nothing more by this than the way of treating something as uncertain and of bringing it to the highest uncertainty, in the hope of getting on the trail of truth in this way. This method is thus really a mere suspension of judging. (*LL*, 585 [AA 9:83–4])

Whilst the former is cognitively destructive, the latter enables us to choose whether to judge that a proposition is true, particularly in cases when we have

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**17** For instance, according to Alston, our beliefs are determined by evidence and thus we are unable to control them in the following cases: first, we cannot choose to believe propositions that are obviously false; second, we cannot help but believe propositions that are obviously true; and third, where evidence is not decisive, we are compelled to believe the proposition that seems most likely (Alston 1988, 263–6).

**18** For a similar claim in the context of contemporary debates, see Frederick (forthcoming, 6–7).

**19** As Kant notes, universal “scepticism, by renouncing all assertoric cognition, ruins all our efforts at attaining possession of a cognition of the *certain*.” (*LL*, 585 [AA 9:83–4]).

a natural tendency to do so. It is a tool we can use to oppose our prejudices and thereby adopt a prudential attitude towards our beliefs: “It is certainly really prudent, therefore, to know how to withhold one’s approval in most cases, until one has enough grounds for the thing.” (LL, 126 [AA 24:160])<sup>20</sup> The sceptical method is thus the means to gain further voluntary control over the acquisition of many of our beliefs, even in cases where evidence pushes us in a particular direction. It enables us to remain in doubt until we are satisfied that we have reached the highest degree of certainty, in which case we can opt to dismiss it and adopt the belief in question:

*Doubt* is an opposing ground or a mere obstacle to holding-to-be-true, which can be considered either *subjectively* or *objectively*. Doubt is sometimes taken *subjectively*, namely, as a condition of an undecided mind, and *objectively* as cognition of the insufficiency of the grounds for holding-to-be-true. (LL, 584 [AA 9:83])

In this sense, we have the capacity to either withhold judgment or make a provisional one until further evidence is available, and this is meant to be sufficient to account for the possibility of epistemic responsibility over all of our judgments.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, one may question whether this argument can successfully address the original worries about doxastic voluntarism. For if Kant simply asserts that we always have the power to withhold judgment even when the evidence is conclusive, it is precisely the kind of claim that critics of doxastic voluntarism see as questionable.<sup>22</sup> However, whilst Kant does argue that judgment can always be suspended, this claim should not be mistaken for the claim that it is free to do so at will or even that the will can do so at will, since it has no direct control

<sup>20</sup> See also “Skill in provisional judgments is a kind of prudence.” (LL, 473 [AA 24:737]).

<sup>21</sup> Needless to say, Kant notes that the capacities to judge and to doubt need to be practiced and cultivated, for it “is extremely hard on account of the fact that the inclination toward immediate judgment of the understanding interferes.” (LL, 471–2 [AA 24:736]; see also LL, 312 [AA 24:860]) Affects need to be kept in check so that our approval is not rushed and all the steps necessary to a warranted judgment are covered: “[R]eally learned people, and philosophers, can keep a tight rein on their affects, so that they are not easily taken by a thing without first having sufficient grounds. Instead they weigh everything that they take as *objectum* of their considerations cold-bloodedly, that is, with calm mind” (LL, 129 [AA 24:163–4]).

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Williams’ “Classic Argument” against direct doxastic voluntarism: “With regard to no belief could I know—or, if all this is to be done in full consciousness, even suspect—that I had acquired it at will. But if I can acquire beliefs at will, I must know that I am able to do this; and could I know that I was capable of this feat, if with regard to every feat of this kind which I had performed I necessarily had to believe that it had not taken place?” (Williams 1973, 148).

