

## **EPISTEMIC AGENCY: SOME DOUBTS**

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Many philosophers hold that we exercise some form of epistemic agency: that we can be active, rather than passive, in relation to our beliefs. This conviction is expressed in various ways. Sometimes, it involves appeal to the Kantian idea of spontaneity. Unlike perception, which is a receptive faculty, the understanding is spontaneous and in a certain way free, though its freedom does not contrast with, but rather consists in, determination by reason.<sup>1</sup> At other times, what is said to be active is inference. A representative discussion treats inferring a conclusion as “a person-level, conscious, voluntary mental action” (Boghossian forthcoming: §2). Still others focus on “judgements [as] actions, normally done for reasons” (Peacocke 1999: 19). “To make a judgement is the fundamental way to form a belief (or to endorse it when it is being reassessed). Judgement is a conscious rational activity, done for reasons, where these reasons are answerable to a fundamental goal of judgement, that it aims at truth” (Peacocke 1999: 238).<sup>2</sup> Finally, some insist that “believing itself is an exercise of agency, one for which the subject bears a characteristically agential sort of responsibility” (Boyle 2011a: 121).<sup>3</sup> This despite the fact that believing is not an event or process in our lives, but a state or condition we are sometimes in.

This essay engages in a sceptical exploration of epistemic agency. The exploration is sceptical not in rejecting the idea outright but in taking a deflationary stance towards it. There are interpretations of epistemic agency on which its existence is not, or should not be, in doubt. But they are relatively modest. These interpretations do little to justify the rhetoric of those who emphasize the place of agency in our cognitive lives. Less modest interpretations turn out to be confused, mistaken, or difficult to make out. The upshot is a challenge to advocates of epistemic agency: to accept a deflationary reading, to defend one of the options I criticize, or to describe a possibility I do not discuss.

The essay has four sections. In the first, I sketch the metaphysical framework in which the rest of the argument is pursued. In section two, I raise preliminary doubts about the nature of epistemic agency. Of course, we believe things for reasons, and we form and revise those beliefs. Is there a sense of epistemic agency that goes beyond these facts? Section three considers attempts to locate an interesting mode of epistemic agency in the act of judgement or inference, concluding that they fail. Finally, there is the idea that believing for reasons involves a form of rational causality—believing one thing because one believes another—that is analogous to rational action. In the concluding section of the paper, I argue against this analogy. Acting and believing for reasons differ in their relation to causality and normative thought.

## 1. Static and Dynamic

Linguists distinguish two categories of verb phrases, or uses of verbs, according to the application or otherwise of progressive and perfective aspect.<sup>4</sup> Some verbs have two forms, one progressive—“The floor was shaking”; “He was buying a house”; “Class was starting”—the other perfective, indicating completion or the fact that something happened: “The floor shook”; “He bought a house”; “Class started.” Others do not admit such distinctions: “The fruit was red”; “He owned a car”; “She knew everything.” These sentences do not report a completed act or event of being red, owning, or knowing. Instead, they describe a state or condition that some object was in. When verbs of the first kind are used in the present tense, they either have progressive aspect—“The floor is shaking”; “He is buying a house”; “Class is starting”—or they are habitual, indicating a repeated or serial action: “The floor shakes”; “He buys houses”; “Class starts at ten.” There is no present perfective. Verbs of the second kind, which admit no distinction of progressive and perfective aspect, have a non-habitual use in the simple present: “The fruit is red”; “He owns a car”; “She knows everything.”

Once we understand this contrast, we can deal with a somewhat difficult case. Arguably, there are verbs that take perfective aspect and form habituais in the simple present, but which have no standard use in the progressive: the verb “to recognize” might be one. If there are verbs of this kind, they belong to the first class, not the second. To say “She recognized her son” is to report something that happened, a completed event, even if it is odd to answer the question “What is she doing now?” with the reply, “She is recognizing her son.”<sup>5</sup>

Though it is introduced linguistically, the distinction between verbs that take perfective aspect and ones that do not has metaphysical import. Some of the things we predicate of objects can be instantiated “perfectively” and in that sense done, while others cannot. Unfortunately, there is no ideal

terminology for the contrast between the two. We can use the word “state” for the latter. But what about the former? It is tempting to call what can be done in the perfective sense an act. But some use “act” more broadly, to include the actualization of a capacity even when it is a state or condition.<sup>6</sup> And others use “act” more narrowly, for purposive or intentional action. Among the things that can be instantiated progressively and perfectly, some have nothing to do with rational behaviour, or even with the animate world. Trees fall, atoms bond with one another, stars explode. We might try “event.” But there are problems here, too. What we mean to identify, in contrast with states, are things predicated of, or instantiated by objects, picked out by verbs like “shake,” “buy,” and “start.” “Event” is often used, instead, for the referents of noun phrases like “the shaking of the floor,” “his buying of a house,” or “the start of class.” Though there is a close relation here, events in this sense are not our primary topic.<sup>7</sup>

Since I despair of finding a noun to contrast with “state” that is neither misleading nor arbitrary, I will instead use the adjectives “static” and “dynamic.” Shaking, buying, and starting are dynamic; being red, owning something, and knowing that *p* are static. These terms are sufficiently memorable, and “dynamic” lacks the distracting properties of “act” and “event.” This is not to say that it cannot be misunderstood. Although I think it is apt, “dynamic” applies by stipulation to one side of the metaphysical contrast I have pedantically introduced. This is how it should be interpreted from now on.

