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Does doxastic responsibility entail the ability to believe otherwise?

Rik Peels

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Abstract Whether responsibility for actions and omissions requires the ability to do otherwise is an important issue in contemporary philosophy. However, a closely related but distinct issue, namely whether *doxastic* responsibility requires the ability to *believe* otherwise, has been largely neglected. This paper fills this remarkable lacuna by providing a defence of the thesis that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise. On the one hand, it is argued that the fact that unavoidability is normally an excuse counts in favour of this thesis. On the other hand, three objections against this thesis are discussed and criticized. First, one might think that what suffices for doxastic responsibility is control over or influence on certain desirable or undesirable properties of beliefs. It is argued that this objection misrepresents the issue under consideration. Second, it may be objected that the thesis is contradicted by our intuitions in doxastic analogues of Frankfurt-style scenarios. It is argued that distinguishing between belief-universals and belief-particulars helps to see why this argument fails. Third and finally, one might draw an analogy with the asymmetry thesis in ethics by arguing that even if blameworthy belief requires the ability to believe otherwise, praiseworthy belief does not. It is argued that the main arguments in favour of this presumed asymmetry are wanting, partly because they fail to distinguish between two different kinds of praiseworthiness. Finally, the author sketches three implications of the thesis that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise: counterfactual construals of responsible belief might be tenable, the deontological conception of epistemic justification needs revision on an important point,

R. Peels (✉)
Philosophy Department, VU University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105,
1081 HV Amsterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: mail@rikpeels.nl

and there might be an important asymmetry between beliefs on the one hand and actions and many non-doxastic consequences on the other.

Keywords Ability to believe otherwise · Doxastic responsibility · Excuses · Frankfurt-style cases

1 Introduction

One of the key issues in contemporary ethics is whether or not responsibility for action entails that one could have acted otherwise. Especially since the publication of Harry Frankfurt's by now classical paper "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility",[1] moral philosophers have disagreed on whether or not being the proper object of praise and blame (and perhaps neutral appraisal) for an action or omission entails that one could have failed to perform that action or omission. As several epistemologists have noticed, though, a similar issue arises when it comes to belief: does responsibility for belief entail the ability to believe otherwise? In other words, if, as most epistemologists agree, we are sometimes blameworthy or praiseworthy or neutrally appraisable for our beliefs, then does it follow that on the occasions in question, we had the ability to believe otherwise? And if so, what precisely does this ability to believe otherwise amount to? These questions have received scant attention compared to analogous questions in ethics. In this paper, I address this neglected issue and argue that, in a sense to be specified, doxastic responsibility does indeed entail the ability to believe otherwise. I do so by providing a consideration in favour of this claim and by responding to three objections that might be raised against this claim.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I explain the thesis that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise, a principle that I call the *Principle of the Ability to Believe otherwise* (PAB), by specifying what I mean by 'doxastic responsibility' and 'ability to believe otherwise' (§ 2). Then, I argue that the fact that unavoidability is normally an excuse counts in favour of PAB (§ 3). In the three following sections, I discuss and attempt to rebut three objections against this thesis. First, one might think that what suffices for doxastic responsibility is control over or influence on certain desirable or undesirable properties of beliefs. I argue that this objection misrepresents the issue under consideration (§ 4). Second, it may be objected that PAB is contradicted by our intuitions in doxastic analogues of Frankfurt-style scenarios, that is, circumstances in which one seems responsible for having a belief despite being unable *not* to have that belief. I argue that distinguishing between belief-universals and belief-particulars helps to see why this argument fails (§ 5). Third, one might draw an analogy with the asymmetry thesis in ethics by arguing that *blameworthy* belief requires the ability to believe otherwise, whereas *praiseworthy* belief does not. I argue that the main arguments in favour of this presumed asymmetry are wanting, partly because they fail to distinguish between two different kinds of praiseworthiness (§ 6). If my argument for PAB and my criticisms of these three objections to PAB are convincing, then we have good reason to think that responsibility for belief entails the

[1] See Frankfurt (1969).

ability to believe otherwise. Finally, I argue that PAB's truth has three important ramifications. First, counterfactual construals of responsible belief might well be tenable. Second, the deontological conception of epistemic justification needs revision on an important point. Third, there might be an important asymmetry between beliefs on the one hand and actions and many non-doxastic consequences on the other (§ 7).

