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Responsible Belief- An Interpersonal Approach

by

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Honors Thesis

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Department of Philosophy

University of Richmond

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## Introduction

It can be quite jarring when we encounter someone with beliefs radically divergent from our own, especially when they are invective or pernicious. Worse still is the experience of encountering one so confident in their convictions that they doggedly refuse to provide any justification for their claims or engage in any sort of deliberation about them. When someone loudly confronts you with the assertion that modern medicine is made up of a series of malicious lies perpetuated by bad actors, you may step away from the experience not only with the conviction that this person is deeply misguided, but that they are potentially harmful to those around them. You may marvel at the fact that in a world of readily available and widely circulated evidence to the contrary, this person has maintained such wildly fanatical beliefs against all odds. You may also wonder what exactly is wrong with such a state of affairs, and who is to blame for it. Are such people all malignant extremists with some sort of vendetta against truth, or are they a victim of some wrongdoing? Should you approach them with indignation or pity? What has gone wrong here?

I have been deeply troubled by such questions. Beliefs occupy a powerful role in all aspects of our lives and are essential to many of the most impactful realms of human activity. All intellectual, political, and social activity relies on the stable function of our belief practices, and our everyday experience certainly reflects this. At times, we find it fitting to hold people responsible for the beliefs they develop, and if these beliefs are in some way bad or incorrect, to blame them for them. However, this is in tension with the popular sentiment that opinions are open to (mostly) free adoption and expression. So long as your beliefs do not directly harm someone (e.g. forms of violent bigotry), it does not seem fit to vocally censure or punish a

stranger for the beliefs they hold, *even if* they are completely unfounded or somewhat problematic- “that’s just my opinion” is usually a viable defense.

These observations led me to question our ordinary belief practice, and to attempt to find some consistency within it and find out what an ideal belief practice should look like. If an unfounded belief is not directly harmful, can we hold someone responsible for adopting it? Can we blame them for it? If so, in virtue of what are we responsible for our beliefs? Which ones can we be blamed for adopting? Above all, how can we be good believers, how can we be *responsible* believers?

In this work I will attempt to answer each of these questions in the order that I have presented them. I will begin with a chapter on doxastic responsibility (that is, responsibility for our beliefs). Following accounts by Angela Smith and Robert Carry Osborne, I will conclude that we are in fact responsible for the extreme majority of our beliefs, including those over which we exercise little to no control. I will then follow this chapter with one on doxastic blame, arguing that blame directed at beliefs is a species of protest aimed at the violation of epistemic norms. I will argue that such protest is grounded and legitimized by the liability to harm that epistemically flawed beliefs (even those which are not apparently malignant) expose those around us to. I will conclude that chapter by arguing that unlike doxastic responsibility, doxastic blame is indeed mitigated by the amount of control we have over the development and maintenance of our blameworthy beliefs.

In the final two chapters, I will apply these analyses of responsibility and blame to questions regarding when we are blameworthy for our beliefs, and how we can minimize such blameworthiness. Put differently, these chapters will consider what obligations we have as believers, and how we can best fulfill them (i.e. how we can be *responsible* believers). I will

argue that all beliefs which we can be blamed for developing result from forms of epistemic *akrasia* or carelessness. From this observation, I will conclude that the best means available to us to become responsible believers is to cultivate a virtue of epistemic *conscientiousness*, that is, care applied to our epistemic activities which prioritizes the truth over all other interests.

In the course of these chapters, I build on the work of Rik Peels and Robert Carry Osborne. Peels has offered an account of responsible belief which answers the questions above in a way I found mostly satisfactory. In a recent paper, Osborne offers an account of doxastic responsibility based heavily on the intuition that we are social creatures who rely on one another to be reliable trackers of information. When we fail to do so, we put others around us at risk of (sometimes) serious harms; Osborne legitimizes near universal responsibility for beliefs upon this intuition.

Osborne's intuition that our interpersonal status is the grounding for many of our responsibilities and obligations is one which I think cannot be understated, and one which has not received adequate treatment in the recent literature. Many of my conclusions in this work will be in some way based upon or motivated by this fact. Peels' account, while generally adequate in its approach, fails to properly appreciate this interpersonal dimension of our doxastic lives. Accordingly, I describe the account offered below as a synthesis of these accounts.

An important note should be made about the scope of this work. In attempting to figure out which beliefs we can be blamed for holding, I will not be considering how we should go about regulating such beliefs in practice. The intersection between respect for the autonomy of others and instituting a more ideal belief practice is a challenging area, and one I have neither the space nor the knowledge to treat properly. I will have little to nothing to say about how we should handle encountering such beliefs in others. Instead, I will say much about *which* beliefs

are blameworthy, *why* we can be blamed for them, and how we can navigate our own doxastic lives in a way that minimizes such blame. In doing so, I hope to provide a means by which we can become more responsible believers.

## 1. Doxastic Responsibility

Before we consider how one believes responsibly, we will have to consider what it means to *be* responsible for a belief. Is it appropriate to attribute responsibility to beliefs, and if so what conditions must hold in order to do so? Does doxastic responsibility (that is, responsibility for beliefs) come in degrees, and does it ever disappear entirely? To answer such questions, in this chapter I will attempt to provide an account of doxastic responsibility. I will then use that account to articulate the necessary conditions for doxastic responsibility, and when it is diminished or heightened.

Many accounts of responsibility (doxastic or otherwise) require that an agent have some form of control over a belief in order to be responsible for it, following the principle “ought-implies-can.” I will spend much of this chapter arguing to the contrary that control is not requisite for doxastic responsibility. Instead, following accounts given by Angela Smith and Robert Carry Osborne I will argue that doxastic responsibility should be regarded as a form of *answerability* which is independent of control. I will first consider arguments which require varying forms of control for doxastic responsibility. After advancing my objections to these accounts, I will continue to consider accounts on which doxastic responsibility does not require control. I will conclude by endorsing an account recently provided by Robert Carry Osborne, which ultimately grounds doxastic responsibility in the potential beliefs have to harm others in one’s epistemic community.

### **Doxastic Responsibility and Control**

For the sake of clarity, I will begin with a definition of responsibility *simpliciter* borrowed from Rik Peels. To say that an agent is responsible for an act or belief is to say that it is



appropriate to normatively evaluate them for that act or belief.<sup>1</sup> In considering accounts which require control for doxastic responsibility, I will begin with two well-known characterizations of control over beliefs. As originally distinguished by William Alston, *direct* control involves an agent coming to believe that  $p$  by an act of will while *indirect* control involves an agent executing action(s) that bring it about that they believe that  $p$ .<sup>2</sup>

Those who claim we have direct control occupy the more extreme position, which entails that we are at least sometimes capable of confronting a given proposition  $p$  and simply deciding to believe  $p$  or  $\sim p$ . With clear cut cases, direct control is fairly easily refuted. Alston provides a now famous counterexample to such claims, claiming that one cannot for an arbitrarily large sum of money believe that the U.S is still a colony of Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> One may be able to *bring it about* that I have such a belief through a rigorous project of self-deception in order to obtain the money, but one cannot simply will that they have this belief for such prudential reasons.<sup>4</sup>

The natural move for an advocate of direct control here is simply to limit the scope of directly controllable beliefs to those which are not obviously true or false. Neil Levy attempts to undermine this strategy by considering instances where our evidence weighs approximately equally for competing beliefs. He argues that in such instances we are equally powerless to directly choose between such competing beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Instead, we will often simply assume one belief or the other out of necessity. In cases where we end up favoring one belief over the other, Levy argues that we never *directly* decide upon one. Instead we first perform necessary acts as dismissing our doubts or evidence, which in turn bring it about that we believe.<sup>6</sup> This precludes

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<sup>1</sup> Rik Peels,

<sup>2</sup> William Alston, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2, (1988): 260.

<sup>3</sup> Alston, 263.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Levy, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Levy, 138.

the possibility of direct control over such equally supported beliefs, and instead suggests that we utilize indirect control in such cases.

Given such refutations, one might regard indirect control as a more plausible alternative. Advocates of indirect doxastic control maintain that we can come to develop a belief that  $p$  through an action or series of actions. This is often analogized to other states of affairs we are responsible for maintaining through some series of practical actions. I am responsible for how long and unkempt my hair is despite the fact that I cannot will that it be neat and trimmed on a whim; still, I can schedule an appointment at the barber or cut and comb it myself.

Many find this form of control over our beliefs plausible, and I am inclined to agree. This category of belief could include such projects as intentional acts of self-deception, or more mundane cases of impulsive or biased thinking: I may want to believe that materialism is true and in order to do so seek out especially well formulated arguments for it and make sure I encounter only weak objections against it.

However, few find this a convincing form of control on which to ground doxastic responsibility. Say that in a local election for dairy inspector I believe candidate  $A$  is more aligned with my interests than candidate  $B$ . If doxastic responsibility is grounded in indirect control, then it seems I am responsible for my false hope in  $A$  because I failed to recognize  $B$  early on and bring it about that I believe she better represents my interests, perhaps by shutting myself off from any and all evidence to the contrary. Such responsibility does not seem instructive in any epistemically appealing way, and the reasons one might have for choosing one belief early on rather than another remain mysterious. Alston articulates this point well: "To try

to get oneself to believe that  $p$ , prior to being in a good position to tell whether  $p$  is true or not, is not a procedure to be commended from the epistemic standpoint.”<sup>7</sup>

Even if one admits that such projects may sometimes be a clearly preferred course of action for moral or prudential reasons, such cases are certainly the exception and cannot serve as general ground for doxastic responsibility. The fact that I am in principle capable of indirectly arriving at beliefs by choice thus seems unrelated to any responsibility we normally ascribe to beliefs.

The common thread between these direct and indirect varieties of control is their directedness towards a specific belief that  $p$ . I would locate the weakness of the above accounts in this intentionality. To put it more directly, I would argue that doxastic responsibility cannot be grounded in our ability to intentionally develop a specific belief. Still, this does not exhaust the options available for doxastic responsibility based on doxastic control. For one can still intentionally impact the *way* they acquire beliefs without intentionally acquiring any *specific* beliefs. A much stronger position along these lines has been extensively developed by Rik Peels.

As above, Peels argues that while we cannot intentionally direct ourselves towards any given belief, we still exert control over the beliefs we acquire through what he calls *indirect influence*. More rigorously, Peels says that we have this sort of influence over belief when we cannot intentionally believe that  $p$ , but we can intentionally perform an action that determines whether we believe that  $p$ .<sup>8</sup> Say for example I currently believe that human hearing does not detect frequencies greater than 20kHz. I could seek out and listen to a 21kHz tone to test my belief; should I hear it, I would reject my original belief. Therefore, there are actions I could

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<sup>7</sup> Alston, 273.

<sup>8</sup> Peels, 90.

voluntarily perform that would determine whether I believe  $p$  or  $\sim p$  without intending to believe either.