## 2. Epistemic Agency?

The point of this preamble is to bring out the obvious fact that believing is static. To say that someone believed that *p* is not to report a completed act or event of believing, but a standing condition. Nor is there an obstacle to the ascription of belief in the simple present, without habituality: “I believe that life is short.”<sup>8</sup>

That believing is static should not blind us to the fact that it can be “done for reasons”—not “done” in the sense of completion, but done for reasons in that, as well as believing that *p*, one can believe that *p* on the ground that *q*.<sup>9</sup> The sentence, “S believes that *p* on the ground that *q*” is a non-habitual in the simple present. Like believing that *p*, believing that *p* on the ground that *q* is metaphysically static.

When you believe that *p* on the ground that *q*, it follows that, in some sense of “because,” you believe that *p* because you believe that *q*. As others have noted, however, this explanation cites only present beliefs.<sup>10</sup> When you believe that *p* on the ground that *q*, your belief that *p* is explained by the fact that you now believe that *q*. Whatever kind of explanation is invoked here—a question to which we will return in section 4—this explanation contrasts

with one that adverts to prior beliefs, as when you believe that *p* because you *believed* that *q*. (When the latter explanation gives a reason for belief, the reason is a fact about your own psychology: you believe that *p* on the ground that you used to believe that *q*. Perhaps you believe that you are optimistic because you thought you would win the game.) Nor is the explanation of belief implied when one believes that *p* on the ground that *q* an account of how one *formed* the belief that *p*. That you believe that *p* because you believe that *q* is an explanation of a present state in terms of another, not of an event by a prior cause.

Although this leaves much obscure, we can already draw conclusions. First, if all that is meant by the claim that belief is active is that one can believe things for reasons, this is something no-one should deny. It is sometimes true that I believe that *p* on the ground that *q*, whatever this state involves. The only mistake would be to miss its static character. Second, as a consequence of this: if the claim that belief is active implies that believing is dynamic, that claim is simply false. Both believing and believing for a reason are states or conditions. They are static, not dynamic. Those who claim that belief is active but resist the deflationary reading on which it amounts to no more than the prospect of believing for reasons must articulate their claim in other ways.

These conclusions do not strike me as especially contentious; nor do they settle very much. But they can prompt resistance and misunderstanding. In responding critically to an earlier formulation of these thoughts, Pamela Hieronymi complains that “we should resist the distinction between believing and forming a belief, at least as understood by Setiya” (Hieronymi 2011: 173).<sup>11</sup> She goes on to elaborate:

[Not] all doings—that is, not all activities, in particular, not all activities done for reasons—are things that can be done in the sense that Setiya specifies: things that can be finished or completed. In particular, I think believing is an activity done for reasons, though not something that can be finished or completed. (Hieronymi 2011: 174)

As a statement of faith in “active belief,” I have no objection to this passage. The only question is what it means to call believing “an activity,” if this is not the minimal claim that we believe things for reasons or the problematic assertion that believing is dynamic. We will come back to this. What I want to resist now is the way in which Hieronymi extrapolates from my account. She finds it “very tempting to think that, on Setiya’s picture, any activity that could be done for reasons must be [dynamic]”:

If this were so, then we would *form* beliefs, or *revise* beliefs, for reasons—forming and revising are [dynamic]—but *believing* would not, itself, be an activity done for reasons. It would be, rather, a state that we create in ourselves, for reasons.

Having once created the belief, we would be done, finished with the part of believing done for reasons. (Hieronymi 2011: 175)

It is emphatically not my view that everything we do for reasons is dynamic. Believing is static, and we do it for reasons. If that is enough to make it active, then believing is itself an activity done for reasons—though in a deflationary sense. Whatever we mean by “active,” it does not follow from anything I have said so far that we only form or revise beliefs for reasons, or that, once we come to believe that  $p$ , our reasons are in the past.

To be fair to Hieronymi, she allows that the problematic picture is “not obviously” mine.<sup>12</sup> But she is clearly unsure how it could fail to be, since she comes back to it on the following page: “forming a belief that  $p$  is the part of believing  $p$  that Setiya thinks is done for reasons” (Hieronymi 2011: 178). As I have noted, that is not the case. The source of the difficulty is Hieronymi’s resistance to the metaphysical frame of section 1. According to her objection, this “picture forces belief and believing into categories (state or completable process) into which believing does not easily fit (and into which, I think, there is no anterior reason to think it should fit), and so distorts our relation to our own beliefs and to their consequences” (Hieronymi 2011: 175–6). I do not understand the complaint. There *is* anterior reason to classify believing as static or dynamic: in doing so, we respect a well-grounded distinction in metaphysics that seems to exhaust what we can predicate of things. Nor is believing a difficult case: it is evidently static. On the other hand, there is no anterior reason to suppose that the sense in which belief is active is somehow in tension with its being a state, or that there is anything mysterious about the static condition of believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ .

None of this conflicts with the existence of dynamic relations to belief. Our beliefs do change, after all. We come to believe things we used to deny. We form beliefs where we had no prior opinion. We become more or less confident that  $p$ . Coming to believe, forming a belief, gaining and losing confidence are all dynamic phenomena. The corresponding verbs take perfective aspect and express habituality in the simple present. Again, this is something no-one should doubt. But again, it is a deflationary point. If there is an interesting thesis of epistemic agency, it must go beyond the fact of belief revision.

It is also clear that our intentional actions affect our beliefs in various ways. We can go out and gather evidence; we can ask other people; we can imagine possibilities; we can run through ideas and arguments in our minds. We can also, more nefariously, manipulate ourselves by avoiding exposure to counterexamples, by associating only with those who share our views, and more fantastically, with the aid of a hypnotist or belief-altering drug. In none of these cases do we intentionally form a belief or become more confident that  $p$ . Our intentional actions here are, as Galen Strawson puts it, “entirely

*prefatory*” or “essentially—merely—*catalytic*” (Strawson 2003: 231).<sup>13</sup> They produce or elicit change in what we believe.