2 The principle of the ability to believe otherwise

In order to tighten our grip on the expression 'doxastic responsibility', let us consider the following example. On May third 1945, Sir Arthur Coningham, commander in the British Tactical Air Force, ordered the attack on three German ships in the Bay of Lübeck. He falsely believed that there were only German soldiers on board. Unbeknownst to him, the Germans had filled these ships with about 10,000 concentration camp survivors. All three ships were sunk. Most of the SS guards survived, but an estimated 7,800 camp survivors died. Was Coningham at least partly culpable for their deaths? The answer seems crucially to depend on whether or not he was culpable for his false belief that there were only German soldiers on board and on whether the other beliefs that he held and that played an important role in coming to the decision to take down these ships were held responsibly or culpably. Let us assume that his other beliefs were formed and maintained responsibly rather than culpably. Thus, he responsibly believed that taking down ships with German soldiers was a good decision at this stage of the war, he responsibly believed that these ships were playing an important role in the military defence of Germany, he responsibly believed that they would escape and be harmful if he were to let them go, and so forth. Then the answer to the question whether he acted responsibly in taking down these ships (ordering to take down these ships) seems to depend on whether or not his belief that there were only German soldiers on board—or a belief in the neighbourhood, such as the belief that there were only hostile enemies on board—was held responsibly or culpably. It seems that if he was not culpable for holding this belief, it is unfair to blame him. However, if he should have known better, then it seems that he is at least partly blameworthy for the tragedy. When, then, would he be culpable for his false belief? Presumably, if at some earlier time he could have found out that there were prisoners on board but did not investigate the matter sufficiently carefully or failed to listen to certain people who possessed more information than he did.[2]

Many epistemologists agree that we are at least sometimes responsible for our beliefs.[3] Sir Coningham's case would be an extreme example of a quite common phenomenon. These epistemologists do not always make precise, though, what they mean by 'doxastic responsibility'. Let me, therefore, say that what I mean by it is that we are at least sometimes the proper object of what Peter Strawson called 'reactive attitudes'—attitudes such as blame, praise, resentment, and, as many contemporary

[2] For a well-known, similar example, see Clifford (1901, pp. 163–165).

[3] Let me mention just a few: BonJour (1985, p. 42); Chisholm (1977, p. 14); Kim (1994, p. 282); Wolterstorff (2005, p. 326).

philosophers would add, neutral appraisal—for having certain beliefs.[4] Responsibility, then, is stronger than merely being the proper object of criticism or evaluation. For, we can properly criticize or evaluate people on the basis of how well they do, without holding them responsible. We can do so, for instance, for educational purposes. Thus, we can evaluate Sir Coningham's false belief from all sorts of perspectives: was his belief rational, reasonable, justified, in accordance with his evidence, reliably formed, adequately based, a piece of knowledge (however precisely these desiderata relate to each other)?[5] If, however, we hold Sir Coningham responsible for his belief, the question is: did he believe *responsibly* or *blameworthily*? For it seems that we can blame Coningham for his order and its consequences in the situation as I described it above only if he is *blameworthy* for his false belief.

The second crucial notion is, of course, that of the ability to believe otherwise. How should we understand this? As William Alston famously argued,[6] we lack *control over* our beliefs. We hardly ever succeed in intentionally acquiring or abandoning a particular belief. Our beliefs are simply not responsive to our intentions in the way our actions are. Even if I know that I would receive a billion dollars if I came to believe that the Roman empire never existed, I would not be able voluntarily to acquire that belief. As Alston himself and other epistemologists have noted, though, it does not follow that we are not responsible for our beliefs.[7] For, we can *influence* what we believe by exercising control over belief-influencing factors. Thus, I can acquire certain beliefs on herons by reading a book on herons and I can change some of my religious beliefs by working on certain intellectual virtues of mine, such as open-mindedness. Evidence gathering and critical reflection will be among the belief-influencing actions over which we most often exercise control. In all these cases, I do not intentionally acquire or abandon a belief, but come to hold a belief or abandon a belief as a result of intentionally performing an action that influences what I believe. What I would like to suggest, then, is that we understand the expression 'the ability to believe otherwise' accordingly: one has the ability to believe otherwise with respect to a belief that p that one holds if and only if there is some action or series of actions that one could have performed such that if one had performed it, one would not have believed that p. We can now formulate the PAB as follows:

PAB: Some cognitive subject S is responsible for believing that p at some time t only if there is some action or series of actions A that S did not perform but could have performed (or did perform, but could have failed to perform) at some time prior to t such that if S had performed (not performed) A, S would *not* have believed that p at t.

PAB is confined to responsibility for *beliefs*. It seems to me that *mutatis mutandis* the same can be said about the other two doxastic attitudes, those of disbelief and

[4] See (Strawson, 1974, pp. 4–13).