Peels argues that this indirect influence is generative of what he calls “intellectual obligations.” One has an intellectual obligation to perform an action if failure to perform that action will lead one to acquire beliefs that are in some way bad, whether objectively or subjectively. In other words, if one has a belief when they should not, they have at some point violated an intellectual obligation.<sup>9</sup>

With this account, Peels capably avoids requiring the intentionality I noted was a weakness in the above views built upon indirect and direct control. However, I do not think this makes his account wholly secure. When we assign responsibility to someone because their actions have led to some bad outcome, we generally set some limit on how far such responsibility can extend. If I cut down a tree on someone else’s property, I am responsible for a number of things: property damage, trespassing, etc. Still, I am not responsible for *every* bad outcome that is causally linked to my vandalistic behavior. I could reasonably be expected to appreciate that removing that tree decreased the property value, deprived the owner of its shade, and perhaps even some fruit. Given this, it seems abundantly clear that I am responsible for such losses. However, nobody could reasonably hold me responsible if the owner developed melanoma thirty years later from increased sun exposure; this remains true even if had the tree remained standing he would have remained healthy. Likewise, I am not responsible for preventing his car from being totaled even if for a certainty the tree would have fell on his car in a storm that very week had it remained standing.

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<sup>9</sup> Peels, 99.

Likewise, in the realm of belief it seems our responsibility for having good or bad beliefs does not ultimately bottom out in some failure to meet our intellectual obligations. This remains true even if (as Peels requires) fulfilling those obligations would unequivocally have avoided acquiring that belief. Just as one cannot always anticipate the outcome of some action, epistemic failings often have unexpected consequences. One could easily violate some intellectual obligation end up in a better position practically, morally, or even epistemically just by circumstance. Or vice-versa, one could fulfill their intellectual obligations with superhuman reliability and still end up with beliefs that are in some way bad. What I hope to emphasize with such examples is the fact that intentionally committing some act does not always render one responsible for its outcome.

Peels attempts to meet this objection of “doxastic luck” with a caveat to his original formulation of intellectual obligations: responsibility does not apply in cases where the belief formation is *accidental* to their fulfillment or violation of intellectual obligations.<sup>10</sup> While this does make Peels’ account extensionally appropriate, it is hard not to see it as *ad hoc*. Given his account, Peels is naturally concerned with retaining the idea that our resourcefulness as epistemic agents determines our quality as believers; this position becomes hard to maintain if it seems that a not insignificant portion of our beliefs are acquired not as a result of the vicissitudes of fate.

### **Doxastic Responsibility without Control**

In the above section, I have argued extensively against grounding doxastic responsibility in different forms of control. To reiterate, I *do* think that we are able to intentionally develop beliefs by the indirect process described above (though it is very likely inadvisable to do so). I also think that the indirect influences Peels grounds doxastic responsibility in are both in our

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<sup>10</sup> Peels, 217.

control and massively shape which beliefs we form and how we are evaluated for forming them. However, if one finds the above issues with these control-based accounts compelling, they should not think that any of these accounts provide a compelling ground on which to base doxastic responsibility.

The motivation for requiring control for responsibility is intuitive; it seems almost oppressive to hold someone responsible for states of affairs they have no capacity to prevent. For this reason, there is a high burden for those who want to attribute responsibility to believers regardless of their control over their beliefs. I will consider two such analyses of responsible belief offered by Angela Smith and Robert Carry Osborne. By outlining these accounts, I hope to demonstrate that for many states of affairs we retain responsibility despite a total lack of control.

Smith's account of responsibility is built upon an analysis of responsibility as *answerability*. Smith argues that many of our attitudes (not just beliefs) are essentially evaluative: they reveal "what we judge to be of value, importance, or significance."<sup>11</sup> Smith concludes that if a mental activity is *rationally connected* to some such evaluation, one can reasonably be asked to acknowledge and defend the judgements it implies; reasons can be demanded as to why they hold the views indicated by their mental attitude.<sup>12</sup> For Smith, being the appropriate target of these reasonable demands (i.e. being answerable for these mental activities) is a form of responsibility.<sup>13</sup>

One may worry that this contradicts my provided definition of responsibility (i.e. responsibility consists in being the target of appropriate normative evaluations). If I have a mental attitude of malice, that attitude is rationally connected to the commitment that the object

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<sup>11</sup> Angela Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115 (no.2), 251.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, 256.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, 270

of my malice deserves to suffer some evil. This commitment can be normatively evaluated; in most contexts it will be regarded as reprehensible. It is also clear that beliefs are indicative of our evaluations and commitments, and thus Smith's account extends to beliefs.

Note that this account of responsibility for attitudes does not require voluntary control. Voluntary control is not necessary for answerability, even in cases where there is no voluntary action I could have committed or not committed to avoid acquiring a certain mental attitude.<sup>14</sup> In the above example of malice, I am not made evaluable in light of some decision I made in the past that set me to developing a malicious attitude; I am evaluable based on the content of the attitude my malice reveals.

However, there is one remaining worry with Smith's account and others like it. While it may be true that one can appropriately ask for a justification for someone else's belief (or some other mental attitude), there does not seem to be any reason why this represents a *demand* with normative force. Robert Carry Osborne raises this worry "Why might I *owe it to you* to actually provide my reasons if you demand them? Why should it matter to you what I believe, and what my reasons are?"<sup>15</sup> Put another way, Smith does not seem to offer with her account a reason why such demands should actually be met.

Osborne argues that in the realm of belief we are often obligated to justify and defend our beliefs. This is because the information we transmit as believers is critical to various social projects which depend upon the reliable transmission of information.<sup>16</sup> As a result, if we fail to (?) fulfill our role as information tracking and transmitting beings poorly, great epistemic and

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, 263.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Carry Osborne, "A social solution to the puzzle of doxastic responsibility: a two-dimensional account of responsibility for belief," *Synthese* (2020), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, 11.

practical harms can result.<sup>17</sup> Thus, in Osborne’s account we find an alternative grounding for answerability: believers are subject to normative evaluation through the demands of *harm-avoidance*.<sup>18</sup> One cannot simply refuse to participate in the practice of justifying and defending their beliefs without putting others at risk.

Beyond this difference in grounding, Osborne’s account of doxastic responsibility is similar to Smith’s account. Like Smith, Osborne regards doxastic responsibility as a form of answerability. Osborne also notes that this notion of answerability does not require the ability to change our beliefs.<sup>19</sup> Osborne offers his “Rational Situatedness Condition” (RSC) as a slightly tweaked form of Smith’s account, where one is answerable for holding a belief iff the belief is “rationally linked to their evaluative judgements, assessments, or dispositions towards activities like reasoning themselves that have not been implanted in ways that bypass or usurp her rational capacities.”<sup>20</sup> This final caveat represents the only significant difference between Osborne and Smith’s accounts. With it, Osborne attempts to extend answerability to beliefs which one initially acquired in ways that usurp their rational capacities (e.g. implanted by a brain surgeon or hypnotist) but still reveal their evaluative judgements, etc.<sup>21</sup> Thus, on his account we can be responsible for such beliefs (while they are excluded by Smith’s).

### **The Limits of Doxastic Responsibility**

I’ll now take stock. Given that he does not locate doxastic responsibility in some form of voluntary control, and improves upon Smith’s otherwise convincing account, I find Osborne’s account preferable over others discussed here. I will thus regard doxastic responsibility as a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Osborne, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Osborne, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Osborne, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Osborne, 8.



form of answerability for beliefs: we are responsible for beliefs insofar as we are the target of reasonable demands to justify them. We are in turn obligated to respond to these demands in virtue of our membership in a wider epistemic community, as refusal to participate in a responsible epistemic practice puts members of our epistemic community at risk. If we accept this account, we are in a position to answer the questions originally posed at the start of this chapter. Namely, what must be true in order for one to be responsible for a belief? Does doxastic responsibility come in degrees, and does it ever disappear entirely?

The first question has already been rigorously answered by Osborne's formulation of RSC. One is answerable (and thus responsible) for any belief which is linked to one's evaluative judgements, assessments, etc. The question of whether responsibility is binary or comes in degrees much more interesting, and much less clear. I see two possible answers given the contents of the above accounts. We could regard responsibility as a purely binary state. If one is at all answerable for a belief according to RSC, they are responsible for it. If they are not answerable, then they have no responsibility for such beliefs. Alternatively, we could admit of degrees in responsibility. We could apply a level of salience to responsibility, where one can be somewhere between *trivially* and *significantly* responsible for a given belief. I think the latter is more plausible, as we do not seem to regard ourselves as having equal responsibility for every belief.

The above accounts lend themselves easily to this concept. Some of the evaluative commitments/judgements noted by Smith or Osborne are more significant than others. If one of my mental attitudes or beliefs is rationally connected to my evaluative judgement that the work of dog surfing instructors is useless, I may be trivially answerable for that belief. In other words, I'm surely responsible for it, but my lack of appreciation for such an obscure profession is not

very morally significant. On the other hand, I would be *significantly* responsible if I believed that natural disasters are sent by Neptune as a means of selectively removing sinful populations from the world. The evaluative commitments connected to such a belief have much more significance than the previous example: they contain the judgement that certain people groups are cumulatively worse than others, and that in virtue of this they deserve death.

I have used highly reprehensible examples here to make my point, but keep in mind that attributions of responsibility are not exclusive to or constituted by blameworthiness. To say that someone is more responsible for holding one belief than another is to say that the moral stakes are raised. Perhaps Osborne would want to extend this further and argue that doxastic responsibility increases with the magnitude of potential harm.

The second question concerns whether we can have beliefs for which we are not responsible. While answerability requires that a belief be rationally connected to one's evaluative judgements, it does not seem to be a conceptual necessity that beliefs are *always* connected in this way. So, it seems plausible that we could hold some beliefs without being answerable for them. I imagine beliefs similar (but not identical) to Peels' so called dormant beliefs can serve as an example of this. Peels defines dormant beliefs as those beliefs one has had in the past but has not considered for some time. If however one were asked whether they believe that  $p$  when they believe it dormant, they would affirm that they believe that  $p$ .<sup>22</sup>

One could for example form a belief that  $p$  which is at one time rationally connected to their evaluative judgements. However, over time their evaluative judgements can independently change, while they still by habit either truly believe that  $p$  or merely respond that they believe that  $p$  when asked.<sup>23</sup> If at some later point such beliefs bear no relation to their evaluative

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<sup>22</sup> Peels, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Whether or not such responses are an instance of belief may not be clear.

judgements and they have yet to realize this, they may not be responsible for believing that  $p$ .<sup>24</sup>

The less realistic cases of belief implantation (e.g. through consuming belief inducing pills or hypnotism) also provide examples of belief without responsibility. Nevertheless, responsibility is only eliminated for these beliefs if they bear no relation to the believer's evaluative judgements.