A question raised by these remarks is whether we can act intentionally on our beliefs in ways that are more direct. Can we intentionally form or revise beliefs? As it is sometimes put, can we believe at will? The second formulation is potentially misleading. As we have seen, believing is static. But the object of intention is dynamic. What we intend can always be completed, as belief cannot. So there is no possibility of intentional belief.<sup>14</sup> What is more, even when it refers to *forming* a belief, “believing at will” is often used only for the case in which I do so “irrespective of its truth” (Williams 1970: 148).<sup>15</sup> It might be impossible to believe at will in this sense even though we form beliefs intentionally, so long as we do so with the aim of believing what is true. We might even equate this act with judgement, securing a robust account of epistemic agency.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the appeal of this idea, I won’t pursue it here. Most philosophers deny that it is possible to form a belief intentionally, even with the aim of believing the truth—except perhaps in pathological cases, ones that reflect not epistemic agency but rational breakdown. This is true even of those who insist on the active character of belief.<sup>17</sup> No doubt we can cause ourselves to believe things by self-manipulation, and there is nothing incoherent in the idea of doing so immediately, without employing further means.<sup>18</sup> In principle, we could affect our own beliefs through basic intentional action. But causing oneself to have a belief is not the same thing as forming it. To form a belief intentionally, one must become more confident that *p* as an instance, not an effect, of intentional action. This is the prospect most philosophers dispute, though their reasons for doing so vary.<sup>19</sup>

In what follows, I set this possibility aside. We are looking for accounts of epistemic agency on which it goes beyond the fact that we believe things for reasons, and the fact that we form and revise beliefs, but does not involve intentional belief-formation. What else could it be? There are two main theories to discuss. On the first, the locus of epistemic agency is dynamic: it is judgement or inference, conceived as non-intentional but done for reasons. On the second, it is the state of believing for a reason, which is thought to be active because it involves a form of rational causality that is like the causality of intentional action. Section 3 deals with inference, section 4 with the analogy between action and belief.

### 3. Inference

Among those who think of judgement as dynamic, a mental action, there is disagreement on several fronts. Is the act of judgement intentional? We are assuming that it is not. Is it an act of belief-formation? Or an act of affirmation that may not issue in belief?<sup>20</sup> The latter conception is

surprisingly common—surprising because it is hard to see how one could count as having judged that  $p$  without taking it as true that  $p$ , and hard to see how one could take this to be true without the relevant belief.<sup>21</sup> Cases in which we are inclined to say “He judged that  $p$  though he doesn’t really believe it” seem to come in three main sorts. There are cases of conflict or self-contradiction in which you judge and believe that  $p$ , but at the same time disbelieve it. There are cases of ambivalence in which you neither fully believe that  $p$  nor determinately judge that  $p$ . And there are cases in which your belief that  $p$  fails to persist: you momentarily believe that  $p$  but the belief immediately fades. Once we recognize these possibilities, we need not admit an act of affirmation distinct from forming a belief. If judgement is dynamic, it is coming to believe, though one may be conflicted, ambivalent, or fickle.

In the special case of judgement that is inference, the implication of belief is especially clear: one does not count as having inferred that  $p$  unless one concludes and so believes that  $p$ .<sup>22</sup> In the discussion of inference cited in my opening paragraph, Paul Boghossian refers to it as a “a person-level, conscious, voluntary mental action” (Boghossian forthcoming: §2). Although he calls it “voluntary” he never suggests that it is intentional; and he thinks of it in dynamic terms. Inference is a species of rule-following in which we draw conclusions from premises. Might inference be the form of epistemic agency we have been seeking?

In asking this question, it is crucial to distinguish inference in Boghossian’s dynamic sense from the state of believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , which might also be called “inferential judgement.” When you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , you believe that  $p$  for a reason supplied by another belief. When asked, “How do you know that  $p$ ?” you might answer “I infer it from the fact that  $q$ ,” where this does not report a completed happening, still less a habitual occurrence, but a static condition. It is easy to conflate the state of inferential judgement with inference as a dynamic phenomenon. What is true of one may not be true of the other.

To what extent, then, is dynamic inference a manifestation of agency? Boghossian claims that it is subject to a condition that suggests activity: “Inferring necessarily involves the thinker *taking* his premises to support his conclusion and drawing his conclusion *because* of that fact.” (Boghossian forthcoming: §3) He adds:

The intuition behind [this] Taking Condition is that no causal process counts as inference, unless it consists in an attempt to arrive at a belief by figuring out what, in some suitably broad sense, is supported by other things one believes. In the relevant sense, reasoning is something we *do*, not just something that happens to us. (Boghossian forthcoming: §3)

Could this be right? Is the dynamic process of forming one belief on the basis of another, at least when it is rational, subject to the Taking Condition?

Let us grant that if it is, we have found a substantive form of epistemic agency ignored by section 1. The problem is that the Taking Condition is false. An immediate source of doubt is the potential conflation of dynamic inference with believing for a reason. It is incoherent to say “I believe that it will rain because the clouds are grey—that is my reason for believing it—though the fact that they are grey is not evidence that it will rain.” When you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , you believe that  $p$  because you take the fact that  $q$  to support your belief. Hence the incoherence. It does not follow from this, at least not directly, that one’s belief cannot be justified by evidence one fails to recognize as such. (More on this below.) Nor does it follow that inference in the dynamic sense is subject to the Taking Condition. In fact, we may suspect that the appeal of this condition, as applied to dynamic inference, turns on the conflation I have described. What Boghossian says on behalf of the Taking Condition is that we cannot give it up without “losing our ability to make sense of ourselves as rational agents” since “full rationality” requires us to endorse our conclusions in a “self-aware process of reasoning” (Boghossian forthcoming: §13). Why is it not enough for full rationality that we endorse our conclusions in a self-aware *state* of inferential judgement? Once we distinguish static from dynamic inference, there is room to reject the Taking Condition on the latter without losing grip on our own rationality.