[5] In Sect. 7, I return to the issue of how responsible belief relates to epistemic justification and knowledge.

[6] See Alston (1989).

[7] See Alston (1989), p. 73; Clarke (1986), pp. 39–49; Dretske (2000), p. 602; Heil (1984), p. 60; Kornblith (1983), p. 39; Leon (2002), pp. 421–424; Stocker (1982, pp. 398–417).

suspension of judgement (suspension of both belief and disbelief). I will leave that for another occasion, though.

Several philosophers have claimed or suggested that responsibility for belief entails the ability to believe otherwise.[8] Unfortunately, they have not always made clear what this claim or suggestion amounts to. PAB is meant to be a plausible interpretation of this claim. In what follows, I provide a consideration in favour of PAB and respond to three objections against PAB.

3 An argument in favour of PAB

If the actualization of a bad or wrong state of affairs that is relevantly related to me is strictly unavoidable for me, then I am *excused* for it. Imagine, for instance, that I see a little girl fall into the water. I jump into the water and try to rescue her. However, she fell into the water because she got entangled in a 200 pound iron chain that was thrown into the water and there is no way I can lift the chain from the water. Given that the water is 15 m deep, there is nothing I can do to rescue her. I try my best, but she drowns. Am I blameworthy for her death? Clearly not. Am I responsible—blameworthy, praiseworthy, or neutrally appraisable—for it? Again, it seems rather clear that I am not, for whether she would drown was completely beyond my control and influence.[9] I could perform all sorts of actions and I am responsible for whether I did so or not, but I am *not* responsible for whether or not the girl drowns. Here, my excuse removes all responsibility.

The same is true when it comes to things that, in some sense of the word, we do or fail to do *ourselves*. Imagine that I have a brain tumour which every now and then forces me to curse and make obscene gestures. There is nothing I can do, apart from killing myself, such that if I were to do that, I would no longer curse and make those gestures. These actions, if they can properly be called 'actions', are unavoidable for me. They come and go unexpectedly and I have no influence on them. Am I blameworthy for these gestures and curses? Clearly not. Am I responsible—blameworthy, praiseworthy, or neutrally appraisable—for them? Again, it seems rather clear that I am not, for whether or not I curse and make these gestures is completely beyond my control and influence.

Now, it seems that belief is no different. Imagine that Julia holds some racist belief which she recognizes not only to be morally wrong but also to be contrary to all her evidence. However, she was raised in a racist family and indoctrinated into neo-Nazi racism. She knows that her belief is morally and epistemically bad. As it turns out, however, her belief is so deep-seated that there is literally nothing she can do to rid herself of it: no matter how many books she reads or how many people she listens to, this belief of hers will not be removed. It seems clear that Julia is excused for having this belief. Of course, her belief is in some sense wrong: she ought not to have it. But she is *not* blameworthy for it. If you find it hard to imagine that Julia cannot

[8] See Hetherington (2002), p. 401; Leon (2002), pp. 424–430; Wolterstorff (2005), p. 336.

[9] Here, I assume that I am not responsible for the chain's being thrown into the water, for the girl's getting entangled in the chain, for the girl's being there, or for some such thing.

rid herself of her racist belief, then imagine that Julia can rid herself of her racist belief but that that will take several months. Then take some time t before several months have passed. Is she *then* blameworthy for her racist belief? Given her inability to have had a different belief by then, it seems rather clear that she is not. In fact, her excuse seems to remove all responsibility for her belief: since she does not have any control over or influence on her racist belief, she is not at all responsible for it.[10]

Of course, unavoidability is sometimes blameworthy. By that I mean that unavoidability is not always an excuse. Sometimes one is *not* excused for the actualization of a state of affairs that was strictly unavoidable in those circumstances, because one was blameworthy for its being unavoidable in those circumstances. If I have to prepare a biology exam and burn all copies of the textbook that I can find, then the ensuing inability to prepare my exam will, according to many philosophers, not excuse me for not preparing my exam and for remaining ignorant on certain biological issues. However, it seems that if I am blameworthy for something's being unavoidable, then there was something that I *could* have done such that if I had done it, it would *not* have been unavoidable. Thus, if I had *not* burnt all copies of my biology book, I could have prepared my exam. PAB captures this idea though, for if I am blameworthy for my inability in specific circumstances to perform a belief-influencing action or omission, then on PAB there must have been some action or series of actions (omissions) prior to that such that if I had performed it, I *would* have been able to perform that belief-influencing action or omission. And that seems right, for if there was no such action or series of actions (omissions), then it is hard to see how I could have been *blameworthy* for my inability to perform the relevant belief-influencing action or omission.