Williams' argument



over judgment.<sup>23</sup> Instead of asserting the existence of a power, he expounds a sceptical “method” (*LL*, 585 [AA 9:83–4]) that enables us to gain indirect control over judgment. Thus, contrary to what the expression “freedom of judgment” may suggest, judgment is not free as such; in and of itself, it has no power of choice over its operations. Rather, Kant’s claim is that it can be withheld if the epistemic environment necessary for doubt is created by using the tools provided by the sceptical method.<sup>24</sup>

Whilst as already noted, this cognitive control over judgment is both indirect and negative, it is sufficient to ground the first part of Kant’s claim that we are epistemically responsible for our beliefs – what could be called “false-belief-elimination”.<sup>25</sup> Insofar as it consists in resisting the push of inclinations and suspending judgment, it is solely concerned with purging cognition from foreign powers and withholding unwarranted judgments. In the following section, I turn to the issue of belief-formation and discuss the positive control we have over it.

## 2 Indirect positive doxastic control: Epistemic maxims

The indirect positive control we have over our beliefs occurs at the level of epistemic principles. For we need rules to correct our ways of thinking and guide us in our pursuit of knowledge: “the issue here is not the faculty of cognition, but the way of thinking needed to make a purposive use of it” (*CJ*, 175 [AA 5:295]). What Kant has in mind is the *sensus communis* that guides knowledge acquisition in order to “avoid[...] error in general” (*LL*, 563 [AA 9:57]). It consists in three “maxims of common understanding” that spell out “universal” rules (*CJ*, 174 [AA 5:294]): first, to think for oneself: “The maxim of thinking for oneself can be called the *enlightened mode of thought*”; second, to think oneself in the

<sup>23</sup> Contrast with Peacocke’s claim that “judgements are in fact actions” so that coming to form a belief is also standardly a matter of action (Peacocke 1999, 19–20) or McDowell’s claim that “Judging, making up one’s mind what to think, is something for which we are, in principle, responsible – something we freely do, as opposed to something that merely happens in our lives.” (McDowell 1998, 434).

<sup>24</sup> Note that this claim should not be confused with Kant’s claim that we have the capacity to resist the influence of the inclinations upon judgment. Whilst the latter is indeed a form of freedom of judgment – a freedom “from”, I have suggested that the former is not.

<sup>25</sup> As Audi agrees, “indirect control of belief formation, even just indirect *negative* control, is enough to ground *doxastic responsibility*.” (Audi 2008, 404).

Epistemic principles to correct & guide thinking

position of everyone else: “the maxim of putting oneself in the viewpoint of others in thought, the *extended mode of thought*”; and third, to always think consistently with oneself: “the maxim of always thinking in agreement with one self, the *consequent or coherent mode of thought*.”<sup>26</sup> These maxims are epistemic principles whose role is to guide the reflective attitude we should adopt upon belief-acquisition and cognitive procedures more generally. Whilst I cannot discuss the content of these maxims here, what is crucial for the purpose of my argument is their function within cognition.<sup>27</sup> As I will show, by effectively playing the role of epistemic norms, they delineate the domain of epistemic responsibility.

The best way of understanding the function of these maxims is to define them as second-order principles that guide belief-acquisition and the use of our cognitive faculties more generally. Insofar as they spell out the principles according to which we should form our beliefs in order to avoid error, choosing to follow them amounts to acknowledging the demands of judgment.<sup>28</sup> They express the normative requirements of judgment, and in this sense they are part of what acquiring a belief is, or at least should be: they are intrinsic to belief-acquisition.<sup>29</sup> To make sense of this claim, let us contrast it with extrinsic forms of control of the will such as the one discussed at the beginning of section 1.

When Kant writes that “Insofar as the will either impels the understanding toward inquiry into a truth or holds it back therefrom, however, one must grant it an influence on the *use of the understanding*” (*LL*, 577 [AA 9:74]), this voluntary control is extrinsic or what I would like to call “indirect-as-means-to-believe”. For as already suggested, the investigative process it initiates merely changes the cognitive state of the understanding. Yet in order to ground doxastic respon-

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<sup>26</sup> All quoted from *LL*, 563 [AA 9:57]. See also *CJ*, 174–5 [AA 5:294–5] and *A*, 333 [AA 7:228]. As Kant notes, “A maxim means a subjective principle. An objective one is called a principle. A rule that the subject makes his principle is called a maxim.” (*LL*, 473 [AA 24:738]).