What is worse, applied to dynamic inference, the Taking Condition begins a vicious regress.<sup>23</sup> In its simplest form, the regress has two steps.

- (1) When you infer that  $p$  from the premise that  $q$ , you form the belief that  $p$  in part because you take the fact that  $q$  as evidence that  $p$ .
- (2) In order to be rational when you take the fact that  $q$  as evidence that  $p$ , you must infer this proposition from some other belief.

Premise (1) is a version of the Taking Condition. Premise (2) rests on the thought that, while there may be general epistemic truths of which we have non-inferential knowledge, it is not rational to take a specific fact—for instance, that the clouds are grey—as evidence for a specific conclusion—that it will rain—except on the basis of dynamic inference. This is not an object of innate belief, or the sort of thing for which one needs no grounds; nor are the grounds perceptual. It is a belief that must derive from other beliefs. Given these premises, rational inference is impossible. In order to infer that  $p$  from the premise that  $q$ , you must take the fact that  $q$  as evidence that  $p$ . In order to do so rationally, you must infer this epistemic proposition from a further premise. In order to make that inference, you need another belief, about the evidence for the epistemic proposition. Again, this belief is particular, not general: it is the belief that a specific premise,  $r$ , supports the conclusion that  $q$  is evidence for  $p$ . In order to be rational, this too must be the product of dynamic inference. And so it goes. At every stage, you need a prior inference, and the process can never begin.



The only way to save the Taking Condition, in light of this regress, is to question premise (2). It might be argued that we form beliefs on the basis of other beliefs by a rational process other than inference. But if this process is not subject to the Taking Condition, why does inference have to be? Nor does it help to propose, with Boghossian, that inference is a primitive phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> The problem is not about reducibility but about the rational basis on which one takes one's premise to support one's conclusion. If taking something to be evidence is not a representational state that stands in need of justification—perceptual, inferential, or otherwise—it is completely opaque what it is meant to be.

None of this prevents us from insisting, or stipulating, that by “inference” we mean belief-formation that meets the Taking Condition. We might even hold that, where this condition is met, we are epistemically active. But this does not amount to much. The position concedes that there is no special *kind* of belief-formation subject to the Taking Condition. We form beliefs on the basis of other beliefs and sometimes the beliefs from which we move concern the evidential force of other things that we believe. These are differences in content not in the kind of activity involved. What is more, the cases of dynamic inference that seem active because they meet the Taking Condition are ones in which we end up in an active state, a state of inferential judgement. We end up believing that *p* on the ground that *q* in a sense that involves taking the fact that *q* to support our belief. (If we do not end up in this state, despite having met the Taking Condition, it would be odd to describe our inference as active: we have lost track of our grounds on the way to our conclusion!) What emerges from this discussion is once again deflationary. Dynamic inference that meets the Taking Condition is in a certain way active, but its activity adds nothing to that of merely dynamic inference together with the state of inferential judgement, in which you believe that *p* because you take the fact that *q* to support your belief.

Before we leave this topic, it is worth noting a threat of regress that is not addressed by rejecting premise (1). I have suggested that the state of believing that *p* on the ground that *q* is subject to the Taking Condition:

- (1') When you believe that *p* on the ground that *q*, you take the fact that *q* as evidence that *p*.

The regress starts if we add an analogue of premise (2):

- (2') In order to be rational when you take the fact that *q* as evidence that *p*, you must believe this proposition for a reason, in the sense of (1').

It follows from these premises that in order to be rational in believing something for reason, you need an infinite sequence of epistemic beliefs. Since there is no implication of temporal priority among these beliefs, this regress

differs from the previous one and is perhaps less bad. But it is implausible to claim that its demands are often met.

How should we respond to this argument? Not by questioning (1') but by disputing the second premise, which is less secure than (2). We already know that dynamic inference is not subject to the Taking Condition, so beliefs about evidence can be acquired inferentially without the need for additional epistemic beliefs. More generally, it is not a condition of being justified by evidence that one take that evidence to support one's belief. Imagine a scientist who surveys a vast array of data, eventually concluding that  $p$ . Some of the facts she surveyed may have influenced her one way, some another. It need not hold of every aspect of the evidence by which she was influenced, and whose presence helps to justify her belief, that she believes it to be evidence that  $p$ .<sup>25</sup> A different case cites propositions that are more or less far-fetched. I don't believe in extra-sensory perception. Why not? Although there are various things I could say in defence of my belief, they don't exhaust the evidence that justifies it, at which I can only gesture. It is part of a world-view whose role in supporting that belief far exceeds my grasp. I don't have beliefs about the epistemic significance of every piece of evidence on which my conviction rests.

One moral of these arguments is that we should reject (2') on grounds that are independent of the regress. Another moral is that believing for a reason, in the sense that involves beliefs about evidence—believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ —is not a condition of a belief's being justified by evidence. There is a potential ambiguity in epistemologists' talk of the "basing relation," which could mean either the first thing or the second. These are not the same.