I take it that examples like these confer some initial plausibility on PAB. If it turns out that something, whether it be an event, such as the girl's drowning, or a belief, such as Julia's racist beliefs, was unavoidable, then we normally withdraw responsibility judgements: we believe that if something was unavoidable for someone, then she is not responsible for it. Unavoidability is a perfectly legitimate excuse. Now, some philosophers have claimed that unavoidability generally excuses, but that *if the consequence was unavoidably realized through the subject's agency*, then unavoidability does not excuse. This idea is, of course, highly controversial and we will look at it in detail in Sect. 5. All that I have wanted to show with the above argument is that the fact that unavoidability generally excuses confers some initial plausibility on PAB. If that were the only consideration concerning PAB, then clearly we should embrace PAB. If we are to reject PAB, we should come up with a convincing argument against it. PAB nicely captures our *prima facie* intuitions or, if you like, our *prima facie* beliefs about doxastic responsibility and the ability to believe otherwise. Of course, such intuitions or beliefs can be defeated by further considerations. Therefore, in the following three sections, I will discuss three objections to PAB.

[10] Thus also Steup (1988), p. 72.

4 Objection 1: control over or influence on properties of beliefs

The first objection to PAB is that its adherents overlook our control over and influence on certain *properties* of beliefs. We may, for instance, be blameworthy and, hence, responsible for a belief if we are responsible for the fact that that belief has certain epistemically bad properties, even if we could not have avoided having *that belief itself*. According to Nikolaj Nottelmann, for instance, we can be blameworthy for an unreasonable or inadequately grounded belief, even if we could not have avoided *having* that belief. Responsibility for a belief, then, does *not* entail the ability to believe otherwise.[11]

I think that this objection is unconvincing. For, it seems that control over or influence on such morally or epistemically desirable or undesirable properties of beliefs, although surely relevant to *something*, is irrelevant to the issue of blameworthy or responsible *belief*. If S has no control over or influence on whether or not she holds some belief that p, but at least some influence on whether or not that belief is based on an adequate ground or reasonable, then, it seems, she can be held responsible for whether or not her belief that p exemplifies these properties, but *not* for whether or not she believes that p. Doxastic responsibility is responsibility for the actualization of the state of affairs of one's believing some proposition, *not* responsibility for one's belief's exemplifying certain properties.[12] Hence, control over or influence on properties of belief, no matter how important, is irrelevant to the issue at hand.

In order to drive this point home, consider the following scenario. A patient is seriously ill and his death is literally unavoidable—there is nothing doctors and nurses can do in order to save him. However, there are other things they can do that make a difference to *how* he dies. They can let him suffer or give him morphine and they can let him die lonely or let him be surrounded by family and friends. Thus, although they do not have any control over or influence on *whether or not* the patient dies, they have influence on *how* he dies, that is, on certain properties of the event of the patient's dying. They are, clearly, not blameworthy for the patient's death, although they may be blameworthy for how he dies. The realms of action and belief, then, seem identical in this regard: one is responsible for the actualization of a state of affairs only if one has or had control over or influence on whether that state of affairs is actualized. Whether one has control over or influence on the exemplification of certain properties by that state of affairs is immaterial to that.[13]

Could we perhaps say that if one is blameworthy for a belief's exemplifying certain undesirable properties, one is blameworthy for the *actual belief* one has, including the properties that that belief exemplifies? Such an approach seems unpromising to me. One is blameworthy for one's actual belief that p if one is blameworthy for the actualization of a specific set of states of affairs. However, believing that p cannot be a member of that set of states of affairs, for one is not blameworthy for that. Things are similar with regard to the patient's death. The patient's death seems to be the

[11] See Nottelmann (2007), pp. 53–72.

[12] See Nottelmann (2007), p. 203.

[13] Thus also Montmarquet (1993), pp. 47–48.

actualization of a large set of states of affairs. Now, the doctors may be responsible for the actualization of *some* of those states of affairs, but not for the actualization of the state of affairs *that the patient dies*. For that, I have assumed, was strictly unavoidable for them. This is even acknowledged in ordinary language, for we would *not* say in the above scenario that the doctors are blameworthy or responsible for the patient's death. That is because what we primarily refer to in talking about the patient's death is the state of affairs of the patient's dying. Similarly, it seems to me, we should not say that someone's belief that p is blameworthy if that person is not blameworthy for the actualization of the state of affairs that she believes that p but only for the actualization of the state of affairs that her belief that p is irrational or unreliably formed.

