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Believing in Compatibilism

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RESUMEN

Argumento en mi comentario que no necesitamos apelar a concepciones de la agencia para entender cómo la creación y revisión de creencias pueden ser un resultado suyo. Cuando nuestros mecanismos de formación de creencias responden y reaccionan apropiadamente a razones, constituyen parcialmente nuestra agencia, pero tal capacidad de respuesta a razones no exige indeterminismo. Por razones similares, no acepto que nuestro responder de manera apropiada y mecánica a la evidencia constituya el que estemos forzados a tener nuestras creencias: más bien, bajo condiciones apropiadas constituye el que las adoptemos en virtud de nuestra agencia. Además, sugiero que el género de formación diacrónica de creencias que Peels subraya, funciona de la misma manera amplia que su formación sincrónica y que, por tanto, no puede solucionar los problemas que acechan a esta última. Termino planteando algunas dudas sobre la afirmación de Peels de que nuestras creencias disposicionales puedan afianzar nuestra responsabilidad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *compatibilismo, creencia, agencia, capacidad de respuesta a razones.*

ABSTRACT

In this response, I argue that we do not need to appeal to incompatibilist conceptions of agency to understand how belief formation and revision can be agential. When our belief formation mechanisms are appropriately reasons responsive and reactive, they partially constitute our agency, but such reasons responsiveness does not require indeterminism. For similar reasons, I deny that our responding appropriately and mechanistically to evidence constitutes our being forced to our beliefs: rather, under appropriate conditions it constitutes our agentially adopting them. Moreover, I suggest that the kind of diachronic belief formation Peels highlights works in the same kind of broad way as synchronic belief formation, and therefore could not solve any problems that beset the latter. I close with some doubts over Peels' claim that our dispositional beliefs may underwrite our responsibility.

KEYWORDS: *Compatibilism; Belief; Agency; Reasons-Responsiveness.*

The extent to which agents may appropriately be held responsible for their beliefs has not received a great deal of sustained attention.

That's a big omission, because all intentional actions are partially explained by beliefs. Moreover, many morally wrongful acts and omissions are partially caused by beliefs that, if true, would justify them – prima facie, that implies that holding the agent responsible for these acts and omissions requires holding them responsible for their beliefs. Rik Peels' *Responsible Belief* is a major contribution to the debate over these questions, a contribution that is sure to set the agenda for years to come. Though it is focused on what might seem the narrow question of doxastic responsibility, it is a rich book. I do not have space to address more than a few of the topics it touches on. As is standard in this kind of response, I will for the most part ignore the many components of the book with which I agreed and which I found illuminating, and focus instead on my disagreements with the account Peels presents.

I don't aim to offer an alternative account of responsible belief. I don't think that we are responsible (in the sense Peels has in mind) for *anything*, and my doubts about responsibility for action apply equally to belief. I have nothing further to add on that score. I remain interested in the questions Peels considers, however, because consideration of the conditions under which we form and alter our beliefs is central to illuminating our agency, and understanding our agency is valuable independently of the question of our moral responsibility. Accordingly, I will focus directly on the conception of agency that underlies Peels' view. I will argue that it is a conception that ought to be rejected, in favour of a rival that identifies agency with the mechanisms involved in synchronic belief acquisition. That argument will occupy the bulk of this essay. I will conclude with brief reflections on Peels' positive account of responsibility for belief. I will suggest that if synchronic belief acquisition is as problematic as he suggests, diachronic belief acquisition is no solution to the problem.

EPISTEMIC AGENCY

In *Responsible Belief*, Peels uses 'compatibilism' in an idiosyncratic way. Doxastic compatibilism is initially defined as the view that "the absence of *intentional* doxastic control is compatible with having a doxastic obligation and with being responsible for what one believes" [p. 72]; later Peels distinguishes this view from 'strict doxastic compatibilism', which is apparently the view that responsibility for belief does not require the ability to believe otherwise [p. 150]. These are highly idiosyncratic usages

of the term, since compatibilism in the philosophy of action is exclusively reserved for a family of views according to which some valued property (usually free will or moral responsibility) is compatible with causal determinism. Perhaps Peels thinks that the position he calls doxastic compatibilism can be true only if responsibility is compatible with causal determinism (that thought is suggested by his mistaken claim that compatibilism in the philosophy of action is a thesis about the inability to act otherwise [p. 72]). But this is a view that would be rejected by many philosophers. After all, some compatibilists – so-called classical compatibilists and new wave dispositional compatibilists [e.g. Huoranszki (2011); Vihvelin (2013)] – hold that responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise, and some incompatibilists – source incompatibilists [e.g. Pereboom (2001)] – deny that responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise.