A natural objection against this and other views grounded in answerability is that they ascribe responsibility to far too many beliefs. Beyond the two exceptions noted above, there are very few beliefs for which we are not answerable (and thus responsible). Some will take issue with the fact that such accounts make responsibility for beliefs nearly inescapable, worrying that such stringent responsibility is unfair. Smith counters this sentiment well by noting that "being held responsible is as much a privilege as it is a burden."<sup>25</sup> It must be remarked that responsibility is not some dogged judgement we should all want to escape; instead it is a mark of respect and recognition of us as capable epistemic agents within our larger epistemic community.

## **Conclusion**

I do not think that control over our beliefs is an appropriate ground for doxastic responsibility. Instead, I characterize doxastic responsibility as a form of answerability: we are subject as believers to reasonable demands for justification of our beliefs so long as they are rationally connected to our evaluative commitments. These normative demands are given force by the potential they have to harm others in our epistemic community if not justified. Thus, while our responsibility for beliefs comes in varying degrees based on the normative impact they have, there are very few beliefs for which we lack responsibility altogether.

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<sup>24</sup> Though they may be responsible for not duly reflecting on whether the belief that  $p$  was truly aligned with their values.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, 269.

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## 2. Doxastic Blame

Having argued above for a notion of doxastic responsibility as answerability, in this chapter I will begin to expand upon this claim. Above, I used Peels' definition of responsibility *simpliciter* as the state of being appropriately liable to normative evaluations. Likewise, here I will use Peels' definitions of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness as the states of being appropriately liable to positive and negative normative evaluations respectively.<sup>26</sup> Here I am only concerned with doxastic blame, for three reasons. First, our evaluative practices concerning beliefs are much more interesting and difficult in the case of blame than in the case of praise or neutral appraisal. Second, a refined account of doxastic blame is also crucial for answering certain questions related to responsible belief practices, as I hope to demonstrate in subsequent chapters. Finally, given that praise and blame are conceptually similar, much of what is said here concerning blame is still applicable to praise, *mutatis mutandis*.

In my analysis of doxastic blame, I will begin by emphasizing a distinction between *the evaluation of one as blameworthy* and *blaming* proper. These are distinguished by the fact that judging one blameworthy is necessary but not sufficient for *blaming*, which is an act rather than a judgement.<sup>27</sup> A large part of this section will concern what must be added on top of judging that one is blameworthy to yield an act of blaming. Moreover, some have argued that blame in the doxastic realm *cannot* extend beyond the mere observation that one is blameworthy for a particular belief or set of beliefs. I will argue that on the contrary blame in the doxastic realm can and does extend beyond the mere evaluation that one is blameworthy for their beliefs, by appealing once more to Osborne's observation that harms resulting from faulty beliefs endanger

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<sup>26</sup> Rik Peels, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Angela Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest," in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

one's epistemic community. These harms ground and legitimize practices of doxastic blame which extend beyond mere evaluation. I conclude by considering how factors such as degrees of harms and the believer's control raise or lower the blame we assign to those who hold particular beliefs.

### **Varieties of Blame**

In his influential essay "Freedom and Resentment," P. F. Strawson noted a tension between different attitudes we can adopt in interpersonal interactions. He distinguishes what he called the "objective stance" from our normal attitudinal practices where we hold each other responsible, reacting to each other with attitudes such as resentment or gratitude.<sup>28</sup> I will refer to the latter category as the "participant stance." The objective stance represents a policy according to which one treats others essentially as objects or obstacles to be navigated, accounted for, or modified.<sup>29</sup> Taking an objective stance, I might navigate interpersonal interactions by asking how I should treat my target to achieve my own ends (or those of society at large) in the most effective way possible. The participant stance involves some manner of response which engages with one's target on a morally active level, i.e. by treating them as a moral agent, with all the expectations and entitlements which that entails. Often this involves what Strawson calls "reactive attitudes." When confronted by someone's moral failings, attitudes like blame, anger, or shame in response would be examples of these.

Strawson argues that we cannot conceive of human relations with a purely objective stance and must engage in attitudes belonging to the participant class when we blame others. Since Strawson's essay however, this distinction between the objective and participant stances

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<sup>28</sup> P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*, (London: Methuen, 1974), 9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

has been utilized extensively in literature on blame, and a tension has arisen between competing camps. Some agree with Strawson that blame cannot be divorced from such participant attitudes as anger and resentment, while others argue that such attitudes are not necessary for blame.

Andrea Westlund provides an analysis of blame which affords an apt diagnosis for such debates. Westlund bases her diagnosis on the observation that we engage in many distinct but related speech acts when we use the word “blame” in everyday contexts. More rigorously, Westlund notes that blame has a “behavioral” sense when it exhibits attitudes and feelings, “verdictive” sense when one delivers a (negative) judgement about behavior, and a “exercitive” sense when it exercises some power of the blamer (e.g. asserting a claim, imposing an obligation, etc.).<sup>30</sup>

So, we can mean a variety of things when we say that we blame someone, from expressing our anger at another’s moral failing to demanding recompense or seeking advice. I would argue that while some of these instances of blaming require Strawson’s participant attitudes, for others (such as the exercitive) such attitudes are not necessary.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, I claim that we could truly *blame* someone and remain totally dispassionate when evaluating the normative content of their acts. Many will not be convinced of the possibility of such dispassionate evaluative blame. One could argue to the contrary (as Strawson does) that some modicum of those interpersonal attitudes is necessary for blame regardless of how it is felt or expressed. In the absence of such attitudes, they would argue that we merely *judge* the targets of our evaluations; it is an overstatement to call such acts blaming.

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<sup>30</sup> Andrea Westlund, “Answerability without Blame?” in *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, eds. Katerina Hutchison, Catriona MacKenzie, and Marina Oshana, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 258.

<sup>31</sup> Jessica Brown also seems to be of this opinion, c.f. “Some of the reactive attitudes often associated with blame, such as resentment and guilt, don’t always seem appropriate in the case of blameworthy belief.” Jessica Brown, “What is Epistemic Blame?” *Nous* 54, no. 2 (2018), 390.

Angela Smith provides an account of moral blame which addresses such objections. According to Smith, while the relationship between blaming and such reactive attitudes is one of close association, it is not one of necessity.<sup>32</sup> Smith supports this claim with abundant counterexamples of cases in which we clearly blame someone for their acts yet remain dispassionate: one relevant to this discussion is a persistently unreliable friend. After dozens of instances of a friend falling through, most of us will cease to feel any significant reaction to our friend's lack of reliability, yet we can blame them all the same.

So, instead of defining blame in terms of such reactive attitudes, Smith offers two alternative requirements for blame: the blamer must first believe that the object of their blame is blameworthy (that is, they must believe that negative normative evaluation is appropriate), and their blame must be an instance of *moral protest* against this object.<sup>33</sup> By moral protest, Smith means one adjusting their "attitudes, intentions, and expectations" towards the person they blame as a way of seeking moral acknowledgement.<sup>34</sup> A simple example of this may be seeking an apology from someone we blame for a morally reprehensible act. In such cases, our blame goes beyond merely judging that this person has done something wrong: we communicate that we have been wronged and seek an admission of that fact. Nevertheless, Smith does concede that arguments against her claim (i.e. arguments that reactive attitudes are necessary for blame) are not entirely unmotivated. Given the fact that the moral protest which *is* necessary for blame most commonly takes the form of such reactive attitudes, it is natural to conclude that the two are conceptually related.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Smith, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Smith, 41.



A further confusion results when one conflates *finding blameworthy* with genuine acts of blaming. To avoid this confusion, I will emphasize the distinction between the merely evaluative judgement that one is blameworthy and blame proper. The fact that one notices a failure to adhere to some relevant norm, whether that norm is epistemic, moral, or generated from some practice is not sufficient for blame. *This* is the mere judgement that the Strawsonian points to when objecting to the concept of dispassionate blame. Still, such judgements coupled with moral protest *are* sufficient for blame, regardless of whether such protest contains any negative reactive attitudes.

### **Doxastic Blame**

In discussing Strawson, Westlund, and Smith's work, I have only considered blame in the moral realm. Given this background, I will now consider what is unique to blame in the doxastic realm. In doing so I hope to answer two questions: when can we blame someone for holding a belief, and on what grounds? It seems that Smith's account could be easily transposed from the moral realm to the doxastic by changing the standards by which the object of one's blame is judged. Rather than judging that someone has done something morally wrong and protesting their act, doxastic blame refers to the recognition and protest of someone violating an *epistemic* norm. Still, this sidesteps the issue of what exactly those epistemic norms are. Moreover, why we should be normatively blamed for our epistemic failings remains mysterious, especially if this blame can justify reactive attitudes (outrage at someone's belief) or even punishment.

To these ends, Conor McHugh's analysis of the relation between truth and epistemic norms can be instructive. In his paper "The Truth Norm of Belief" McHugh argues that it is problematic to suggest that truth can serve as a grounding for doxastic norms. McHugh argues that truth cannot serve as the basis for general norms governing our beliefs, e.g. "one ought to

have true beliefs.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, McHugh argues that truth can (and does) serve only as an *evaluative* norm of beliefs. More rigorously, beliefs are good *doxastic* attitudes if true and bad *doxastic* attitudes if false.<sup>37</sup>

Without reiterating it in full here, McHugh bases his argument for this claim on the intuition that true beliefs are in some way correct, while false beliefs are in some way defective. So, the belief that my sister is honest may be independently good (e.g. practically or morally), but my holding this belief is better when it is true than when it is false. He also motivates his conclusion by noting that it explains many other epistemic norms; we adhere to norms such as withholding judgement when we have insufficient evidence because such norms are good means of maximizing the true beliefs we have.

However, McHugh emphasizes that these evaluations can only apply to doxastic attitudes: we can only be evaluated in light of the truth or falsity of our beliefs *qua* believer, not *simpliciter*.<sup>38</sup> So McHugh claims that in light of the *truth*, I can be evaluated as *believing poorly* if I come to the conclusion that the northern hemisphere experiences winter in July, but this is as far as any appropriate truth-based evaluation extends. This is especially troubling if applied to epistemic norms generally. One could similarly agree that those who formulate beliefs by irrational (e.g. unreliable) means should be evaluated as poor believers, but this is as far as any appropriate evaluation extends for such agents.

In this restricted scope an important objection resurfaces: while such norms may be universally applicable to all of us *qua* believer, there is no rationale for why we are required to be good believers (e.g. given a truth norm, to have true beliefs). If none exists, only a trivial type

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<sup>36</sup> Conor McHugh, “The Truth Norm of Belief,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93, (2012), 11.

<sup>37</sup> McHugh, 22.

<sup>38</sup> McHugh, 23.

of evaluative blame could exist in the doxastic realm. One could only blame someone *qua* believer for having a false (or unreliably generated) belief in the same way they would blame someone *qua* runner. That is, blame concerning one's false belief would only amount to the charge that one was not adhering to the norms of the practice.