This does not mean that they are unrelated. According to what Adam Leite calls the "Spectatorial Conception," the facts that bear on the justification of a belief "are in place independently of and not directly affected by what goes on when the person attempts to justify the belief" (Leite 2004: 225). That cannot be right. As Leite goes on to argue, when "you consider reasons for and against a claim, find that certain reasons decisively support holding it, and sincerely declare that you believe the claim for those reasons . . . you thereby directly determine what the reasons are for which you hold the belief" (Leite 2004: 227). If we distinguish having evidence that supports a belief (or "propositional justification") from the belief's being justified by that evidence ("doxastic justification"), we can put the connection as follows: when you have sufficient evidence that  $p$ , in the fact that  $q$ , and you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , this evidence justifies your belief that  $p$ . In other words, believing for a reason, in the sense that involves beliefs about evidence, is sufficient for justification by evidence, where the ground of one's belief belongs to one's evidence and is sufficiently strong.

Leite defends a converse claim: "if someone is justified in believing as he does in virtue of basing his belief upon good reasons, then, in the absence

of any special circumstances preventing him from doing so, he must be able to provide those reasons in defense of his belief” (Leite 2004: 238). There is the prospect here of an attractive unity on which justification by evidence is explained in terms of the evidence we have and our capacity to believe for reasons that this evidence provides. But unless Leite’s conditional is interpreted quite liberally, I am doubtful that it is true. Does being inarticulate count as a “special circumstance” in which one’s belief is justified by evidence one cannot provide? What about incompetence with epistemic concepts? Or forming a belief on the basis of evidence one then forgets? If we make these exceptions, the conditional may hold, but it tells us very little. If we do not make them, I believe that it is false.<sup>26</sup>

Where does this leave us? We have failed to locate in judgement or inference, thought of in dynamic terms, a substantive form of epistemic agency. The Taking Condition does not apply to dynamic inference, as such. And where it is satisfied, its significance is weak. At the same time, there is the state of believing for a reason, or of inferential judgement, in which you believe that  $p$  because you take the fact that  $q$  to support your belief. Although it is not a condition of the basing relation, this state might be conceived as its reflective form. Can it also be conceived as *active*? Have we found, at last, what we were looking for: a state that constitutes activity, or agency, in relation to belief?

#### 4. Action and Belief

In “Active Belief,” Matthew Boyle defends a conception of believing as an active state: “[my] claim is not that to believe something is to be occurrently up to something; it is that being occurrently up to something is not the only species of the genus: act, exercise of agency” (Boyle 2011a: 137). The idea that the genus of agency has two species suggests the following view: in believing for reasons, we relate to something static (the state of belief) in the same way we relate to what is dynamic when we act for reasons. When you are acting on the ground that  $p$ , it follows that, in some sense of “because,” you are acting because you believe that  $p$ . Likewise, when you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , it follows that, in some sense of “because,” you believe that  $p$  because you believe that  $q$ . But in neither case is it enough that there be an explanation that cites belief. There are well-known cases of “deviant causation” in which someone is doing  $\phi$  because he believes that  $p$  without acting on the ground that  $p$ . In an example from Donald Davidson, a climber wants to rid himself of the dangerous weight of his companion; he knows that he can do this by dropping the rope that supports her, and becomes so nervous as a result of his belief and desire that he unintentionally lets go.<sup>27</sup> The climber drops the rope because he believes that he can rid himself of his companion’s weight by doing so, but he does

not act for the corresponding reason. In much the same way, one's belief that  $q$  might causally sustain one's belief that  $p$ , in that one would cease to believe that  $p$  if one ceased to believe that  $q$ , without its being true that one believes that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ . There seems to be, in connection with both action and belief, a distinctive kind of explanation that cites a "rational cause." The hypothesis we are exploring is that such explanations work in the same way: there is a generic form of rational explanation that applies to intentional action and belief, two species of a single genus. If this were true, the idea of epistemic agency would have a point. In believing for reasons, we would relate to our beliefs in the same way we relate to our intentional actions: by a species of rational causation. The genus to which these species belong defines the abstract notion of activity we have been seeking.<sup>28</sup>

Despite its appeal, my view is that the analogy between acting and believing for reasons is flawed. There are two quite different forms of explanation here, which are not helpfully seen as species of a single genus. Reasons for action and belief bear contrasting relations to causality and normative thought: the appearance of unity is superficial.

Consider the state of believing for a reason, or inferential judgement, that is subject to the Taking Condition. When you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , you believe that  $p$  because you take the fact that  $q$  to support your belief. This state has something in common with acting for a reason. Each is subject to the question "Why?"—"Why are you doing that?"; "Why do you believe that  $p$ ?"—a question you can be expected to answer without having to observe or make inferences about yourself.<sup>29</sup> What is more, your answer plays a constitutive role in making it the case that you are acting or believing for a given reason. When you act on the ground that  $p$  you take the fact that  $p$  as your reason for acting; when you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$  you take the fact that  $q$  to support your belief.

I don't deny these similarities, but the realities that explain them differ greatly. In particular, I think it is both necessary and sufficient for inferential judgement, in the sense at issue here, that one have beliefs about the evidence for one's belief. Acknowledging that one may believe that  $p$  on many grounds, each individually inconclusive, we can give the following account:

To believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$  is to believe that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ .

What is more, the sense in which one believes that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ , when one believes that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , comes to the very same thing: one believes that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ . The rational causality of believing for a reason reduces to a conjunction of beliefs. There is no further causality that connects them.