<sup>27</sup> For a thorough discussion of the content of these maxims, see McBay Merritt (2011, section 2), Wood (2002, 103), and O’Neill (1989, chapters 1–2).

<sup>28</sup> For a contemporary version of this claim, see Burge: “~~One must be susceptible to the force and implement normative evaluations in guiding thought and other acts that fall under such those evaluation and (to understand reasoning), one must regard reasons as effective in one’s judgements. Doing so amounts to acknowledgement of one agency [...] in recognizing the effect of reasons on one’s judgements and inference, one cannot think of oneself as powerless~~” (Burge 1995, 252). In this sense, the ability to attend to one’s principles of judgment through reflection in order to control our beliefs is sufficient to affect what one believes in the sense required for epistemic agency and responsibility.

<sup>29</sup> For a slightly different formulation of the same claim, see McBay Merritt: “The maxims [of common human understanding] articulate aspects of the self-recognition that is internal to the practice of judgment” (McBay Merritt 2009, 1009).

sibility, we need a more robust connection between the will and belief, a connection that is not extrinsic but rather “indirect-as-constitutive-of-believing”, a form of indirect control that is intrinsic to the acquisition of belief.<sup>30</sup> Then again one may question whether there can really be more than a merely extrinsic connection between the maxims of judgment and the beliefs they are meant to regulate. For, if maxims play a normative role so that belief-acquisition *should* follow the epistemic method they spell out, in what sense can they be constitutive of it?

On my interpretation of Kant’s account, maxims can be both constitutive of belief-acquisition and normative. They are constitutive of it insofar as they spell out a process that aims at the truth of the belief it gives rise to. And they are normative since this process is merely regulated by norms ~~that~~ that guide it. In this sense, the will can choose whether the faculty of judgment follows the right epistemic norms. But the fact that these norms are constitutive of belief-acquisition does not entail that we cannot choose to fail to meet them.<sup>31</sup> As a result, insofar as this capacity enables us to control indirectly the acquisition of our beliefs, it is sufficient to affect what we believe in the sense required to secure the second, positive part of Kant’s claim that we are epistemically responsible for our beliefs.

However, one may wonder why belief-acquisition is better than belief in order to support indirect doxastic responsibility. Is this distinction sufficient to

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**30** To formulate it in terms ~~of contemporary debates~~, to be constitutively or intrinsically epistemic, constitutive reasons for believing are reasons that bear directly on the question whether P is true. Extrinsic reasons are reasons that one has to believe that P independently of whether P is true or justified, and that bear on the question of what kind of state of affairs one can bring about to make it the case that one believes that P. For an account of this distinction, see Bennett (1990) and more recently Owens (2000) and Shah (2003).

**31** Korsgaard provides a helpful illustration of this claim, for in this respect, judgment does not differ from other kinds of aim-constituted activities: “The shoddy builder doesn’t follow a different set of standards or norms. He may be doing one of two things. He may be following the norms, but carelessly, inattentively, choosing second-rate materials in a random way, sealing the corners imperfectly, adding insufficient insulation, and so on. But he may also, if he is dishonest, be doing this sort of thing quite consciously, say in order to save money. In that case, surely we can’t say he is trying to build a good house? No, but now I think we should say that he is not trying to build a house at all, but rather a sort of plausible imitation of a house, one he can pass off as the real thing. What guides him is not the aim of producing a house, but the aim of producing something that will fetch the price of a house, sufficiently like a real house that he can’t be sued afterward.” (Korsgaard 2009, 31). Hence, you cannot intend to build a house arbitrarily – that is, without regard to whether the structure you are building can provide shelter. But of course this obstacle to arbitrarily building a house does not entail that you cannot deliberate about whether or how to build a house. See also Shah and Velleman: “there is only one way of deliberating whether to judge that *p*, but there being only one way of deliberating about judgment cannot entail that there is no way at all.” (Shah & Velleman 2005, 505).