To this objection I repeat Robert Osborne's important insight from the previous chapter. We are obligated to be *good* believers in virtue of the potential harms we could cause by being poor epistemic agents.<sup>39</sup> To use the above example, if I regularly run marathons for my own enjoyment and suddenly fail to finish one because I've stopped training, I cannot be blamed for running that race poorly except *qua* runner. But consider Pheidippides, the soldier who delivered messages from the Battle of Marathon for which the modern race is named. If he failed to run those extensive courses and deliver important information for the war effort, many more of his Greek countrymen would have died in battle. So not only could Pheidippides be blamed in virtue of being a poor runner if he collapsed one mile in, but he could also be blamed in virtue of failing his obligations as a soldier. The case is quite similar for all of us as epistemic agents, as others in our epistemic communities can be hurt, misled, and suffer losses if we fail to manage our beliefs responsibly.

With this in mind, we can now move on to answering the question of when doxastic blame is appropriate. If we deny McHugh's argument and make the truth norm the basis for doxastic blame, it may seem that *all* false beliefs render their believer blameworthy insofar as they jeopardize others in the larger epistemic community. However, this claim seems implausibly radical. An account that regards all of us as perpetually blameworthy for our beliefs does not seem at all right. Nearly all of us hold false beliefs; if I myself could somehow empty

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Carry Osborne, "A social solution to the puzzle of doxastic responsibility: a two-dimensional account of responsibility for belief," *Synthese* (2020), 9.

the contents of my head and sort the false beliefs from the true, I'm not confident more than half would turn up in my favor. Thus, if I am to reject the conclusion that we are all perpetually blameworthy in virtue of having false beliefs, I must either provide expansive excusing conditions which mitigate our blame in most cases, or modify my concept of doxastic blame to include considerations beyond the effects one's beliefs have on their epistemic community.

I will go with the latter approach. My reason for doing this is stated well by Peels: excuses should not be sweeping conditions that apply to all universally and should be the exceptional situation instead of the norm.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, taking beliefs themselves as the grounding of one's blame would in an important sense miss one's target. When we blame an agent, we do so not simply in virtue of some negative trait or circumstance, but because we believe they have brought about some ill through the violation of a relevant norm.<sup>41</sup> Thus, I will identify blameworthy beliefs as those formed in violation of a relevant epistemic norm (without excuse). What these norms are will be explored in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, while I still believe that epistemic harms ultimately ground doxastic blame, such blame is not the sort of condition we can apply to all universally without considering the context in which one develops a false belief. This is especially true since we are not always in a position to reliably gather true beliefs, nor are we always in a position to appreciate the proper way to devote our epistemic resources to optimize the outcome of our belief forming processes. In order to formulate an acceptable account of doxastic blame, this context dependence must be accounted for. In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider such context dependence.

### **Degrees of Doxastic Blame**

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<sup>40</sup> Peels, 183.

<sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Karin Boxer for bringing this fact to my attention.

I will first argue that how blameworthy one is for a particular belief is determined largely by just how significant that belief is and how dangerous holding it is to one's epistemic community. I think this flows naturally from Osborne's claim that doxastic responsibility is ultimately grounded in the potential for harms in one's epistemic community, and also echoes my claim of variable responsibility from the previous chapter. Briefly restated, my argument for variable responsibility is as follows: if epistemic harms ground our normative evaluations of someone's beliefs, surely the development of more consequential beliefs deserve more intense judgements. The case is no different for doxastic blame.

Some examples can help further this point. Imagine that I believe that the *medulla oblongata* is situated immediately behind the right eye socket. This belief is clearly false, but in my daily life I am fairly unlikely to cause significant harm by forming it. I might not find anyone who cares enough about neural anatomy to accept my false belief without verification, nor am I likely to perform brain surgery anytime soon. However, if a practicing neurosurgeon were to adopt this belief, they would be extremely blameworthy simply for forming and maintaining that belief in virtue of their profession; they could perhaps communicate it to surgeons in training or perform malpractice as a result. With this example I hope to have demonstrated that with the formation of the same belief, the appropriate amount of blame can shift wildly depending upon the position one is in to cause harm based upon that belief.<sup>42</sup>

A potential objection to this claim is that the above example the additional blame is entirely a product of the professional role the neurosurgeon occupies. Instead, an account of doxastic blame should rely only on desiderata that apply universally and address us purely as believers. In replying to such an objection, I would first argue that no such account can track

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<sup>42</sup> See Sanford Goldberg, "Should have known," *Synthese* 194, (2017), 2863-2894 for more on the relation between such roles and doxastic obligations.

well with our actual practice of doxastic blame. We are all required to develop particular true beliefs based upon very individual considerations; if doxastic blame serves to regulate this practice any reliable account will track with this variation. I would also argue that such examples of varying doxastic blame are not restricted to the professional realm. We can be blamed for many beliefs simply as believers, and we assign different levels of blame to these beliefs depending on their potential for causing harm.

One might also object by arguing that this sort of blame completely flouts McHugh's conclusion (which I endorsed above) that truth norms cannot ground practices of doxastic blame. However, doxastic blame of the sort above is not justified exclusively in light of a truth norm. Norms governing professional conduct and our roles as epistemic agents in a larger community are the primary basis for doxastic blame directed at such failings. It is not in virtue of the fact that myself or the neurosurgeon *develop* this false belief that we are blameworthy. It is in virtue of the fact that it could be reasonably demanded of either of us to take steps to prevent the acquisition or maintenance of such a belief. Such demands are themselves made reasonable by the harm this belief could cause in our epistemic community. However, the potential for harm in the case of the neurosurgeon is orders of magnitude higher than that of myself or any layperson. The doxastic blame appropriately attributable to her for this epistemic failing is much higher as a result.

I should note that in the above example my relative inability to harm others with my false belief in the location of the *medulla oblongata* does not *eliminate* my blameworthiness, it only minimizes it. However, I would argue that for some beliefs, doxastic blame can be entirely eliminated by the relative inability to produce epistemic harms. I imagine Chase Wren's examples of useless beliefs, such as the belief that the number of blades of grass on the

Whitehouse lawn is even.<sup>43</sup> Even if we knew for a fact that that belief was false, it seems ludicrous to imagine myself being blamed for it in some nightmarish scenario where the death of several orphans results from my false belief.

One might argue to the contrary that some minimal blame does persist in such instances. I would respond that it is important to keep in mind that we are extremely limited as epistemic agents; we have limited time and resources to devote to the management of our beliefs. Perhaps if omniscience were humanly obtainable, I would be obligated to acquire a true belief about the number of blades of grass on the Whitehouse lawn to prevent any potential nightmare orphan scenarios. But as it stands, figuring out the truth of that useless (and soon to change) fact is not a good use of my epistemic resources. If I am only concerned with limiting the harms I impose on my epistemic community, that end would be better served by improving my beliefs regarding the most impactful facts first, so as to most effectively use my limited epistemic resources. If such a prescription has force, I should be blamed if I waste my time pursuing a true belief regarding the Whitehouse lawn.<sup>44</sup> In doing so I unwisely spend my epistemic resources and end up with more poorly managed beliefs than I otherwise might have, which puts my epistemic community at increased risk of harms.

The second factor I see as influencing the appropriate amount of blame that can be assigned to a belief is the degree of control that one has over a belief. In the previous chapter I expressly denied that control is necessary for doxastic responsibility. However, the case is not the same for doxastic blame, as the above discussion should make clear. Recall that I have

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<sup>43</sup> Chase Wren, "Truth Is Not (Very) Intrinsically Valuable," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98, (2017), 111.

<sup>44</sup> I do not really think such prescriptions can have normative force, I merely include this example to demonstrate that when doxastic blame is grounded in epistemic harms the limitations we have as epistemic agents make blame inappropriate in some instances where we cannot be obligated to spend our epistemic resources.

characterized doxastic blame along the lines of Smith's "moral protest account": in blaming, one judges that someone is blameworthy, and engages in some form of protest against their blameworthy act. On this account, I believe that blame directed at an act outside of an object's control is incoherent.

Lindsay Rettler articulates what generates this requirement for control well. Rettler conceives of blame as a demand that someone *acknowledge they have failed* to adhere to a norm; she notes that by being a demand of this sort blame extends beyond the merely evaluative judgement that one has failed in the fulfillment of that norm.<sup>45</sup> Given my endorsement of Smith's "moral protest" account, Rettler and I disagree on the specific attitudes required for blame. Still, I do not think that Rettler's "demand for acknowledgement" and Smith's "moral protest" differ on this point of control.<sup>46</sup> Whether blaming consists in protesting the actions of the blamed or demanding an acknowledgement of their failure to adhere to a norm, blaming when one's target had not control over their action is incoherent. In either case, there must be something the believer could have done *in principle* to avoid acting in a blameworthy way. Doxastic blame cannot therefore extend to beliefs over which we exercise no control.

To place these concepts in a doxastic context, consider Angela Smith's example of Bert and Abigail, who both have equally reprehensible racist beliefs. While Abigail was born into a community that imposed such beliefs upon her, Bert developed his racist beliefs coming from a family that encouraged more tolerant and egalitarian attitudes.<sup>47</sup> Smith uses this example to emphasize the point that both Bert and Abigail are equally responsible for their racist attitudes.

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<sup>45</sup> Lindsay Rettler, "Answerability without Blame?" *Synthese* 195, (2018), 2211

<sup>46</sup> I should note as well that the sort of control that Rettler and I have in mind here is identical with the indirect influence that Rik Peels argues we have over beliefs. c.f. Rettler, 2215.

<sup>47</sup> Angela Smith, "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life," *Ethics* 115, no. 2 (2005): 267.



Given the arguments I presented in the previous chapter, I hope I have made it clear that I agree with Smith on this point.

Interestingly though, Smith notes that these cases demand different degrees of criticism.<sup>48</sup> This seems to align well with intuition, as we often take into account the epistemic habits of a believer before we blame them for any flawed belief. The case of Bert and Abigail thus supports the relationship between doxastic blame and control I have offered above. Abigail is still blameworthy for her beliefs, as it was not in principle impossible for her to seek out and acquire more tolerant views. However, Bert is much more blameworthy for the same beliefs, as he had to actively fight against the current of his sympathetic upbringing to end up with the pernicious beliefs he has. In just the same way, we wouldn't regard someone who read half a Wikipedia page on cholera as equally blameworthy as someone who checked with experts and consulted multiple sources, even if they both ended up with the same false belief that cholera is caused by a virus; no less would we be lenient with someone who swung a golf club in a lightning storm.

