Making Room For Volitionism in a Non-volitional Model of Belief Formation

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1. Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to synthesize volitional and non-volitional (or representational) theories of belief formation. More precisely, I will attempt to show that the two accounts occupy different logical space in the larger discussion over the matter of how beliefs are formed, and that one can consistently hold a position that preserves the most essential features of them both. Moreover, I will argue that the two positions *should* be merged with one another so that we might have a model of belief formation adequately equipped to handle the primary concerns of both respective views.

In brief, the two positions hold the following sets of premises regarding the nature of belief formation:

Volitionism[1] –

1. A volitionally acquired belief is acquired by a basic act. Believing itself need not be an action, but some beliefs are obtained by acts of the will directly upon being willed.
2. One must be fully conscious of what one is doing in acquiring a belief through an act of the will.
3. The belief must be acquired [at least in part by extra-evidential considerations]. That is, the evidence is not decisive in the belief formation.

Non-volitionism[2] –

1. Acquiring a belief is a happening in which the world forces itself upon a subject.
2. Happenings in which the world forces itself upon a subject are not things the subject does (i.e., are not basic acts) or chooses.
3. Therefore, acquiring a belief is not something a subject does (i.e., is not a basic act) or chooses.

The two theories come apart most markedly in application to discussions regarding the ethics of belief. For instance, from a volitionist perspective, the beliefs an individual holds can become the appropriate objects of moral evaluation since they involve basic acts of the will. From a non-volitionist perspective, however, it simply

[1] Premises slightly adapted from Louis P. Pojman, "Believing and Willing," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar., 1985), 38-39.
[2] Premises slightly adapted from ibid., 40.

doesn't make sense to treat beliefs as morally evaluable, since the will is not active in their formation. The apparent dichotomy between these positions, I will argue, derives largely from the failure to recognize the unique role beliefs play in the practical versus the speculative sphere. The transition between the processes of speculative and practical reasoning provides a natural joint by which we may mark out the respective domains of non-volitional and volitional theories.

So why don't I think we should be satisfied with leaving the territory divided as it is between these two opposing views? In short, because I don't think either view on its own is sufficient to handle our full range of doxastic concerns satisfactorily. Volitionism does a great job explaining our sense that people are sometimes morally culpable for the beliefs they hold, but leads us too far astray from the most plausible account of how our beliefs are formed under default conditions. Non-volitionism, on the other hand, provides the most compelling model of belief formation, but taken to its furthest logical conclusion, predicts that beliefs should escape moral evaluation. As long as the two remain separate, I suspect we will constantly feel ourselves gravitating back and forth between each position as one or the other concern becomes more salient.

In summary, the following two considerations serve to motivate the present project: (1) the general representationalist picture of belief formation that the non-volitionist provides strikes me as fundamentally correct (if only under ideal conditions); however, (2) the arguments in support of the moral evaluability of beliefs seem to me strongly compelling. In the discussion that follows, I will present Clifford's case for why one should think beliefs are morally evaluable. After having provided the non-volitionist

with a reason to feel insecure about the sufficiency of their doxastic theory, I will provide some further discussion to soften our attitude toward volitionism.

A peripheral point that I will begin to develop in this section is that evidential considerations are never decisive in forming empirical judgments (of which, not insignificantly, all practical and moral judgments are species). The reader is encouraged to note how strongly Clifford relies on vague allusions to "*sufficient* evidence" and "*unworthy* reasons" in the communication of what is morally significant about a belief. This type of vague, unreflective thinking about the decisiveness of evidence in the formation of beliefs is common to both evidentialism (Clifford's view) and non-volitional theories. A little clarification on this matter, I suggest, can take us a long way toward ameliorating the two views under discussion.

2. Clifford and the Scientific Thesis

Clifford argues that what is morally evaluable about a belief is its fidelity to the evidence, either already possessed or readily accessible. The position he champions, which we may call *evidentialism*, is represented by the slogan, "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence."[3] The position holds further, "The question of right and wrong has to do with the origin of [a person's] belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how [the person] got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether [the person] had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him.[4]

[3] W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief and other essays*, (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), 77.
[4] Ibid., 71.