make room for the possibility of a positive control over our beliefs? Belief-acquisition is under our voluntary control, contrary to beliefs themselves, because on Kant's account, it requires the activity of judgment. This is crucial because as already argued, we have indirect control over our faculty of judgment through the will and its choice of maxims.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, on the Kantian model I have put forward, the analogy between the ethics of belief and the ethics of action turns out to be misleading, for as many contemporary philosophers are keen to point out, believing is indeed unlike acting.<sup>33</sup> However, crucially, *acquiring a belief* is like acting insofar as they are both guided by maxims that are under our direct voluntary control. This entails that we need to shift our focus from beliefs themselves to the principles that govern them. For, just as we deliberate over moral maxims rather than actions themselves, we deliberate over our epistemic maxims rather than beliefs themselves.<sup>34</sup>

In this respect, it is interesting to note that a number of Kantian-inspired contemporary defences of indirect doxastic voluntarism reject the claim that reflective control over our beliefs is the product of an intention or a choice. Rather, they argue that it is a passive attitude that does not involve any higher-order reflective judgment, thereby abandoning what I believe to be an essential part of Kant's account.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, insofar as the interpretation I defend here stress-

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**32** As Chignell has convincingly argued, "In contemporary discussions, the fundamental attitude is assumed to be belief. For Kant (as for Locke, Leibniz, and some others in the early modern tradition), the attitude is *Fürwahrhalten*—"assent" or, literally, "holding-for-true." Assent for these writers is the genus of which most other positive propositional attitudes (opining, having faith in, knowing, and the like) are species. Kant doesn't have an exact equivalent of our contemporary concept of belief, but if he did that concept would also fit under the genus of assent." (Chignell 2007b, 34). For a contemporary version of this claim, see Shah and Velleman "A judgment is a cognitive mental act of affirming a proposition (although, as we shall explain, not all affirmations are judgments). It is an act because it involves occurrently presenting a proposition, or putting it forward in the mind; and it is cognitive because it involves presenting the proposition as true—or, as we have said, affirming it. A belief, by contrast, is a mental state of representing a proposition as true, a cognitive attitude rather than a cognitive act." (Shah & Velleman 2005, 503).

**33** For instance, as Pojman argues, contrary to acting, since acquiring a belief is typically a happening where the world forces itself on a subject, it is not typically something a subject does or chooses (Pojman 1999, 576–9).

**34** As O'Neill puts it, "precisely because it applies to intentions or principles, a universality test [...] cannot generally provide a test of the rightness or wrongness of the specific outward aspects of action. [...] [It] is, above all, a test of the mutual consistency of (sets of) intentions and universalized intentions or principles." (O'Neill 1989, 103).

**35** See for instance Hieronymi (2008, 360). She insists that our attending to the reasons which "bear upon a question" that we "settle" does not involve any higher-order reflective judgment as

es the voluntary nature of the reflective process that guides belief-acquisition, not only is it markedly different from its contemporary counterparts, it provides more robust grounds for epistemic responsibility. For instance, it can be used to counter Scott-Kakures' claim that since acquiring beliefs is by its very nature *not* the kind of act that can be guided and monitored by an intention, in contrast to acting, it is not under our voluntary control (Scott-Kakures 1994, 95–6). As I have argued, whilst this is correct of *believing*, it is not correct of *acquiring* beliefs, for it is precisely the kind of process that is guided by an epistemic maxim – the cognitive equivalent of an intention.