Thus, I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that while factors such as potential harms or control have no effect on whether an agent is *responsible* for a belief, they do impact the degree and type of blame that is appropriate to attribute to that agent for having that belief.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

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### 3. Responsible Belief

Having characterized doxastic blame and the conditions which mitigate it, I will now argue for an account of responsible belief as blameless belief. In doing so I will build on arguments advanced by Rik Peels. While I agree with Peels that responsible belief is blameless belief, I will note several key areas of emphasis on which our accounts diverge. Accordingly, I will begin this chapter with a defense of responsible belief as blameless belief rather than praiseworthy belief. Once I have defended this view, I will then apply my analysis of doxastic blame to demonstrate the differences my concept of blameless belief has with that of Peels. I will then conclude by summarizing and restating what criteria I argue are necessary for blameless belief.

#### **Responsible Belief as Blameless Belief**

Before I consider arguments for characterizations of responsible belief, I will first make one terminological clarification. In the first chapter of this work, I considered the conditions required for doxastic *responsibility*. Questions of doxastic responsibility consider when it is appropriate to normatively evaluate someone for their beliefs. Doxastic responsibility should not be confused with the concepts of *responsible belief* or *responsible believers* which I will consider in this chapter. When I call a belief or believer responsible, I do not mean to refer to the appropriateness of normative evaluations of either (except perhaps indirectly). Instead, I refer to the evaluation we give to either when we approve of them in a specific way. I call a believer responsible in the same way we would call a ship captain *responsible* if she manages to safely navigate her ship, and we would call an accountant responsible if she thoroughly avoided clerical errors.

In order to characterize responsible belief, I will use the same normative terms that I have referenced throughout this work, namely praise, blame, and neutral appraisal. If one takes this approach, it seems there are only two possible analyses of responsible belief: one could require that responsible belief be either praiseworthy or blameless. These competing theses seem both mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive.<sup>49</sup> I prefer the latter account of responsible belief as blameless belief and will support this preference using arguments provided by Peels.

My defense will benefit greatly by beginning with a more rigorous characterization of these two theses. We can regard one as holding a belief praiseworthily if they are appropriately liable to positive evaluation for holding that belief. Likewise, one holds a belief blamelessly if one is immune to negative evaluation for holding that belief. It follows from these definitions that all praiseworthy belief must also be blameless, as one cannot simultaneously be evaluated positively and negatively for holding the same belief.<sup>50</sup> Thus, we can see that these two camps both agree that all praiseworthy belief is responsible; their contention concerns only those neutrally appraised beliefs which deserve neither praise nor blame.

To defend the claim that responsible belief is blameless rather than praiseworthy, Peels offers several considerations meant to demonstrate the explanatory superiority of the former. Peels first suggests that our evaluation of agents should be analogous in both moral and epistemic contexts.<sup>51</sup> In order to call someone responsible in the moral realm, we do not require that they perform any praiseworthy actions; it seems instead that to be morally responsible, one needs only avoid violating any ethical norms.<sup>52</sup> To give an example, we can call a forester

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<sup>49</sup> The remaining alternative is to regard blameworthy belief as responsible, but this seems incoherent. c.f. Anthony Booth and Rik Peels, "Why Responsible Belief is Blameless Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy* 107, no. 5 (2010): 258.

<sup>50</sup> One cannot *appropriately* be simultaneously evaluated in these ways, at least. c.f. Booth and Peels, 257.

<sup>51</sup> Rik Peels, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 44.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

responsible if he manages his woodlands such that they remain in the same condition throughout his stewardship.<sup>53</sup> Performing praiseworthy actions such as expanding and improving the woods are not required for his responsibility, while blameworthy actions such as overharvesting suspend it.

Peels uses epistemic examples as well to show that praiseworthiness is too high a standard for responsible belief. One such example is skepticism about the external world: most everyone believes in some external world, but it does not seem right to call anyone praiseworthy for doing so. Belief in the external world would therefore be considered irresponsible if responsible belief must be praiseworthy.<sup>54</sup> I will further emphasize that such examples can be extended to much more mundane matters than skepticism. It seems that praiseworthy belief is somewhat rare, and even more so is an agent who can achieve it consistently. It would not be right to call the vast number of beliefs which we hold inescapably *praiseworthy*; should we require such praiseworthiness for responsibility, it would seem that we all hold a great deal of beliefs irresponsibly. Take for example the belief that I in fact have a brain which deals with all of my sensory input and information processing. It seems bizarre to consider me praiseworthy for holding this belief (and countless others like it), and equally absurd to call me irresponsible for holding it.

Thus, I consider the analysis of responsible belief as blameless belief decidedly preferable to those requiring praiseworthiness. While Peels goes on to refute arguments against responsible belief as blameless belief, thorough advocacy for responsible belief as blameless belief is neither the primary goal of this work nor necessary to my project. Accordingly, I will

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<sup>53</sup> Except in cases where he has an obligation to improve them.

<sup>54</sup> Peels, 45.

further develop my account of responsible belief with the (hopefully well supported) assumption that blamelessness is sufficient for it.

### **Our Doxastic Obligations**

Having concluded that responsible belief is blameless belief, I will now continue to lay out my characterization of blameless belief itself. In the previous chapter I identified doxastic blame with the violation of doxastic norms without excuse. Accordingly, in the remainder of this chapter I will consider which doxastic norms we are obligated to adhere to, and what conditions excuse us for their violation. I will begin with a summary of Rik Peels' account of our doxastic obligations and contrast it with my own. In doing so, I hope to refine Peels' account through emphasis on the interpersonal doxastic obligations I have heavily emphasized throughout this work.

Peels develops his account of responsible belief in terms of "intellectual obligations."<sup>55</sup> While I have described Peel's analysis of such obligations elsewhere, I will begin by more thoroughly describing them here. Peels argues that we have an intellectual obligation to perform some action or series of actions when the failure to do so will lead us to acquire beliefs that are in some way bad.<sup>56</sup> It is important to note that these intellectual obligations are *all-things-considered* obligations.<sup>57</sup> That is, one cannot be blamed for violating an intellectual obligation when doing so was necessary to prevent acquiring an even worse belief; we are only doxastically obligated to do what we should *all things considered*.<sup>58</sup>

Peels further develops this initial definition of intellectual obligations with a few key distinctions. The first of these is the distinction between *objective* badness and *subjective*

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<sup>55</sup> Peels, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Peels, 119.

<sup>58</sup> Anthony Robert Booth, "All Things Considered Duties to Believe," *Synthese* 187, (2012): 512.

badness. On Peels' account, we have *objective* intellectual obligations to perform those actions that would in actuality prevent us from acquiring bad beliefs, and *subjective* intellectual obligations to perform those actions which we mistakenly *think* would prevent us from acquiring bad beliefs.<sup>59</sup> So even if my acquiring the false belief that my desk is made of marble is not objectively bad by any measure, if I think it is in some way bad I still have a subjective obligation to correct it. Peels also distinguishes *contingent* and *non-contingent* intellectual obligations. We have intellectual obligations *contingently* which derive from the specific roles and professions we occupy, while *non-contingent* intellectual obligations apply to all doxastic agents.<sup>60</sup>

While Peels lingers on these points and develops them with a great deal of rigor, the condensed summary I have made so far should be sufficient for the purposes of this work. Already, it should be fairly easy to note a divergence in grounding between my account and Peels'. Recall that in the prior chapter I emphasized the fact that the epistemic harms which result from our beliefs are the ultimate grounding for doxastic blame. For this reason, I do not take epistemic fault itself to be the primary justification for doxastic blame: while one's belief may be epistemically or practically bad, the *pro tanto* obligations generated by these considerations are *always* defeated by any competing moral obligation to minimize the harms one causes.

To argue for and clarify this claim I will point once more to Chase Wren's examples of pointless truths (originally coined by Johnathan Kvanvig).<sup>61</sup> Such examples provide a useful heuristic, because they allow us to observe our intuitions about epistemic problems isolated from

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<sup>59</sup> Peels, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Peels, 101.

<sup>61</sup> Chase Wren, "Truth is Not (Very) Intrinsically Valuable," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98, (2017): 111.

any moral or practical considerations. This is important because often we value knowing the truth of the propositions for primarily instrumental reasons- for most engineers knowing Newtonian mechanics is useful only insofar as it aids in bridge construction, for example.<sup>62</sup> Examining the value of true propositions divorced from such instrumental gains thus allows us to more clearly see their worth compared to similar moral stakes.

Take as an example the proposition that the number of grains of sand on the western coast of South Africa is a multiple of three. I would not be any morally better or worse off simply for knowing the truth value of this proposition, but I would be minimally better off epistemically. If we ask ourselves how much moral cost we are willing to incur in order to secure such epistemic gains, I think such examples make clear that the answer is none. In such cases, even the smallest moral cost (e.g. a pinprick given to a total stranger) seems unjustified when the only gain is knowing the truth of a proposition for its own sake: we simply do not care enough about such propositions to harm someone. I regard the case as the same for any other purely epistemic obligation, no matter how epistemically significant.

Accordingly, while I will not argue that we have no epistemic obligations whatsoever, for our *all-things-considered* obligation to align with our epistemic obligation the *all-things-considered* obligation must either be completely non-moral or align with some moral obligation.<sup>63</sup> Put differently, any epistemic obligation at odds with a moral obligation will be defeated by it. It is also important to note that such purely epistemic scenarios are quite rare in any real circumstances; as I pointed out in the last chapter, how we use our epistemic resources

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<sup>62</sup> Miriam Schleifer McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence* (New York: Routledge, 2015): 8.

<sup>63</sup> Wren offers a related argument that there are no epistemic obligations. Instead, all epistemic obligations are parasitic upon some moral consideration. While I argue that there are still purely epistemic obligations (and thus disagree with Wren's conclusion), his arguments express the same advocacy for the primacy of moral obligations that I argue for here, nor does his conclusion undermine the ultimate point I make in this chapter. c.f. Chase Wren, "Why There are no Epistemic Duties," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 46, no. 1 (2007): 115-136.



and which true and false beliefs we have can make a huge difference to our moral standing. It would thus be quite difficult to divorce these seemingly distinct realms and arrive at a purely epistemic obligation. So, when considering the badness of our beliefs and its impact on our obligations, I place our moral obligations at the forefront.

To give a more concrete example to illustrate these concepts, assume I simultaneously believe all of the propositions in the following inconsistent triad.

- (1) If ducks are not around in late winter, they must migrate elsewhere.
- (2) Ducks are not around in late winter.
- (3) Ducks are not capable of long distance migration.

If we stipulate that I have an epistemic obligation to believe rationally, then continuing to believe all of these propositions would violate such an obligation and I would be required to revise my beliefs. While this epistemic obligation persists, I argue that I also have a moral obligation to my epistemic community to revise my beliefs. Again, this is grounded in the potential harm I might cause by continuing to hold such beliefs (e.g. by misleading children or wasting someone's time when they explain to me why I am wrong). I argue that this moral obligation provides a much stronger reason I ought to revise my beliefs than my purely epistemic duty to believe rationally.