To support his argument, Clifford provides several examples in which an individual forms a belief on insufficient evidence and negative consequences result. In one example, a ship owner, ignoring all evidence to the contrary, forms the belief that his ship is fit to carry a large group of people to their destination across the sea. Behaving in accordance with the belief he formed, the ship owner neglects to inspect the ship before it sets sail. Once at sea, a violent storm hits and sinks the fragile ship, killing the entire crew. *What shall we say of such a man?* poses Clifford. "Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him*."[5]

Now, it is certainly an *epistemic* vice to form beliefs on inadequate or contradictory evidence, but do such epistemic vices really amount to moral wrongdoing? For instance, are *naive* people *bad* people? If this sounds strange to us, perhaps we may object that the ship owner's great *moral* error was not his poor epistemic performance, but rather his disregard for his practical responsibility to those individuals that rely on his experience and better judgment to make their journey safe.[6] If only the ship owner had demonstrated the appropriate professional conscientiousness and subjected the ship to the standard inspection, what moral difference would it have made to find out later that he all the while harbored the private belief that his ship was sound (or even, as an implication of this first belief, that such conscientious inspection itself was superfluous)? Sounds reasonable enough.

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[5] Ibid., 70-71.

[6] This is a classic non-volitionist-type response.

But Clifford disagrees. Such an explanation, he argues, is good only "so far as it goes" – which is not that far, it turns out. In the ship example, it was possible to tease apart the belief from the actions that ensued, but only because we imagined the ship owner to be operating under a clearly defined professional code of ethics. Such a code, however, merely stands in the place of the ship owner's innate ethical sensibilities for precisely those situations in which he *believes* such practices to be unnecessary. In the absence of such quality control mechanisms, the ship owner would presumably have relied on his default behavioral mechanisms and, guided by his private beliefs, foregone the inspection. Because we are often forced to live and act in the absence of such safety nets, Clifford concludes, "it is not possible to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other."[7]

It seems right to me to exclude from our moral considerations such contingencies as whether or not some third party is present to dictate to us our moral responsibilities relative to a given set of circumstances. What *is* morally significant, rather, is what we ourselves contribute to the decision: the care with which we treat the evidence, the fairness with which we weigh it, the discretion of our judgment, etc. And each of these, Clifford argues, depends on the sustained integrity of our faculties.

> Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judiciously and fairly weighing evidence. We all suffer severely enough from the maintenance and support of false beliefs and the fatally wrong actions which they lead to, and the evil born when one such belief is entertained great and wide. But a greater and wider evil arises when the credulous character is maintained and supported, when a habit of believing for unworthy reasons is fostered and made permanent.[8]

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[7] Ibid., 73.
[8] Ibid., 76.

Clifford's thesis states that the sum moral value of preserving sound epistemic faculties is greater (or *will be greater*, all things considered) than the sum value of any number of possible individual performances achieved at the expense of weakened epistemic faculties. Let us call this the *scientific thesis*. Implicit within this thesis is the sub-thesis that soundness with respect to our epistemic faculties consists in assenting to that judgment of which the evidence weighs most heavily in favor. However, since Clifford often uses vague qualifiers – e.g., "*insufficient* evidence" and "*unworthy* reasons" – in communicating the essential theses of his position, I cannot take it for granted that the scientific standard is exactly the standard he means to invoke for determining whether a given belief is morally justified or not.[9] Nonetheless, I think some interesting conclusions may be drawn from considering alternative theses against this stark background, and so, excusing Clifford from our discussion, we will proceed to consider the weaknesses of the scientific thesis in application to practical reasoning.

3. The Role of Beliefs in Practical Reasoning

It is my contention that practical reasoning involves a fundamentally different type of belief formation mechanism than what is involved in ordinary belief formation, and that this fundamental difference is what renders one's practical deliberation strategies morally evaluable while one's default belief forming processes are not so evaluable. In practical deliberation, one is occupied not with the question *What should I believe*, but

[9] Although, certain passages lead me to believe something like this is what he has in mind: "[Belief] is rightly used on truths which have been established by long experience and waiting toil, and which have stood in the fierce light of free and fearless questioning" (ibid., 74). And also, "Laying aside, then, such tradition as is handed on without testing by successive generations, let us consider that which is truly built up out of the common experience of mankind. This great fabric is for the guidance of our thoughts, and through them of our actions, both in the moral and the material world" (ibid., 88-89).

rather *What should I do, and how far will my stock beliefs support any particular alternative*. During this transition from speculative to practical reasoning, unreflective beliefs are transformed into reasons with practical utility. Scott-Kakures refers to this active process as "reflective reasoning," and suggests that it is it rather than its passive counterpart that poses an issue for morality. As he writes, "It is reason, and not its sleep, that produces monsters."[10] This statement is true not only with respect to the various forms of self-deception that were the target of his critique, but also of reflective reasoning generally. As he writes, "There is, additionally, evidence that reflective reasoning itself, independently of familiar biasing mechanisms can play a role in our doxastic seductions."[11] He goes on to quote portions of a study by Timothy Wilson, Sara Hodges, and Suzanne LaFleur (1995) that argues that the very process of reflective reasoning can distort our cognition. "Wilson and his colleagues argue," for instance, "that reasoning serves to boost the 'judged usability' (Higgins, 1996) of [the most] accessible information. They argue that 'analyzing reasons can increase the perceived applicability of accessible thought' (p. 18) in three ways:

> First, when a thought comes to mind as part of a search for reasons, its biased sources might be less evident than when people simply recall information…A thought that comes to mind as a result of a search for reasons is, by definition, more diagnostic than a simple recollection; it is, after all, a reason…Second, the act of analyzing reasons might cause people to go beyond the information recalled generalizing from specific memories to more general qualities of the attitudinal object…Finally, thinking about reasons might trigger memories that are consistent with accessible information (Ross, Lepper, Hubbard, 1975). When reasons are analyzed, for example, the information that is accessible might remind people of specific memories that are perceived as highly relevant to their attitude. (ibid.)"[12]

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[10] Dion Scott-Kakures, "At 'Permanent Risk'," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Nov., 2002), 592.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

Something happens in transition from passive to reflective reasoning[13] that renders our beliefs morally evaluable. As I have already suggested, the beliefs that support actions are of a different kind than what we might consider ordinary beliefs, and it is this difference that is morally significant. To begin with, I think the beliefs that serve to justify actions are more complex than ordinary beliefs, and are, in this respect, really more akin to hypotheses. These hypotheses typically involve predictions about future states of affairs made on the basis of stock evidences (e.g., background beliefs and other readily accessible factual data). I will have more to say about the conditions under which these hypotheses are developed in the section to follow.

It is ultimately from these hypotheses that derive our practical and moral judgments – our answer to the question *What should I do*. These judgments, in turn, become the internal motivation for practical action and the basis of our moral evaluations. Therefore, when someone is accused of wrongdoing, that person's only means of vindication is to supply his/her reasons for acting as they did. If they can produce the *right* reasons, that person's action may be considered morally justified, and the accusation will be dismissed. Reasons applied to support moral activities are often called "excuses" for this very reason: when they are of the right sort, they serve to excuse us from moral culpability.

The next question to consider, then, is what makes a reason "of the right sort." Is it, as the evidentialist suggests, *that the belief best reflect the weight of evidence*? In this case, a mother that abandoned the search for her abducted child after the first three hours

[13] These correspond to what I referred to above as speculative and practical reasoning, respectively.

had elapsed would be morally justified.[14] If we are not satisfied with this result, then we are going to have to reconsider the plausibility of the evidentialist's criterion. But if this criterion is flawed, then we will be forced to conclude that the non-volitionist model of belief formation is flawed as well, insofar as it is based upon the very same foundation (i.e., the presumption that evidence is decisive). In the next section's discussion, I will offer considerations toward developing a more plausible ethic of belief based on our discussion so far. There I will argue that the suspicion that some are inclined to feel toward the notion of volitional beliefs is a symptom of unreflective thinking about the decisiveness of evidence in forming empirical judgments.

4. Empirical Judgments and the "Decisiveness of Evidence"

In the formulation of those hypotheses that support our practical and moral judgments, the evidences one has to draw on are typically non-exhaustive. Therefore, while the evidence in our possession imposes very real *constraints* on the sorts of judgments we may make (i.e. by defining the outermost boundaries of what is rationally defensible), they do not *determine* them. Pojman defines a volit as "an act of will made in full consciousness of acquiring a belief which is underdetermined by the evidence."[15] But it would seem in light of the general nature of empirical judgments that *all* beliefs are of this sort. As Clifford himself acknowledges, "every belief, even the simplest and most fundamental, goes beyond experience when regarded as a guide to our actions…The

[14] "In late 1993, the Criminal Division of the Washington State Attorney General's Office undertook a 3-1/2 year research project, partially funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, to study the investigation of child abduction murder cases…In 76 percent of the missing children homicide cases studied, the child was dead within three hours of the abduction–and in 88.5 percent of the cases the child was dead within 24 hours." (http://www.atg.wa.gov/page.aspx?id=2354)

[15] Pojman 1985, 40.

question is not, therefore, 'May we believe what goes beyond experience?' for this is involved in the very nature of belief; but 'How far and in what manner may we add to our experience in forming our beliefs?'"[16]

Much of our doxastic activity takes place within the leftover space between inductive certainty and impossibility. Occupying this remaining space are all those considerations that evidence has neither explicitly allowed nor disallowed. Let us call this space *possibility*. It is within the domain of the possible that we must supplement our judgments with extra-evidential considerations. The judgments that result from such syntheses of evidential and extra-evidential considerations have sometimes been characterized as "leaps of faith," and are often criticized, I think unfairly, as being irrational.[17] Take, for instance, Pojman's criticism of volitionism:

> Volitional believing is not simply irrational believing, but is incoherently irrational, for it offers an account of believing that confuses the nature of believing. In volitional believing I not only believe without decisive regard for the evidence, but I do so for no other reason than because I want to (i.e., I don't believe simply because of the evidence but because of other desires). Hence we can say that doxastic incoherence is a species of epistemic irrationality.[18]

Besides the vague and dubious reference in this passage to "decisive regard for the evidence," consider that Pojman himself admits that "Most volitionists would confine the power of the will to situations where the evidence is not sufficient or irresistible in forming a belief."[19] That is, by the volitionist standard, "leaps of faith cannot occur just any time over any propositions, but only over propositions that have some evidence in

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[16] Clifford 1999, 92.
[17] Pojman defines rational believing as "believing according to the evidence," and fully rational believing he defines as "believing simply because of the evidence" (Pojman 1985, 48).
[18] Ibid., 49.
[19] Ibid., 38.

their favor but are still inadequately supported by the evidence."[20] Insofar as volitional beliefs are built upon such considerations as the available evidence neither explicitly allows nor disallows, I don't see that there is anything strictly irrational about them. On the contrary, as Bach argues, certain extra-evidential considerations are essential to both good scientific method as well as to everyday thinking:

> There is nothing intrinsically irrational about explaining away evidence against what we already believe. This is part and parcel of good scientific method – theories should not be discarded without a fight – and of everyday thinking as well. Initially we try to deal with 'recalcitrant experiences' not by adjusting our beliefs but by looking for something wrong with the experiences. Before making serious changes in our beliefs, we try to render contrary data not worthy of accommodation. Only if we cannot do this without constructing theoretical epicycles do we adjust our beliefs, making changes as local and minimal as possible.[21]

In light of these considerations, I recommend that we reject the evidentialist's suggestion that the "right sort of reasons" in the justification of moral judgments is that which the available evidence most strongly favors. In its place, I suggest we adopt the view that reasons are "good" when they properly represent one's moral commitments (i.e., that one include among their extra-evidential considerations the practical consequences of adopting alternative hypotheses), and "bad" when such commitments are purposely excluded from one's extra-evidential considerations.

The scientific thesis, which we took to underlie the evidentialist's criterion, argued that the sum moral value of preserving sound epistemic faculties is greater than the sum value of any number of possible individual performances achieved at the expense of weakened epistemic faculties. Such a thesis presupposed that soundness with respect to these faculties consisted in reliably forming judgments that reflected the weight of

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[20] Ibid., 39.

[21] Kent Bach, "An Analysis of Self-Deception," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1981), 358.

evidence. Having been provided reasons to reject this crude characterization, we may adapt our understanding of what it is to "preserve sound epistemic faculties" to better reflect the complex nature of our doxastic situation. Applying this more refined notion of soundness to the analysis of volitional beliefs (i.e., those reasons that support practical and moral judgments), we see that it is not the inclusion, but the *exclusion* of extra-evidential considerations from our beliefs that is fundamentally irrational.

5. Conclusion

Consider the following argument constructed from the several conclusions drawn from our discussion: If evidence is decisive in the formation of beliefs (as the non-volitionist has claimed), then beliefs are not morally evaluable. However, Clifford has provided compelling arguments to suggest that there is at least a class of beliefs that *are* morally evaluable. Such a conclusion challenges the notion that evidence is decisive in the way that non-volitionists have argued. If evidential considerations are not decisive in the formation of all beliefs, then at least some beliefs must be constructed in part upon extra-evidential considerations. Such beliefs would be volitional in nature, and so would be the proper objects of moral evaluation (as the volitionists have claimed). The task is therefore set before us to discover what makes a belief "of the right sort" to justify a moral judgment. Since the evidentialist's criterion yields the absurd result that a mother who abandoned the search for her abducted child after the first three hours had elapsed would be morally justified, we chose to reject it. In its place, we developed an ethic of belief based upon a criterion that better reflects the complex nature of our doxastic situation.

These arguments serve to support my thesis that there is a legitimate place for volitional beliefs in our otherwise non-volitional framework. Although we accept the non-volitionist's model of belief formation as fundamentally correct under ideal circumstances (i.e., in contexts in which there is sufficient evidence available to render extra-evidential considerations irrelevant), we deny that the vast majority of our doxastic activity occurs under such ideal circumstances. The reality of our doxastic situation demands that our theory of belief formation be able to accommodate not only those beliefs acquired under ideal conditions but also those complex hypotheses that we formulate to support our moral and practical judgments. Such a theory is achievable by merging the non-volitional and volitionist accounts into a single comprehensive unit, regarding non-volitionism as the fundamentally correct model of belief formation under ideal conditions, but also affirming volitionism as the correct model for evaluating the application of stock beliefs toward the activities of practical reasoning.

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