In fact, questions concerning whether responsibility requires the ability to do otherwise, or intentional control, are related to but distinct from questions concerning whether these properties are compatible with causal determinism. Peels conflates them, I suspect, because he rejects the conception of *agency* he associates with compatibilism. He doesn't see that this conception of agency, while indeed best developed in the hands of compatibilists, is not committed to any particular metaphysics of causation. It can be accepted by anyone, no matter what their stance on issues to do with determinism and responsibility. In fact, I will suggest, it *should* be accepted by everyone. This conception of agency provides us with resources that we need for understanding ourselves and for making ourselves better agents (if not for holding one another responsible).

The conception of agency I have in mind is the one that is represented in *Responsible Belief* by Matthias Steup (2012). I want to abstract away from the details of Steup's view, and indeed of others in the same family [e. g. McCormick (2015)]. I'm interested in these accounts as accounts of control, not of responsibility, and it is what they share, rather than what distinguishes them, that is useful for these purposes. Accounts in this family understand control as consisting in a kind of sensitivity to reasons. These views owe an enormous debt to the influential work of John Martin Fischer, alone and together with Mark Ravizza [see especially Fischer & Ravizza (1998)]. My own views are also indebted to theirs, but I develop the account of control as reasons-responsiveness along somewhat different lines [Levy (2017)].

On my view, an agent exercises control over an action or the formation of a belief to the extent to which the process which causes the belief or action is sensitive to reasons in an appropriately patterned man-

ner. Sensitivity to reasons consists in recognizing them as considerations in favour of alterations and appropriate adjustment in response. Agents possess control when this sensitivity is sufficiently *fine-grained* and sufficiently *broad*. To say sensitivity is fine-grained is to say that the relevant mechanism (or the agent: control is exercised at multiple levels, with higher levels constituted by lower level mechanisms) is capable of recognition and appropriate response to relatively small gradations in the consideration. Reasons come in various strengths, and the smaller the gradations in strength I am capable of responding to, the more control I exercise. To say sensitivity is broad is to say that the relevant mechanism or agent is capable of responding to a broader range of reasons. When agents have sufficiently fine-grained and sufficiently broad sensitivity, they possess control (how much sensitivity to reasons is sufficient for control? That differs depending on the task and the stakes).

To illustrate: take my control over my driving. I have more control than a novice: there is a broad range of reasons in favour of modulating my driving that I am capable of recognizing (unlike the novice, I am capable of recognizing changes in road conditions as a reason to slow down, say) and I exhibit fine-grained responsiveness to these reasons (I may intentionally adjust my speed up or down by much smaller increments, or deviate only a few degrees left or right). A professional driver has much more control than me: she recognizes more reasons and responds in a finer-grained way. The novice has some control over the car, though perhaps not enough to be allowed to drive on his own. I have sufficient control for normal driving conditions; the professional driver has still more. In some contexts, we will want to say that the novice, or I, do not possess control; in others, we may assign control to all of us.

It should be plain that this account of control is compatibilist only in the weak sense that it does not *require* indeterminism. It is not compatibilist in any stronger sense: someone who thinks that moral responsibility or free will require alternative possibilities and that the possession of these alternative possibilities is incompatible with causal determinism, need not reject this account of control. They need reject only the claim that this kind of control is sufficient for free will or moral responsibility. Similarly, someone who thinks that epistemic obligations require what Peels calls “intentional control”, which is a capacity intentionally to believe that p or that $\sim p$, need not reject this account of what control consists in. Indeed, she may believe that an agent exercises intentional control *by* exhibiting appropriately patterned sensitivity to reasons.

Why does Peels think that sensitivity to reasons is insufficient for control over our beliefs? He presents us with a thought experiment which, he claims, show its inadequacy. Imagine creatures who form beliefs as we do, by tracking reasons in appropriately sensitive manner, but which lack the capacity to *influence* what they believe. They cannot, that is, gather evidence, inculcate (alleged) intellectual virtues in themselves like open-mindedness, or improve the functioning of their cognitive mechanisms. Peels thinks that we should say that the belief formation of these creatures is not “up to them”. They simply believe the products delivered to them by their cognitive mechanisms. To make them the kinds of creatures capable of believing responsibly, he suggests, we need to add intentions. We freely do only those things we intend to do.