This characterization of the interplay between our moral and epistemic obligations has important implications for my analysis of responsible belief. It also marks a significant departure my account will have from Peels' view. According to Peels, we have two main types of obligations grounded in epistemic badness: the first arises when we *believe* that the failure to perform some action will lead to the future acquisition of epistemically bad beliefs (such badness

is *subjective*).<sup>64</sup> The latter type arises in cases of doxastic discrepancy, in which we recognize something epistemically bad about our beliefs. Doxastic discrepancy generates an *objective* obligation to eliminate the discrepancy, and a *subjective* obligation to perform an action which one *thinks* will eliminate the discrepancy.<sup>65</sup>

Given what I have argued above about the import of moral obligations, I find this characterization to be so limited that it becomes irrelevant. This irrelevance stems from the fact that such moral obligations are ubiquitous in our everyday doxastic practice. Recall that I believe moral obligations always defeat any countervailing epistemic obligation. Since in almost all the instances where we have an epistemic obligation there is a concurrent moral obligation, our *all-things-considered* obligation is always aligned with what is morally demanded of us. I take these moral obligations to be objective (that is, they remain in some capacity whether or not the believer recognizes them as an obligation).<sup>66</sup> Since the extreme majority of our intellectual obligations are thus objective, I take Peels' distinction between objective and subjective obligations to be practically irrelevant.

Even if all of this seems correct, it may not yet be clear why it runs contrary to Peels' account. I argue that if the scope of our purely epistemic obligations is as restricted as I suspect, then the extent of our would-be intellectual obligations is much greater than Peels suggests in his account. Consequently, I argue that nearly all of our doxastic activities have a corresponding objective moral obligation owing to the potential harms bad beliefs could produce. While this may not run directly contrary to Peels' account (in fact, I think one could fit it in his framework without modification), it certainly aggravates a fear Peels had.

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<sup>64</sup> Peels, 106.

<sup>65</sup> Peels, 107.

<sup>66</sup> It seems Peels does as well, c.f. "When it comes to non-epistemic obligations, we have an obligation to avoid objective badness," Peels, 105.

Recall that Peels limits the scope of our objective epistemic obligations to cases of doxastic discrepancy. He motivates this constraint at least in part with the fact that our having an obligation in all cases of epistemically bad belief would result in practically infinite number of intellectual obligations which we routinely violate.<sup>67</sup> Without such restrictions on this class of objective epistemic obligations, every epistemically flawed belief we hold would represent a violation of our intellectual obligations. Considering all the beliefs we have which rest on faulty logic, a lack of evidence, and poor quality evidence, we would all routinely violate a staggering number of our intellectual obligations every day if these objective obligations were binding. Peels thinks that this is an unacceptable outcome for any realistic account of responsible belief. If my emphasis on the potential harms of beliefs commits me to an equally large number of doxastic obligations, how can I square my account with the multitude of obligations such harms would create?

I offer two considerations to mitigate such worries. I first reiterate that I do believe there are excusing conditions which limit the extent of doxastic blame. I will lay these out later in this chapter. The second is articulated well by Scott Stapleford in dealing with a similar issue which he calls “the justificational fecundity of evidence.” Stapleford recognizes that all the sensory data we receive and propositions we already believe justify a practically infinite number of further beliefs equally well.<sup>68</sup> So, if we have any duties to manage our beliefs at all (Stapleford argues that we do) it will be impossible to fulfill these duties perfectly.<sup>69</sup> Accordingly, Stapleford compares our epistemic duties to Kantian imperfect moral duties. Imperfect duties are distinguished as general guiding principles which seek to satisfy some general end rather than

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<sup>67</sup> Peels, 104.

<sup>68</sup> Scott Stapleford, “Epistemic Duties and Failure to Understand One’s Evidence,” *Principia* 16, no. 1 (2012): 167.

<sup>69</sup> Stapleford, 168.

inviolable maxims we are required to uphold.<sup>70</sup> When and how these duties are fulfilled requires our judgement, and there is no upper limit to their fulfillment.

A characterization of our doxastic (or in Peels' terminology, intellectual) obligations as imperfect duties is indispensable to our understanding of them, especially in the interpersonal context I have emphasized here. Nor is it unmotivated: no matter which metric one chooses as the base of our doxastic duties, there is no means available to us by which we can be perfect believers. It is impossible for us to establish a fully internally consistent doxastic framework, perfectly proportion our beliefs to our evidence, cultivate infallible intellectual virtues, etc. It is also impossible to spend all of our time examining the sum total of our beliefs to correct any errors we might have internally, or to seek out enough evidence to root out all of our false beliefs. When and how we seek to revise our beliefs requires us to develop sharp judgement in determining the best use of our epistemic resources. Thus any account based on perfect doxastic duties will be left wanting or will have to provide quite broad excusing conditions. Apart from these differences in grounding and the characterization of our doxastic obligations as imperfect duties, I can accept Peels' account of doxastic obligations without much modification.

### **Excused Blameworthy Belief**

Regarding excuses, Peels suggests two major categories which can mitigate or eliminate the blame appropriate to one's violation of an intellectual obligation. The first of these is force; if one is compelled to violate an intellectual obligation, then they are excused from blame for doing so.<sup>71</sup> The second category of excuse Peels offers is ignorance. Peels suggests that ignorance can provide a partial or full excuse for the violation of one's intellectual obligations in several

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Peels, 138.

instances. One can be ignorant of their intellectual obligation, their ability to fulfill it, or the fact that one of their actions will lead to the violation of intellectual obligations in the future.<sup>72</sup>

I agree that blameworthy beliefs acquired as the result of compulsion should be excused. I find Peels' account of ignorance as an excuse for the violation of intellectual obligations acceptable as well, but again feel it would benefit from increased emphasis on blameworthy ignorance. While Peels does acknowledge that ignorance itself can be blameworthy, I worry that he fails to properly emphasize and develop this point.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, I will elaborate on which cases of ignorance are blameworthy below.

To organize this discussion, I begin with a reminder of Peels' distinction between *contingent* and *non-contingent* obligations. Recall that these point respectively to the obligations we have as the result of the roles or professions that we occupy and the obligations attributable to all believers. Sanford Goldberg provides an excellent account of when ignorance can be blameworthy and thus fails to excuse for each of these types of obligations.<sup>74</sup> Goldberg argues that when it can be legitimately expected of one based upon some role they fill that they are aware of  $x$ , their ignorance of  $x$  is itself blameworthy.<sup>75</sup> While "some role they fill" may at first glance seem to point exclusively to professional or institutional roles, it is important to note that Goldberg extends his argument to those expectations which are appropriate to all as mature epistemic and moral agents.<sup>76</sup>

An example of such expectations is the assumption that one (if they belong to a community of mostly literate agents) read carefully. To illustrate why this extends beyond the

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<sup>72</sup> Peels, 179.

<sup>73</sup> Peels, 185.

<sup>74</sup> Sanford C. Goldberg, "Should Have Known," *Synthese* 194, (2017): 2863-2894.

<sup>75</sup> Goldberg, 2868.

<sup>76</sup> Goldberg, 2877

occupational or institutional roles we fill, imagine that a legal associate skips over several lines when editing an appellate brief. While they have certainly failed in their professional duty, they need not be an attorney to have this expectation legitimately thrust upon them; Goldberg argues that this and other similar expectations generate obligations upon us simply as mature epistemic agents, and not in virtue of any other roles we occupy.<sup>77</sup>

Thus ignorance can fail to excuse both our contingent and non-contingent obligations.<sup>78</sup> I will not go into detail as to what expectations can be legitimately imposed upon us either as believers or as a result of the specific roles we occupy. Such expectations are far too individual and context dependent to be articulated with any degree of rigor. However, I will emphasize that such blameworthy ignorance covers many of the cases we encounter in daily life; it is quite a rare circumstance that one should be ignorant while not violating any of their contingent or non-contingent obligations.

### **Responsible Belief as Harm Reduction**

I will now summarize this chapter with a collected restatement of my account of responsible belief. I have argued above that responsible belief is blameless belief. I have also noted that practically all of our doxastic obligations are imposed upon us in virtue of their moral force; we are thus blameworthy as believers when our beliefs put someone in our epistemic community in harm's way. Given the practically infinite number of beliefs we have which may create such harms, our obligations to minimize them are best characterized as imperfect duties: there is no upper limit to how well we can satisfy these obligations, and when and how we do is

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<sup>77</sup> The caveat that these epistemic agents must be mature is added to exclude those like children who cannot be expected to embody such epistemic virtues yet.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

a matter of judgement. There are also two major circumstances which mitigate the blame we are subject to for beliefs which generate harms.

Recall that in the last chapter, I distinguished between the mere judgement that one is blameworthy and blaming proper. Importantly, I concluded that blaming proper is only appropriate when the target of one's blame could have avoided acting blameworthily. This condition is generative of the two categories of excuse which I have noted above, excuses which make blame inappropriate.<sup>79</sup> One is not susceptible to blame if they developed their belief out of compulsion or ignorance, where their ignorance is not itself blameworthy. Ignorance is blameworthy when it could be reasonably expected of that believer to have performed actions to address their ignorance, whether or not they knew that such courses of action were available to them or that they had a duty to correct their ignorance.

Therefore, one holds a belief responsibly when they fail to generate harms in their epistemic community by holding that belief or are excused for doing so. Now that I have specified what makes individual beliefs responsible, in the next chapter I will continue to derive from this principle the long term characteristics which make *believers* responsible as doxastic agents: what course of action is advisable to us as believers in order to globally minimize the harms we impose on our epistemic community as the result of our beliefs?

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<sup>79</sup> To be precise, evaluative blame is still possible in such cases.

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#### 4. Doxastic Virtue

In the previous chapter, I provided an account of responsible belief as blameless belief and continued to characterize the doxastic obligations to which we are bound. In doing so, I found Rik Peels' accounts of each quite tenable, though argued that some points (mainly regarding the extent of our doxastic obligations and excusing conditions for them) were in need of emphasis and reframing. Throughout this work, I have emphasized that one of the most valuable insights an account of responsible belief can provide is guidance for believers. Given this importance, I now want to apply my characterization of faulty beliefs to this end. That is, I want to consider how we can best navigate our doxastic lives to reduce the number of faulty beliefs for which we are blameworthy.

In this chapter I will use the conclusions I have arrived at concerning doxastic obligations and blame to argue for a particular characterization of responsible believers. I argue that if responsible belief is blameless belief, responsible believers are those who act in a way such that their blameworthy beliefs are minimized. To this end, my primary aim is to provide an account of the qualities which minimize the blame one might be subject to as a believer. In doing so, I will draw primarily from prior accounts offered by Rik Peels and James Montmarquet. Peels' work on excusing conditions for doxastic blame provides a motivation for my account, and Montmarquet's work on epistemic virtue provides its content.