There are several arguments for this claim. It is often said that beliefs about evidence are not sufficient for one to believe that  $p$  on the ground that

$q$ , since one's belief that  $p$  might not depend on one's belief that  $q$ . It does not follow from this belief about evidence that one came to believe that  $p$  because of one's belief that  $q$  or that the latter now sustains the former.<sup>30</sup> This is true but, I think, irrelevant. We already know from section 2 that the explanation of one belief by another involved in believing for a reason cites only present beliefs. It is not an explanation by prior cause or an account of how one formed the belief that  $p$ . What I add now is that it is not an explanation by sustaining cause, or a claim of counterfactual dependence. The sense in which one believes that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ , when one believes that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , does not require causation or dependence of this kind. This comes out most clearly when one's evidence is conclusive. To illustrate: suppose that I am prone to wishful thinking, and I would continue to believe that I will win the lottery even if I had no evidence. As it happens, I know that the lottery is rigged in my favour and regard this as proof that I will win. Although the belief that I will win is not sustained by my belief that the lottery is rigged and is counterfactually independent of it, that does not prevent me from believing that I will win on the ground that the lottery is rigged, or from having a justified belief that I will win.<sup>31</sup> Asked "Why do you believe that you will win the lottery?" I can cite conclusive proof. What more could knowledge demand?

Once we see that this point holds for conclusive grounds, there is no reason to resist the generalization. If someone asks "Why do you believe that  $p$ ?" and I answer by citing the fact that  $q$  as evidence, there is no room for doubt whether the fact that  $q$  is among my reasons for belief. It follows from my answer that I believe that  $p$  partly on the ground that  $q$ , and that my belief is justified in proportion to the strength of that evidence. What matters here is not what I would say, but the psychological state in virtue of which I would say it: my belief about the evidence for  $p$ .

This generalization is confirmed by reflection on Moore's paradox and its variations. Just as it is incoherent to assert " $p$ , but I don't believe that  $p$ ," so it is incoherent to assert " $p$  and the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ , but I don't believe that  $p$  even partly because I believe that  $q$ ." In each case, the paradox rests on the fact that being in a position to assert the first claim entails the falsehood of the second. One cannot believe that  $p$ , and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ , without believing that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ , in the epistemic sense. What is true is that there are interpretations of "because" on which the relevant assertion would be fine. It is not paradoxical to assert " $p$  and the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ , but I did not form the belief that  $p$  because I came to believe that  $q$ ; nor is my belief that  $p$  sustained by my belief that  $q$ , from which it is counterfactually independent." The sense of "because" on which it follows from believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$  that one believes that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ —the sense that evokes the paradox—does not involve a prior cause, sustaining cause, or claim of counterfactual dependence.<sup>32</sup> Alleged exceptions

to the principle above conflate these sorts of explanation. For instance, I believe that I was born in Hull and that the fact that my passport says so is evidence for this claim. Do I believe that I was born in Hull because I know that my passport says so? In some sense of “because,” surely not. I did not form this belief by looking at my passport, nor would I revise it if I discovered that my passport says something else. What my passport says is not the first or most important evidence of my place of birth, and it would be pragmatically odd to cite it as the ground of my belief. Doing so carries the apparent implication that I do not have more direct or conclusive access to the truth. Still, once we acknowledge these facts, there is no reason to deny that the words in my passport are among the grounds on which I believe that I was born in Hull, and that, in the corresponding sense, I believe that I was born in Hull in part because I believe that my passport says so. The belief that I was born in Hull is epistemically over-determined, and the fact that my passport says so is what I would cite as evidence if I had no other grounds.

As these remarks suggest, the identification of believing for reasons with epistemic belief helps to explain how one can answer the question, “Why do you believe that  $p$ ?” without observation or inference. Self-knowledge of reasons for belief will fall under the account of self-knowledge for belief as such. If you believe that  $p$ , you are in a position to know that you believe that  $p$ .<sup>33</sup> Likewise, if you believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , you are in a position to know that you believe that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ . But to believe that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$  just is to believe that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ . So you are in a position to know that you believe that  $p$  because you believe that  $q$ . At the same time, the reductive theory explains how your answer to the question “Why?” plays a constitutive role in believing for a reason. When you believe that  $p$ , it follows from your beliefs about the evidence that  $p$  that you believe it on the corresponding grounds. What accounts for these phenomena if believing for a reason is not a mere conjunction of beliefs?<sup>34</sup>

There are, then, three arguments for the principle, above, that it is not only necessary but sufficient for believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$  that one believe that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$ : the argument from conclusive evidence; the argument from a variation on Moore’s paradox; and the argument from the need to explain self-knowledge of reasons, and the constitutive role of answers to the question “Why?”

Where does this leave the analogy with reasons for acting? It reveals a basic contrast. In the case of belief, believing that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$  is sufficient for believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , and so believing that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ ; in the case of intentional action, doing  $\phi$  intentionally while believing that the fact that  $p$  is a reason to  $\phi$  is not sufficient for acting on the ground that  $p$  or because one believes that  $p$ .<sup>35</sup> The rational causality of acting for a reason does not reduce to a

mere conjunction of action and belief. There is a further causality involved here, whatever its nature.

This is the first and most significant difference between acting and believing for reasons. The former requires a causal or explanatory relation between action and belief that, together with the dynamic character of action, explains why it should count as active. The latter does not. It consists in beliefs about a certain subject-matter. It is misleading to call the belief that  $p$  distinctively “active” when it is accompanied by a belief about the evidence that  $p$  or because it can be conjoined with such beliefs. And it is wrong to treat reasons for action and belief as species of a single genus: in believing for reasons, we do not relate to belief in the way we relate to action when we act for reasons.