I do not share Peels’ intuition that intentions add anything of significance to agency or indeed that they add anything that is appropriately described as control. Appropriately reasons responsive mechanisms constitute our control systems: what Peels seems to be after, in adding intentions to the mix, is some way of controlling our control systems. But we would exercise control over our control systems only by adding more in the way of control systems which function in exactly the same kind of way as the original systems: if the original systems are not sufficient for control, then neither are they sufficient when augmented by more of the same (unless, of course, they thereby become finer-grained or broader in their sensitivity; but that’s a way of being responsive to reasons not an *alternative* to such responsiveness). Intentions that were not themselves the upshot of reasons responsive mechanisms would not promote our control. They would, at best, add an element of randomness to the mix. If intention formation and guidance is independent of our reasons responsiveness, it would detract from our control. Since we could not, by hypothesis, exercise our power of intention formation *for a reason*, it would seem to be merely arbitrary.

Nor do I share Peels’ worry that the creatures he imagines are in some sense the puppets of their cognitive mechanisms. Of course, what they believe is “up to them”; when their cognitive mechanisms respond to evidence and track reasons, that is the agents responding to evidence and tracking reasons. They are partially *constituted* by these mechanisms, not distinct from them. Agents are not identical to such cognitive mechanisms, but the constituents of agents that are not cognitive mechanisms – not responsive to reasons – *in principle* cannot play any rational role in belief formation or update. Is the capacity to influence our beliefs useful? Of course, but that’s because this capacity plays a role in fine-tuning rea-

sons responsiveness. If the creatures are ideally reasons responsive, then they don't need this capacity (it has nothing to add to their epistemic capacities). And if they are not ideally reasons responsive, they may benefit from the exercise of the capacity to influence their beliefs, but such a capacity is *itself* a deployment of our reasons responsive mechanisms. It is not something independent of them, but a way of making ourselves better responsive (more sensitive, broader in receptivity and of course in receipt of more evidence) *by* training up those mechanisms in the light of reasons to do so. Again, nothing (epistemic) besides these mechanisms is needed or can play a (non-accidental) beneficial role.

Why does Peels apparently believe that the conception of agency and control outlined above can be accepted only by compatibilists? Philosophers of action – compatibilist and incompatibilist alike – have long been alive to the dangers of identifying determinism with coercion, causation or constraint. As Robert Kane, perhaps the single most influential defender of libertarianism today says, such identifications are bad reasons for thinking that compatibilism is false. Determinism should not be confused with constraint, coercion, compulsion or control by other agents [Kane (2005), pp. 18-19]. But Peels does seem to identify deterministic causation with some kind of external constraint; hence, I conjecture, his search for an account of agency which postulates, or requires, some extra-mechanistic influence to secure responsible action and belief.

Consider, for example, his claim that we are *forced* to our beliefs. Peels argues that we are subject to synchronic force in believing: every belief we adopt is a belief we are forced to at that moment (usually, Peels says, by the evidence; p. 138). We may be responsible nevertheless because we can influence what we come to believe; this diachronic capacity for influence underwrites our responsibility despite this force (conversely, diachronic force – in those instances it exists – removes all responsibility). I find this set of claims mysterious, but before I turn to this issue, I want to highlight the conflation of causation with force. We can see how this is mistaken, adopting Peels' own definition of force:

S is forced to φ iff (i) **S** φ -s, and (ii) what **S** wills cannot make a difference as to whether or not **S** φ -s [p. 135].

This strikes me as a reasonable definition of what being forced comes to. But with this definition in mind, it should be clear that we are not (normally) forced to adopt the beliefs we form. The idea of being forced 'by the evidence' to a belief is just the kind of confusion that Kane warns

against. Our coming to a belief in the light of the evidence is not our being forced against, or even independently of, our wills. It is rather the evidence setting our wills. The suggestion that there is some kind of agential power missing when we form beliefs in this way postulates a demand for a power that is extra-evidential and extra-rational, and such a power cannot itself be exercised for reasons. We are not forced to act by merely causal forces, and when they operate through the mechanisms constitutive of our agency such causation is *our* acting. Similarly, we are not forced to believe when reasons sensitive mechanisms respond appropriately to evidence: that is just our (agentially) coming to believe.