Based upon the conclusions Peels reaches in this argument, I will argue that the proper approach to believing well is the cultivation of doxastic virtue. I will ultimately conclude that Montmarquet's virtue of epistemic conscientiousness is the most critical quality for responsible belief. I will also expand upon his concept of epistemic conscientiousness to better account for the interpersonal dimension of belief I have emphasized throughout this work. Finally, I will

contrast this approach with alternative accounts which prefer the revision of one's current beliefs through reflection or different epistemic virtues and defend my preference for Montmarquet's approach.

### **Blameless Ignorance and the Regress Problem**

In this section I will lay out an objection Peels notes to his account of blameless ignorance and his response to this objection. The objection is centered on Peels' claim that ignorance is only blameworthy in cases where one could have prevented their ignorance by meeting their intellectual obligation to do so.<sup>80</sup> Peels notes that others such as Montmarquet, Michael Zimmerman, and William Fitzpatrick have voiced concerns that such a claim leads to an infinite regress of blamelessness.

The issue arises when one considers that to be blameworthy for ignorance on Peels' account, their blame must result from a past action which caused the ignorance.<sup>81</sup> However, the same could be equally well said of those past actions themselves: the action(s) which caused one's ignorance were performed in ignorance, so there must be some even more distant past action in virtue of which this past ignorance is blameworthy.<sup>82</sup> Such explanations lead quickly to an infinite regress, with no terminal blameworthy action to break the cycle. Take as an example my ignorance that I was meant to provide feedback on a friend's paper draft. If I am blameworthy for this ignorance, I could point to a past action where I failed to exercise due cognizance of my obligation which would have prevented my ignorance (e.g. setting a reminder or writing myself a note). However, to avoid blame for my failure to write myself a note or set a

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<sup>80</sup> Rik Peels, *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 188.

<sup>81</sup> Peels, 189.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

reminder, I could just as easily point to my ignorance that such cognizance was required of me. From there, the regress continues indefinitely.

The only means of breaking such a cycle are cases of *akrasia*, where one clearly recognizes their intellectual obligation and decides to violate it anyway.<sup>83</sup> However, Peels notes that objectors maintain that *akrasia* is quite rare relative to how prevalent blameworthy ignorance is. Differently put, there are not enough cases of *akrasia* to account for all the blameworthy ignorance we perceive. Thus we are left on the horns of a dilemma, wanting neither to limit the cases of blameworthy ignorance to such rare cases of *akrasia* or to tolerate the infinite chains of blamelessness noted above.<sup>84</sup>

Peels responds to this argument by claiming that cases of *akrasia* in the doxastic realm are neither as limited nor as impotent as the objectors suppose. He begins his response by demonstrating that cases of *akrasia* compound in a way that makes them a viable solution to these chains of ignorance. If we suppose that *akrasia* is responsible for only five out of every hundred blameworthy acts, we need only go back 15 actions before it is more likely than not that one is blameworthy for their act due to *akrasia* than ignorance.<sup>85</sup> This fifteen act chain may provide quite a distant grounding for one's blame, but it is not infinitely far away as the objectors suggest.

Peels also suggests that *akrasia* is much more prevalent in the doxastic realm than intuition initially suggests. His suggestion is grounded in the claim that epistemic *akrasia* is importantly different from the moral *akrasia* on which we base our intuitions. He motivates this claim by pointing out that while in most instances we have a clear indication of the consequences

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Peels, 190.

<sup>85</sup> Peels, 192.

of our moral failings, the consequences of those in the epistemic realm are more obscure: we are much less likely to foresee the particular beliefs we will acquire when we violate an epistemic obligation, as well as the greater moral and practical consequences that will result.<sup>86</sup>

To give an example, imagine a man called Alonso ignores evidence in an attempt to maintain a belief that is dear to him, knowing that his behavior is epistemically unsound. In such cases it seems extremely difficult to predict the consequences of such epistemically bad behavior. His unsupported belief may lead him to mislead others, to fail to fulfill certain obligations he has, or nothing may come of it at all. Contrast this with the case of Alfonso (who happens to be a high ranking bureaucrat) taking a bribe from an oil executive wanting to evade environmental regulations. The consequences of Alfonso's akratic bribe taking are much more clear: likely some environmental damage will result, respect for the regulations will diminish, and future corruption may be provoked by the success of the oil tycoon's attempt. While in the case of the bribe the consequences are not easy to ignore, the ambiguous consequences of Alonso's epistemic failings makes them much easier for him to commit even when he knows that they are epistemically flawed.

Finally, Peels also describes *dormant* and *tacit* beliefs as a possible source of blameworthy belief. Roughly, one holds a belief that *p* dormantly whenever one does not at the moment actively consider that *p*, but has in the past believed the *p* and not changed their mind since.<sup>87</sup> One holds a belief that *p* tacitly whenever one has never considered that *p*, but would when prompted believe that *p*. Peels argues that one can be blameworthy for not acting on a dormant or tacit belief.

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<sup>86</sup> Peels, 193

<sup>87</sup> Peels, 36.

Imagine for example that I dormantly believe my garbage disposal is full of silverware.<sup>88</sup> If I fail to inform my roommate that the garbage disposal is full of silverware while I watch them reach to turn it on, I am blameworthy even though I am neither ignorant nor acting from *akrasia*.<sup>89</sup> It is much more accurate to describe this as a case of epistemic *carelessness*, or blameworthy failure to act upon a dormant or tacit belief.

I have laid out Peels' response to this argument not primarily because I was troubled by the objection itself, but because his response provides a clear summary for what he takes to be the most common (if not an exhaustive list of) instances of blameworthy belief. It is particularly helpful because it synthesizes his accounts of intellectual obligations and excusing conditions into a single focus. One is blameworthy without excuse for a belief when one acts from this sort of epistemic *akrasia* or carelessly fails to act on a dormant or tacit belief.

While not critical for the purposes of this work, it may be of interest to consider whether or not on Peels' account doxastic blameworthiness is conceptually limited to these two cases. Given how thoroughly Peels develops these points, I suspect the relationship is indeed one of necessity, especially in the epistemic realm. Recall that Peels essentially limits our epistemic intellectual obligations to those that are subjective, i.e. those we recognize as epistemically bad.<sup>90</sup> This would seem to make *akrasia* or carelessness a necessary condition for epistemic blameworthiness, as on Peels' account we must recognize our epistemic shortcomings to have an

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<sup>88</sup> Perhaps I realized that the garbage disposal was full of silverware earlier but forgot about it. A good example of a tacit rather than dormant belief in this example would be the belief that my roommate would be upset by the garbage disposal being turned on while full of silverware. I probably have not considered this belief in the past, but would naturally believe it if prompted to based on other beliefs I already had about my roommate's valuing the silverware and garbage disposal.

<sup>89</sup> Peels, 194.

<sup>90</sup> Our only *objective* intellectual obligations are to eliminate any doxastic discrepancy which results from our recognition of such epistemic badness. c.f. Peels, 97.

intellectual obligation to correct them. We must then violate them knowingly, which is only possible if we act out of *akrasia*.

In the moral realm, things are less clear cut. Unlike the epistemic cases noted above, Peels acknowledges that we can have intellectual obligations in virtue of objective moral badness. Could we violate these by means other than *akrasia* or carelessness? I think that for Peels the answer remains “no”. Even if intellectual obligations exist in such cases, violations of them will either result from the believer knowingly violating them (which would amount to *akrasia*) or violating them out of ignorance. Cases where one violates a moral intellectual obligation out of ignorance will generally be fully excused.<sup>91</sup> The remaining cases where one is blameworthy ignorant are traced back to cases of *akrasia* or carelessness, as in the argument above.

### **Responsible Believers and Epistemic Virtue**

Regardless of whether or not the above argument establishes the necessary limitation of doxastic blame to cases of *akrasia* or carelessness, it at least motivates the claim that these two categories account for the vast majority of unexcused doxastic blame: this is the premise on which the remainder of this chapter will turn. I argue that if all or most of our doxastic failings stem from these sorts of doxastic *akrasia* or carelessness, responsible believers are best characterized as those who have attained the epistemic virtue which minimizes these failings.

To motivate this claim, we must first investigate what such cases of such doxastic failings look like. I take acts like wishful thinking as a paradigmatic example of doxastic *akrasia*; when we think wishfully (and are aware of doing so), we recognize that we are not epistemically justified in believing that *p* but do so regardless. If I choose to believe that I am morally flawless

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<sup>91</sup> Peels, 179.

despite having clear evidence to the contrary simply because it improves my self-image, I am acting out of doxastic *akrasia*. Other acts in this category might include biased evidence gathering practices and closed mindedness.

With this picture of doxastic failure in mind, it should be clear that the common thread uniting cases of such failure is insufficient attention to what is epistemically demanded of the believer. In cases of wishful thinking, flawed evidence gathering, and closed mindedness, the believer inappropriately subjugates these epistemic demands to some other purpose- their pride, discomfort, etc. In cases of carelessness, one simply fails to sufficiently regard the demands imposed upon them (out of laziness, inattention, or disregard). Thus, in all cases a blameworthy believer fails to appropriately act upon these demands.

This diagnosis provides a strong justification for my claim that epistemic virtue is critical for responsible belief. In all of the above cases, doxastic failure results from some lack of epistemic fortitude: one fails to accurately appraise and respond to the stakes of their epistemic actions and generates some harm as a result.<sup>92</sup> Given this conclusion, I point to the cultivation of epistemic virtue as the proper means of combatting such failure. Many epistemic virtues have been spelled out and advocated for in prior works, including open-mindedness, intellectual courage, introspection, or clear-sightedness.<sup>93</sup> However, not all of these are relevant to characterizing responsible believers, as not all limit cases of doxastic blame. This is why I indicate Montmarquet's virtue of epistemic conscientiousness as solely important to responsible belief.

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<sup>92</sup> Or worse still, one accurately appraises the consequences of their epistemic actions and chooses to promote their interests at the expense of others.

<sup>93</sup> Jason Baehr, "Character Reliability and Virtue Epistemology," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56, no. 223 (2006): 193.

In his account, Montmarquet echoes many of the same points I have highlighted above: doxastic failure is ultimately rooted in a failure to act with due care epistemically.<sup>94</sup> This lack of care manifests as insufficient regard for the truth in one's epistemic actions. By "epistemic actions" I mean those actions which have a significant relation to our belief forming processes, including introspection, evidence gathering, reflection, etc. The disregard to which Montmarquet points is the result of one's priority of their own interests over truth in such actions.<sup>95</sup>

Montmarquet offers the virtue of epistemic conscientiousness as the antidote to such failure. Epistemic conscientiousness consists in an "underlying desire to believe what is true and to avoid belief in what is false."<sup>96</sup> This initial definition may seem unhelpful, as it should be an obvious goal for anybody looking to believe well. Noting this, Montmarquet further explains that conscientiousness consists in developing this desire for truth such that it cannot be defeated by other influences.<sup>97</sup> Care is the lifeblood of this virtue; one can only become epistemically conscientious by exerting an effort to do so, and a certain amount of this effort is required of us.<sup>98</sup>

While I agree with Montmarquet on all of these points, I want to develop his concept of epistemic conscientiousness to better account for interpersonal contexts of belief. I argue that an important component of epistemic conscientiousness is a cognizance of the greater outcomes of one's epistemic actions. As I noted in the previous chapter, we are extremely limited in the resources (time, effort, etc.) that we are capable of committing to our epistemic dealings.