There is a second contrast, related to the first. In order to believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , one must take the fact that  $q$  as evidence that  $p$ . But in order to act on the ground that  $p$ , it is not only insufficient but unnecessary to take the fact that  $p$  as a normative reason to act. This is true even when one acts self-consciously: when one knows without observation what one is doing and why. The argument for this claim does not rest on cases of perversity, where someone acts on grounds they take to be irrelevant or to count against what they are doing. It turns instead on what is required to answer the question “Why?” understood as a request for reasons. The crucial point is this: the proposition that A is doing  $\phi$  because  $p$ , in the sense in which it follows that A is doing  $\phi$  on the ground that  $p$ , does not entail that the fact that  $p$  is a reason for A to  $\phi$ . Not every ground on which we act in fact supports our action: we make mistakes. But then we can argue as follows:<sup>36</sup>

It is sufficient to answer the question “Why?” that one has a belief of the form, “I am doing  $\phi$  because  $p$ ,” in the sense of “because” that gives an agent’s reason.

That I am doing  $\phi$  because  $p$ , in this sense, is consistent with the fact that  $p$  not being a reason for me to  $\phi$ .

If one proposition is consistent with the negation of another, it is possible to believe the first without believing the second.

So:

It is possible to believe that I am doing  $\phi$  because  $p$ , and thus to answer the question “Why?” without believing that the fact that  $p$  is a reason for me to  $\phi$ .

So far, I have argued that one need not believe that the grounds on which one acts are reasons to  $\phi$  in order to answer the question “Why?” It might

still be true that one must believe this in order to act for those reasons. But this demand now looks mysterious. Why would it be a condition of acting on the ground that  $p$  that one believe that the fact that  $p$  is a reason to act? So long as you are doing  $\phi$  intentionally, and you believe that you are doing it because  $p$ , where this is an explanation that purports to give your reason, and so long as there is the right sort of connection between the two, you count as acting on the ground that  $p$ .

Those who defend the need for normative beliefs in acting for a reason may insist that the “right sort of connection” must be one that invokes such beliefs. Perhaps the problem of causal deviance is solved, in part, by the belief that one’s reason helps to justify one’s action. But this is hopeless. If there can be the wrong sort of connection between the belief that one is doing  $\phi$  because  $p$  and one’s doing it, there can be the wrong sort of connection between doing  $\phi$  and a belief about its justification. Problems about the right connection between attitude and action, as in cases of causal deviance, cannot be solved by adding more beliefs, whose relationship to what one is doing will be equally problematic.

My conclusion is that, while you must believe, of the grounds on which you believe that  $p$ , that they are evidence that  $p$ , you need not believe that the fact that  $p$  is a reason to  $\phi$  in order to act for that reason. Reasons for action and belief differ from one another in relation to causality and to normative thought. It is the first contrast that is most relevant to us. Unlike the causality of acting for a reason, the causality of believing that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ , when one believes that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , reduces to a conjunction of beliefs. There is no basis here for a substantive notion of epistemic agency, or a conception of active belief that goes beyond the obvious fact that we believe things for reasons. I stress the second contrast, about the need for normative thought, not because it is essential to this point, but in further opposition to the prejudice, which is prevalent in philosophy, that we should give parallel treatment to reasons for action and belief. This prejudice is one source of the conviction that there must be *something* to epistemic agency, something that illuminates the nature of belief. We should not take this for granted. Despite my efforts, we have failed to unearth an interpretation of epistemic agency that is not obscure, deflationary, or simply wrong. Perhaps I am missing something. But I am not sure what.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

1. See, for instance, McDowell 1994.
2. For different versions of this claim, see Shah and Velleman 2005; Cassam 2010.
3. Boyle cites Moran 2001 as a precedent; see also Hieronymi 2009.
4. A classic treatment is Comrie 1976, though the distinction has philosophical roots; see Vendler 1957; Kenny 1963: 171–86. Later discussions include Mourelatos 1978, Graham 1980, and Galton 1984.



5. See Comrie 1976: 41–5 for further distinctions in the first kind of verb.
6. See Boyle 2011b: §5.
7. Compare Hornsby 1997: 87–92 on actions as events and as things done, though she does not stress the generality of the distinction or its relation to linguistic aspect.
8. Michael Thompson has argued that, despite appearing to be static, intending should be explained in dynamic terms (Thompson 2008: Part Two). Roughly speaking, S intends to  $\phi$  just in case he is  $\phi$ -ing intentionally, though perhaps at an early or interrupted stage. Might something similar hold for belief? In principle, yes. But I am sceptical of Thompson's view. And the cases are strikingly different. Intention has dynamic content: its object can be completed. This content provides the basis for Thompson's equation. In contrast, the content of belief is not dynamic: it is the proposition that  $p$ . Nor are such phenomena as judging that  $p$  or affirming that  $p$  coextensive with believing that  $p$ , on their dynamic interpretations. We have no sense of how belief could be dynamically composed.
9. Some restrict the phrase “believing for a reason” to the case in which it is true that  $p$ . Thus, in discussing intentional action, Maria Alvarez insists that motivating reasons must be facts: they are facts that motivate us to act (Alvarez 2010: Ch. 5). At the same time, she allows that the considerations by which we are motivated can be false. It is hard to see here more than a terminological dispute. Should we use “reason” for any proposition by which one is motivated, or only for propositions that are facts? Nothing of substance turns on this. I intend my discussion of believing for reasons to include the case of believing on mistaken grounds.
10. See Boyle 2011b: §3.4, Marcus 2012: 28, 42–5. As I explain in section 3, it does not follow that the justification of one's belief that  $p$  can never depend on past beliefs: not every instance of the “basing relation” is a case of believing for a reason.
11. The earlier discussion is Setiya 2008.
12. Hieronymi 2011: 175, 177.
13. Strawson goes much further than I would in disputing mental agency. He insists not only that judgement and belief-formation are not intentional, but that we cannot imagine things intentionally (Strawson 2003: 239–42). And he does not acknowledge the sense of activity in which believing for a reason is an active state.
14. This argument is made at greater length in Setiya 2008: 38–9; see also Hieronymi 2011: 174–5.
15. I elaborate on this in Setiya 2008: 41–2.
16. This is how I read Shah and Velleman 2005 in Setiya 2008: §IV.
17. As, for instance, Hieronymi 2011; Boyle 2011b: §1.2.
18. As in one interpretation of the “Credamites” described by Jonathan Bennett (1990); see Hieronymi 2011: 153–7.
19. I give a tentative explanation in Setiya 2008. Responding to that discussion, Hieronymi argues that to form a belief intentionally “you must believe *because* you decided to believe” and so “incur the commitment to  $p$ 's truth *because* you settled the practical question [whether to believe  $p$ ]” (Hieronymi 2011: 162).