As far as I can see, the only alternative to this view is some kind of dualism, according to which in addition to the set of mechanisms that constitute our reasons sensitivity there is a separate self which – somehow – is able to assess and respond to reasons and intervene on those mechanisms. Even if Peels is willing to accept the ontological costs of postulating such a self, it is mysterious how it would be able to assess and respond to reasons. It is, after all, independent of the cognitive mechanisms that underwrite our reasons sensitivity. What resources does this separate self have for rational behavior? Of course, we can suggest that the separate self is itself constituted of reasons responsive mechanisms. But then either there would need to be yet another self to intervene in these mechanisms, or they must be sufficient to ground agency. And if they are sufficient to ground agency, why are the first order mechanisms not sufficient? I doubt Peels wants to go down this rabbit hole. Yet it is what he seems to be committed to. This is clearest in his claim that the person who is intoxicated or mentally ill is forced to act as they do, on the grounds that their “will or intentions could not make a difference to what she did or failed to do” [p. 162]. What clearer statement could there be that our will or intentions is independent of the mechanisms that are disordered in these persons? This is not a slip; it is the view to which Peels is committed.

As well as rejecting the idea that evidence forces agents to their beliefs, I also reject the claim that we can usefully think of luck as ever reducing to force. Luck usually works through agential mechanisms. Does luck ever reduce to ignorance? I doubt it, though not because I take issue with Peels’ descriptions of how ignorance functions in the cases he describes. It is one thing to show that the proximate explanation for an action or omission is ignorance and another thing altogether to show that the action or omission is reducible to ignorance. I think it would, in fact, be more plausible to say that these instances of ignorance reduce to luck

than to say that luck in these cases reduces to ignorance: luck is the more basic and more encompassing explanation and therefore more apt to serve as the reducing base than the reduced phenomenon. I won't address the prospects for reduction here. Doing so would require a detailed exploration of the nature of luck, including those elements of luck that Peels leaves out of his otherwise illuminating account (constitutive luck is not well understood on the model he proposes, nor appropriately eliminated on the basis of the fact that it does not fit his model). I have developed a detailed account of luck elsewhere [Levy (2011), (2016)] and it would be redundant to describe it here.

Let me turn now to a quite different issue. In arguing against the view (which I have defended elsewhere) that clear eyed akrasia somewhere in the causal chain leading to belief possession is a necessary condition of being blameworthy for possession of the belief, Peels claims that we can be responsible for actions caused by dormant or tacit beliefs. A dormant belief is one that has been occurrent but no longer is; a tacit belief has never been occurrent but is nevertheless believed (call the conjunction of dormant and tacit beliefs dispositional beliefs). Peels' thought is that an agent might be responsible for an action (including the kinds of actions that ground responsibility for belief on his account, of course) because "they can be blamed for not activating those beliefs" [p. 194]. It is an interesting claim, but it requires more of a defence than it is given here if it is to do the work he wants from it.

In defence of the claim, Peels presents a banal example. Someone giving a lecture can make a claim that is *based* on their beliefs without consciously considering those beliefs [p. 195]. More generally, our dispositional beliefs shape our cognition and action *literally* all the time we are awake: everything we do is guided by beliefs we do not entertain at the moment of action. The claim that we can be responsible only for actions caused by consciously entertained beliefs sets the bar for responsibility high indeed. Of course, I am not concerned with defending responsibility, but I am concerned with seeing most of our actions as expressions of agency par excellence, so I have a stake in accepting that dispositional beliefs can shape behavior in ways that are paradigmatic of such agency. We need an account of agency which gives due weight to how dispositional beliefs guide its expression.

In the light of such an account, however, we should recognize that even *mere* agents responsible for behaviors shaped by their dispositional beliefs, it would not be in virtue of failing to activate dispositional beliefs. Let me introduce another distinction: as well as being tacit or dormant,

dispositional beliefs may be online or offline. The online/offline distinction cross cuts the tacit/dormant distinction: each of the latter may be on or offline at any moment. There is plenty of evidence that beliefs may be online without the person being conscious of them. When agents are primed with cues, for instance, these cues affect their subsequent processing of information. Elsewhere, I have provided a detailed argument for the claim that these online nonconscious beliefs shape behavior in ways that differ from how conscious beliefs shape behavior, and that these differences are relevant for the attribution of moral responsibility [Levy (2014), (2016)]. Briefly, these attitudes lack the breadth in functional role that conscious beliefs tend to have. As a result, behavior driven by them is much less flexible than behavior caused by conscious states and may not be expressive of the broad range of states constitutive of the agent.