Accordingly, while I feel that Montmarquet adequately identifies a *lack* of care as a failure to be

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<sup>94</sup> James Montmarquet, "Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (1992): 337.

<sup>95</sup> Montmarquet, 336.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Montmarquet, 338.



epistemically conscientious, here I will note *mismanaged* care as an additional failure. That is to say, I argue that exerting as much effort as could be reasonably demanded of one in their epistemic dealings is not sufficient for epistemic conscientiousness. I argue that we are additionally required to competently manage the ways in which we direct such efforts.

To illustrate this point, recall my discussion of Chase Wren's useless truths. I noted in chapter two that it would be inadvisable for one to pursue the truth of the matter concerning the number of blades of grass on the Whitehouse lawn. I think it is clear that such an endeavor is a waste of one's epistemic resources, and I have accordingly argued that one might be blameworthy for pursuing such an endeavor. Even if one applied more care than anyone could reasonably demand of them in the narrow pursuit of such truths, I do not think we would call them epistemically conscientious.

However, I will further argue here that such blame extends beyond these clear-cut cases. To this end, I argue that a necessary component of epistemic conscientiousness is sufficient cognizance of one's epistemic duties and the greater consequences of one's epistemic actions. Much of this will be individualized and derive from the roles one occupies. It would be epistemically conscientious for example for a father to develop a thorough understanding of his child's character, personality, and tastes. It would be epistemically careless for him to do so about a total stranger with whom he is certain he will never interact.

Despite the ubiquity of such role-generated demands, our exercise of epistemic conscientiousness is not exhausted by cognizance of them alone. In illustrating this claim, again I point to the claim made by Sanford Goldberg when discussing his "should have known" phenomena. While many of our epistemic obligations are generated by the roles we occupy,

there are still obligations that apply universally to us all as epistemic agents.<sup>99</sup> In the same vein, I argue that we have a corresponding obligation to judiciously allocate our epistemic resources in attending to such obligations. “Judicious” management requires that one recognize the needs of their epistemic community and their position in it. Doing so will allow them to know which epistemic virtues and specific true beliefs are demanded of them (and perhaps more importantly which can be safely disregarded), and accordingly how to meet those demands.

I will note once more that our ability to meet these demands is inherently imperfect. As in the last chapter, I argue that these obligations are best conceived of as imperfect duties to which we owe some unspecified degree of attention. This aligns well with Montmarquet’s account, as he notes only that “a certain level of effort may rightly be expected of one.”<sup>100</sup> Likewise, I will conclude with the modified observation that a certain level of effort applied with a certain level of judgement may be rightly expected of one. When one applies a sufficient amount of each, they are epistemically conscientious. Thus, care towards the truth directed by a keen sense of what is demanded of one epistemically are the marks of responsible believers.

### **The Advantage of a Virtue-Theoretic Account**

I want to indicate explicitly that this virtue-theoretic account is directly motivated by the observations made by Peels in the above section: we are blameworthy for beliefs which result either from *akrasia* or carelessness.<sup>101</sup> However, given my definition of responsible believers as those who minimize the doxastic blame attributable to them one might argue that there are better means of achieving this end than developing an epistemically conscientious character. Here I

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<sup>99</sup> Sanford Goldberg, “Should have known,” *Sythese* 194, (2017): 2877.

<sup>100</sup> Montmarquet, 336.

<sup>101</sup> Ian Church, “Virtue Epistemology,” *Philpapers Topic Summaries*, <https://philpapers.org/browse/virtue-epistemology>

will present two such accounts, and attempt to demonstrate the superiority of my own in minimizing doxastic blame.

The first alternative approach to minimizing such harms is to attack one's belief set directly, eliminating all those epistemically flawed beliefs which could produce harms. One account which may serve as an example of this is provided by Scott Stapleford. Stapleford argues that we have an epistemic duty to believe rationally, and that this duty can only be fulfilled by careful introspection and evaluation of the logical relations that hold between our beliefs and evidence.<sup>102</sup> The best possible fulfillment of our epistemic duties for Stapleford is the cultivation of a maximally consistent belief set (that is, internally consistent and consistent with the evidence available to us). If one managed to achieve this to a high degree it would seem that they would have no blameworthy beliefs, and thus believed responsibly.<sup>103</sup>

To meet this objection, I return to an argument I have made above. In minimizing the harms we inflict upon our epistemic community through our beliefs, it is not sufficient to merely have beliefs that are in perfect accord with our evidence and with each other. We are sometimes also obligated to *have* certain beliefs as a result of the roles we fill; failing to acquire these beliefs can often result in serious harms for which one will be blameworthy regardless of whether or not they have done anything bad epistemically. While such criteria may provide better protocols for agents to develop practically or epistemically, I consider neither of these the appropriate ends for *responsible* believers.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Scott Stapleford, "Epistemic Duties and Failure to Understand One's Evidence," *Principia* 16, no. 1 (2012): 169.

<sup>103</sup> Note that Stapleford himself does not make this claim, and the article in which he develops this account speaks of duties in epistemic terms only. Here I mean to use his account as an example of an alternative account of doxastic obligations, and why striving for epistemic flawlessness misses the mark.

<sup>104</sup> That is, better enable them to achieve their own goals or grow into more successful epistemic agents.

Alternatively, one could devise a reliabilist approach to responsible belief rather than the responsibilist one I have provided. Whereas responsibilists emphasize the importance of intellectual traits of character (such as intellectual courage), reliabilists emphasize the traits of a person which are reliably truth conducive (such as good memory or sense perception).<sup>105</sup> Given this, a reliabilist could argue that in conscientiousness I have selected a virtue that is largely irrelevant to responsible belief. Instead, they might argue that developing reliable traits of intellectual character would more effectively produce fewer harmful beliefs (and thus a more responsible believer) than becoming epistemically conscientious.

To meet this objection, I point to the conclusion reached above: all cases of unexcused doxastic blame are either due to epistemic *akrasia* or carelessness, whereas all other cases of harmful belief are excused. While how well one's prowess of reasoning or evidence gathering may minimize how many harmful beliefs they have, harmful beliefs do not exhaust the considerations that factor into blameworthy belief. On the other hand, epistemic conscientiousness provides a much more direct remedy to blameworthy belief; an epistemically conscientious believer has developed a regard for the truth which prevents them from giving into *akrasia*, and by extension a vigilance which minimizes their carelessness.

Jason Baehr provides some insights which may help articulate this more clearly. Baehr regards responsibilist virtues like conscientiousness as "involving a person's *agency*: to exercise a character virtue is, for example, to *deliberate* and to *choose* in a certain way [emphasis original]."<sup>106</sup> These are contrasted with reliabilist virtues, which he notes as describing well-functioning "input-output devices" in a much more mechanistic way.<sup>107</sup> This recalls the

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<sup>105</sup> Baehr, 193.

<sup>106</sup> Baehr, 197.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

distinction between evaluating someone as blameworthy and blaming that I made in a prior chapter.

I see Baehr's description of responsibilist and reliabilist virtues as perfectly in line with this distinction. Recall that in order to blame someone for violating a doxastic norm there must have been the opportunity for them to avoid their violation through their own agency. The fact that Baehr points to responsibilist virtues as engaging with one's *agency* and *choice* shows that it is liable to blame proper. On the other hand, his description of reliabilist virtues as mechanistic and automatic shows that blame for the failure to exercise reliabilist virtues is strictly limited to the recognition of a norm violation, and thus irrelevant to whether a believer is responsible. To articulate this differently still, I regard it a much more insidious (and therefore blameworthy) act for one to impose harms upon their epistemic community by their own choice rather than lack of skill.

To summarize, I have argued here that responsible believers are defined by their ability to minimize the blame they incur as the result of their beliefs; doxastic blame is appropriate when one generates harms in their greater epistemic community without being excused (through ignorance, compulsion, or inability which is not itself blameworthy). While functioning reliably epistemically or having epistemically flawless beliefs certainly contributes to this goal, Peels argument noted above makes clear that they do so only tangentially. Resistance to such cases of doxastic *akrasia* and carelessness is stymied directly only by the cultivation of epistemic conscientiousness. Thus, responsible believers are epistemically conscientious believers.

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### Conclusion

The best way to encapsulate this account lies in the conclusion of the last section: a responsible believer is one who believes *carefully*, or in other words one who navigates their epistemic life with special attention to what the truth (and not their own interests) and their position within their epistemic community demands of them. Insofar as one abides by this maxim, they can believe blamelessly and thereby responsibly.

To reiterate, I arrived at this conclusion by first examining whether and when we could be held responsible for the beliefs which we adopt and maintain. I concluded that in virtue of the harms which our beliefs are capable of exposing our epistemic community to, we are nearly always responsible (i.e. answerable) for the beliefs we adopt and hold. Following on this, I examined how blame operated in doxastic contexts, concluding that practices of blaming others for adopting or holding incorrect beliefs was appropriate for similar reasons. The major limitation on such blame is the degree of control available to a believer in coming to adopt and hold a belief; I argued that blame directed at the formation of a belief over which a believer had no control (e.g. by compulsion) is incoherent and does not reflect a legitimate practice of blame.

In the latter chapters of this book, I applied these analyses to the examination of which obligations we had as believers and how we could best go about fulfilling them. I concluded that again, in virtue of the harms that our beliefs may generate, most of our doxastic obligations are a species of *moral* obligation and are thus more expansive and more binding than many have previously thought. Nevertheless, these obligations are (as noted in the discussion of blame) sometimes excused by a lack of control or ignorance. Crucially, from these excusing conditions I concluded that the true locus of doxastic blame was a variety of epistemic *akrasia* (or carelessness) wherein we recognize that an intended doxastic act violates the norms to which we

are beholden but choose to do it anyway. This led me to the conclusion highlighted above: the best means of being a responsible believer is the cultivation of epistemic *care*- deference to the truth and cognizance of one's role and impact in their greater epistemic community.

In these discussions, I hope to have offered some new legitimacy and perspective to our practices of doxastic blame. In an increasingly hostile and partisan world in which all cling defensively to their beliefs, it does us great justice to remember the stakes involved and harms imposed on others by leading epistemically vicious lives; it is important to remember that the price of the comfort in which we indulge by clinging to the ways of thinking familiar and easy to us is always paid by someone else.



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