The practical commitment involved in the decision cannot entail or constitute a commitment to the truth of  $p$  (Hieronymi 2011: 163–4). So it must “somehow cause or bring about the commitment to  $p$ ’s truth” (Hieronymi 2011: 162). The problem is that “you commit to all parts of an action from the point of decision” (Hieronymi 2011: 163). “Thus, if the commitment to  $p$ ’s truth is merely the result or effect of the commitment to the practical question [whether to form that belief], believing  $p$  will be understood, not as part of the action you have decided upon, but rather as the product or consequence of that action—an action best described as bringing it about that you believe or making yourself believe.” (Hieronymi 2011: 163) As I see it, this argument assumes at least part of what needs to be proved: that two kinds of commitment, practical and theoretical, cannot come apart. (I made an earlier version of this point in Setiya 2008: 39–40.) When you intend to form the belief that  $p$ , believing that  $p$  is not a mere effect of executing your intention. It is part of the action you intend. You are thus, in a sense, committed to this belief from the moment of decision. But this commitment is practical: you are committed to its being a good thing to form, and so to have, the belief that  $p$ . You are not committed to the truth of  $p$  until you have completed the action you intend. (In general, the completion of an act can involve commitments you do not undertake until it is done: think of signing a contract.) Hieronymi does not explain why this description fails.

20. See Shah and Velleman 2005: 503; Cassam 2010: 81–4.
21. For this argument, and for further resistance to judgement without belief, see Boyle 2011a: 130–3.
22. I set aside inference from supposition, which does not involve judgement. An adequate treatment of suppositional reasoning lies beyond our scope.
23. An earlier version of this argument appears in Setiya 2011: 185–6, citing Johnston 1988: 87–8, Railton 2006, and Boghossian 2009: 492–4, along with precedents in Wittgenstein and Hume.
24. Boghossian forthcoming: §§14–15.
25. Compare Harman (1970: 844): “It is doubtful that anyone has ever fully specified an actual piece of inductive reasoning, since it is unlikely that anyone could specify the relevant total evidence in any actual case. The difficulty is not simply that there is so much relevant evidence, but also that one cannot be sure whether various things should or should not be included in the evidence. One cannot always be sure what has influenced one’s conclusion.”
26. So I reject Boyle’s claim that “only my present beliefs have a direct bearing on whether I should now accept that  $Q$ ” (Boyle 2011b: §3.4). A belief formed on the basis of good evidence, since forgotten, is in epistemically better shape than a belief formed on the basis of no evidence at all.
27. Davidson 1973: 79.
28. Boyle defends a version of this idea: “where my present endorsement of X-ing is the ground of my present X-ing, in virtue of a capacity I possess to be through the former the source of the latter, there I am the *agent* of my X-ing, and X-ing is my *act*” (Boyle 2011a: 141), a characterization of agency that can be applied to both intentional action and belief. But the general thought is independent of the details. For variations, see Moran 2001; Rödl 2007; Hieronymi 2009; Marcus 2012.

29. The conception of agency invoked here derives from Anscombe's *Intention*, though I won't rely on, or object to, the specifics of her view.
30. A classic presentation of this argument is Harman 1970: 844–6. For a recent endorsement, see Leite 2004: 135–7.
31. Here I side with Lehrer 1971 against Harman 1970.
32. This argument is indebted to Mathew Boyle (2011b: §3) and Eric Marcus (2012: Ch. 1), though they do not accept the reductive view.
33. I give an account of such knowledge in Setiya 2011: §1.
34. Can we appeal to the self-conscious character of reason: part of what is involved in believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$  is that one takes oneself to believe that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ ? Even if we ignore its patent circularity, this account does not explain why one must take the fact that  $q$  as *evidence* that  $p$ , when one believes that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ . The principle behind this observation is explored below.
35. Compare Davidson 1963: 9 on the relation between acting for a reason and having a reason to act.
36. This argument is developed more fully in Setiya 2010: §2. You might ask why it does not apply to the state of believing for a reason. The answer is that the first part does. It shows that one need not believe that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$  in order to believe that one believes that  $p$  because one believes that  $q$ . (In that case, one's belief about the grounds of one's belief is false.) The contrast with acting for a reason comes in the second phase, since the "right connection" is secured by normative beliefs: believing that  $p$  and that the fact that  $q$  is evidence that  $p$  is sufficient for believing that  $p$  on the ground that  $q$ , and leaves no room for causal deviance.
37. For comments on earlier versions of this paper, I am grateful to Andrew Chignell, Casey Doyle, Pamela Hieronymi, Ulf Hlobil, and to audiences at Auburn University and the University of Southampton.

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