However, one could object that by defining belief-acquisition as a process guided by a maxim, Kant's account ends up proving too much. For it seems to entail that we are responsible for our beliefs only if we are actually aware of the epistemic principles that govern their acquisition. Yet in many if not most cases, we do not in fact attend to the norms that guide our cognitive endeavours and thus fail to demonstrate any such reflective awareness, which puts into question the responsibility we have over most of our beliefs.<sup>36</sup>

Once again the analogy with moral deliberation can be useful to address this objection. According to Kant, we do not, nor should we, reflect on our moral maxims every single time we act. Rather, we select general principles of action that we then spontaneously apply to the situations we find ourselves in. These principles have been reflected upon and adopted on the basis of reasons for

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whether the proposition believed conforms to certain standards. The agent simply arrives at the judgement in the first-personal mode, but not through an intermediary mental state: "The appeal to "settling the question" is not meant to introduce a new mental state or event. By "settling the question" I do not mean, e.g consciously entertaining the question. The mental state or event that corresponds to settling the question whether P is nothing over and above than believing P. The claim simply makes explicit the uncontroversial conceptual connection between believing P and a positive answer to a certain question – whether P. Insofar as one agrees that one's belief represents the world as one takes it to be, and that the question whether P asks whether the world is as P would have it, then one should have no trouble with the claim that to believe that P is to have settled for oneself the question of whether P." (Hieronymi 2008, 360).

**36** See for instance Engel: "It seems here that the Kantian view confuses two things: being actually an agent in control of one's beliefs, and the necessary conditions for such a control. If epistemic agency is to be conceived upon the model of moral agency, the reflective condition on reasons which the Kantian emphasises is indeed justified. But it is at best a necessary, and certainly not a sufficient, condition in the epistemic case, that agents are aware of their reasons for believing and capable of reflection. Indeed it seems that in many cases one can be sensitive to reasons without being necessarily aware of them." (Engel 2009, 213). Note that the Kantian view Engel has in mind here are those of Hieronymi and Moran. In this sense, they differ in some respect from the view defended here, although not in a way that is relevant to the particular objection discussed here.

which we are answerable. But once these are settled, we do not need to repeat the reflective process every single time we act on them.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, whilst the routine task of judgment is one of applying general principles to particular cases, the moral maxims we have adopted reflectively simply play a background role in our everyday moral life.<sup>38</sup> But instead of entailing that we are not responsible for our everyday choices, this account locates the primary burden of responsibility at the level of the choice of principles rather than the level of their routine use.

The same is true of epistemic deliberation. Kant's account of the role of epistemic maxims does not imply that conscious reflection upon them is necessary for the acquisition of every single belief: "For common cognition it is not necessary that we be conscious of these rules and reflect on them. If we were to do that we would lose very much." (*LL*, 15 [AA 24:27])<sup>39</sup> Rather, it is only necessary for complex or uncertain beliefs – what he sometimes calls learned cognition: "if our understanding wants to have ascended to learned cognition, then it must be conscious of its rules and use them in accordance with reflection, because here common practice is not enough for it." (*LL*, 15 [AA 24:27]) Although actual awareness of epistemic rules is not necessary for every single belief-acquisition, it does not entail that we are not responsible for every belief that is thereby acquired.<sup>40</sup>

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**37** As Sullivan notes, "Many readers have been led to think that Kant claims we need to use the Categorical Imperative in all our everyday decisions about how to act here and now, when we generally *already* know in principle what is right and what is wrong. It can be argued that Kant did know that in such decisions we simply act on the appropriate moral principles – substantive categorical imperatives – we have already adopted as our own policies." (Sullivan 1989, 56). See also O'Neill: "acting on a maxim does not require explicit or conscious or complete formulation of that maxim. Even routine or thoughtless or indecisive action is action on *some* maxim." (O'Neill 1989, 84).

**38** The only requirement is that we do not act from impermissible inclination, mere habit or imitation but from the principles we have already reflected upon. For, "virtue is not to be defined and valued as [...] a long standing *habit* of morally good actions acquired by practice. For unless this aptitude results from considered, firm, and continually purified principles, then, like any other mechanism of technically practical reason, it is neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about" (*MM*, 515–6 [AA 6:383]).