On some occasions, I have suggested – when the action is novel, in particular – these facts are sufficient to undermine responsibility for the action. Note, however, that even if this claim were wrong, it does not follow from the fact (if it is fact) that dispositional beliefs that are online may play an exemplary role in cognition and action that agents can reasonably be expected to activate their dispositional beliefs. The latter are, by hypothesis, offline, and states that are offline are *not* playing a role in cognition and behavior. How can agents reasonably be expected to bring them online, when they are not appropriately cued to do so? I suspect, moreover, that when they are cued but fail to bring these beliefs online, this fact is due to a glitch in agency, rather than something for which the agent can be faulted.¹

It is true that some philosophers have argued that we can be responsible for actions that are partially explained by offline dispositional states [see, for example, Arpaly (2002); Smith (2008)]. But their account of *why* agents may be responsible for such actions is not available to Peels. These philosophers are proponents of ‘real self’ accounts of responsibility, according to which agents are responsible for actions that express who they are or their quality of will. It is an entailment of these accounts that responsibility never requires alternative possibilities (except insofar as access to such alternatives makes a difference to the real self). In maintaining that responsible belief requires the capacity to believe otherwise, Peels commits himself to rejecting real self views. As a matter of fact, I suspect that real self theorists are mistaken in thinking that their view entails that agents are responsible for actions partially explained by offline states (because I doubt that these actions are expressive of the re-

al self; see Levy (2014)). In any case, such an account cannot come to Peels' aid here.

I have argued that Peels' account of force is inadequate. It is not the case that we are forced to our beliefs. Rather, we typically form our beliefs agentially, in response to evidence. There may be reasons to think that we are not responsible for our synchronically acquired beliefs (in fact, I think there are), but they are not the reasons he identifies. Let us suppose, however, that he is right: that we acquire beliefs synchronically in a way that undermines our responsibility. Peels claims that we can nevertheless believe responsibly because we can influence what we end up believing. We can influence the doxastic mechanisms that (we agree) are central to synchronic belief acquisition. We can gather evidence or change our context such that we are exposed to different doxastic influences. We can work on our intellectual virtues and vices [p. 91]. All this is true and important. But the fact that we exercise diachronic control in these kinds of ways is no solution to the problem of synchronic force. If synchronic force is a problem, then diachronic control will not solve it, and if diachronic control will solve it, then synchronic force is not a problem.

Chen is now an open-minded person (here I assume – for the sake of argument only [see Levy (2006)] – that open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue). Suppose, further, that she is open-minded because she exercised diachronic control. Her parents were narrow-minded and brought her up in the same mould: she became open-minded because she came to the realization that being narrow-minded is wrong and as a consequence deliberately engaged in a series of actions that led her to her current intellectually virtuous state.² How did she come to have the belief that her narrow-mindedness was a vice? If she acquired it synchronically, it was forced on her (Peels must say). Let us suppose, then, she acquired it diachronically. But a regress threatens: how is she to acquire these beliefs without being forced to them at some point in the causal chain?

All intentional actions are, after all, partially explained by the agent's beliefs. If she acquired those beliefs synchronically, then they were forced on her (according to Peels), so it is hard to see how she is responsible for the actions they cause. She may bootstrap her way to open-mindedness, through a long series of actions, of course. But each of those actions is partially caused by an antecedent belief state. How does the magic happen? The problem here is a version of the well-known tracing problem in the free will literature. It is widely accepted that agents may be responsible for actions they do not perform freely in vir-

tue of the fact that they are responsible for coming to be in the circumstances in which they act. Similarly, one may reasonably believe that one is responsible for a character trait in virtue of a series of prior actions that resulted in one's having it. But responsibility cannot be indirect all the way: it must bottom out in direct responsibility. On Peels's view, however, there are no candidates for direct responsibility, because at each time such a candidate occurs, it is forced on the agent.³

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Notes

¹ Peels holds that to believe that p is to think that p [p. 29]. I find this claim unilluminating. Folk psychology and scientific psychology alike recognize that agents may take themselves to believe that p but be mistaken (as in self-deception). It is also plausible that agents sometimes unconsciously believe propositions that they do not take themselves to think. For this reason, I hold that an adequate account of belief will focus on the functional role of representational states, not on whether agents take themselves to hold them [see Levy (2015)]. Dormant beliefs and tacit beliefs may well have different functional roles when they are online. When they are offline, they occupy no functional roles at all, though they are disposed to come to occupy such roles given certain triggers.

² In describing Chen as an agent who had an intellectual vice coupled with a belief that it was a vice, I follow Peels himself [p. 144]. Indeed, he goes further, describing some agents as having racist beliefs coupled with the belief that such beliefs are bad [p. 151]. It seems that something along these lines (though it may be weaker than the direct conflict that occurs in these cases) plays much the same role in his account as a benighting act plays in Holly Smith's (1983) account of culpable ignorance [see pp. 112-13]. I suspect that these kinds of conflicts are extremely rare: agents who believe that p almost always believe that their belief is justified, and the agent who is intellectually lazy usually believes that testing their beliefs is not worth the effort.

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