**39** See also "Not all judgments require an investigation, i.e. attention to the grounds of truth; for if they are immediately certain, e.g., between two points there can be only one straight line, then no further mark of truth can be given for them than what they themselves express." (*CPR*, 366 [A 261/B 317]).

**40** Note also that just as for moral virtue, the only requirement is that we do not base our approval on inclination, custom or imitation, for they are the "principal sources of prejudices" (*LL*, 579 [AA 9:76]). For a discussion of custom and imitation, see McBay Merritt (2009, 992–3).

**Table 1.** Epistemic maxims and their implication for epistemic responsibility

<i>Maxim</i>	<i>Autonomous thinking</i>	<i>Heteronomous thinking</i>
Think for oneself	Unprejudiced (free from constraint)	Prejudiced (chained to constraint)
	Enlightened (not subject to rules of nature)	Superstitious (subject to laws of nature)
	Active (autonomous)	Passive (heteronomous)
	Broad-minded way of thinking	Narrow-minded way of thinking
Think in the position of everyone else	Universal standpoint of judgment	Subjective / private condition of judgment
Think consistently	Extended mode of thought	Restricted mode of thought
	Coherent mode of thought Logical way of thinking	Incoherent mode of thought Illogical way of thinking

On the contrary, it is because the grounds of responsibility reside in the choice of the right maxim (as argued in this section) and the correct use of judgment (as argued in the preceding section) that we are responsible for the result of this process, namely our beliefs.

As a result, whether we acquire beliefs according to maxims at all, just as which maxims we choose to adopt, is under our voluntary control. Crucially for Kant, this ability to control the powers of the mind is the means of reaching their greatest perfection:

The greatest perfection of the powers of the mind is based on our subordinating them ~~the powers of the mind~~ to our power of choice, and the more they are subjugated to the free power of choice, all the greater perfection of the powers of the mind do we possess. If we do not have them under the control of the free power of choice, all provisions for such perfection are thus in vain, if we cannot do what we want with the powers of the mind. (*LA-F*, 62 [AA 25:488])<sup>41</sup>

Our cognitive perfection thus consists in choosing our way of thinking rather than letting it be determined heteronomously “from the outside”, as spelt out by the epistemic maxim that commands free autonomous thinking: “The maxim of thinking for oneself can be called the *enlightened mode of thought*” (*LL*, 563 [AA 9:57] – see Table 1). If our will fails to lead, control, or direct our

<sup>41</sup> See also “Our perfection consists therein, that we are able to subjugate our faculties and capacities to the free power of choice” (*LA-F*, 60 [AA 25:485–6]).

cognitive practices, our mind stops being its own guide and a passive way of thinking is thereby induced through a mechanism that leads it to produce unwarranted judgments.

Of course, as already noted, whilst the choice to acquire beliefs according to certain maxims as well as the choice of maxims is under our direct voluntary control, the belief itself is not, which is why our positive doxastic control is indirect. But it is sufficient to secure the dimension of control that is necessary for doxastic responsibility.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to show that Kant's account of cognition can be used to defend epistemic responsibility against the double threat of either being committed to implausible versions of doxastic voluntarism, or failing to account for a sufficiently robust connection between the will and belief. To support this claim, I have argued that whilst we have no direct control over our beliefs, we have two forms of indirect doxastic control that are sufficient to ground epistemic responsibility: first, the capacity to judge and doubt; and second, the ability to choose our epistemic maxims. It is because we have direct control over our capacity to judge as well as the epistemic principles that govern belief-acquisition that we have indirect control over the beliefs we thereby acquire. The interpretation of Kant I have defended here thus allows us to account for the possibility of epistemic responsibility by providing a robust account of indirect doxastic voluntarism and thereby rendering direct doxastic voluntarism unnecessary.

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