This is, of course, not to deny that there are concrete belief states, such as the belief state of irrationally believing that p. Nor is it to deny that we can be responsible for such belief states. For instance, one can be blameworthy for irrationally believing that p. But all this is perfectly compatible with PAB. All that PAB requires is that if one is responsible for believing a proposition p, one could have failed to believe that p. This is perfectly compatible with being blameworthy for irrationally believing that p even if one could not have failed to believe that p. For, the adherent of PAB could say that in such a scenario, one is blameworthy for one's concrete belief state, for if one had believed rationally rather than irrationally, one would not have held that concrete belief.

5 Objection 2: doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios

The second objection to PAB is more complex. The basic idea is that the thesis is false because it rules out responsibility for beliefs in doxastic analogues of Frankfurt-style scenarios. Let me explain what I mean by that. Harry Frankfurt famously argued that responsibility for actions does *not* require the ability to act otherwise.[14] For instance, I may be responsible for throwing a girl into a canal even if I could not have acted otherwise, because if I had decided not to do so, an evil neurosurgeon who has been waiting in the wings to see what I would do would have forced me to do it via a device that he has implanted in my brain. Frankfurt's argument is confined to actions and omissions.[15] I call the examples that Frankfurt uses in support of his claim *Frankfurt scenarios*. However, something similar has been argued, most notably by John Fischer and Mark Ravizza, for the *consequences* of one's actions and omissions. I dub such examples Frankfurt-*style* scenarios. In this section, I consider whether our intuitions in at least some *doxastic* Frankfurt-style scenarios count against PAB. I call those who believe that they do *strict* doxastic compatibilists. *Strict* doxastic compatibilists ought to be distinguished from doxastic compatibilists, who claim that *intentional* doxastic control is not required for doxastic responsibility.[16] The adherents of doxastic compatibilism may very well also claim that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise and thereby reject *strict* doxastic compatibilism.

[14] See Frankfurt (1969), pp. 829–837; Frankfurt (1993), p. 287.

[15] For the latter, see Frankfurt (1993), pp. 292–293.

[16] For the latter view, see, for instance, Heller (2000), pp. 132–137; Ryan (2003), pp. 70–74; Steup (2008).

It is important to note that, in opposition to Frankfurt scenarios and many non-doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios, *doxastic* Frankfurt-style scenarios come in two varieties. First, there are, of course, scenarios in which a belief is unavoidable because it results from a belief-influencing action or omission for which I seem responsible despite being unable to do otherwise. Imagine, for instance, that Julia is raised in a racist family. As a result of that, she is firmly disposed to form racist beliefs. She realizes how bad it is that she has such a disposition. One day, she gets a once in a lifetime opportunity to freely attend a race issues class, a training which would rid her of her racist belief-forming dispositions. Julia, however, decides not to attend the meeting because she is lazy and careless. It seems that she is blameworthy for not attending the meeting and maybe also for her racist beliefs that she maintains as a result of this omission. That seems true, even if her family members, who heard of it, were waiting in the wings and would have prevented her from attending the meeting if she had intended to go. This first kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style cases, then, is relevantly analogous to most non-doxastic Frankfurt-style cases.

The second variety of doxastic Frankfurt-style cases, however, is quite unlike most non-doxastic Frankfurt-style cases that we find in the literature. Adopting one of Nikolaj Nottelmann's examples, imagine that Julia's family does not know anything about Julia's opportunity to attend the race issues class and that Julia decides *not* to attend the meeting. A year later, she is at a conference. At that conference, a racist demagogue presents certain crime statistics which happen to be correct. On the basis of her racist inclination, she believes that those statistics are correct. However, there is another, clearly reliable and non-racist speaker, who presented the exact same crime statistics an hour earlier. If Julia had attended the race issues class, as she should have, her belief-forming dispositions would have changed in such a way that she would have believed the statistics on the basis of the reliable speaker's testimony. It follows that Julia could not have failed to form the belief that the statistics are correct, for whether or not she meets her intellectual obligations, she ends up believing the crime statistics. PAB implies that she is not responsible for her belief. But it seems that Julia *is* blameworthy for believing that the statistics are correct if she believes them on the basis of the unreliable speaker's testimony.[17] The nice thing about this second variety of doxastic Frankfurt-style cases is that Julia's situation is one of alternate possibilities, because both meeting and failing to meet her intellectual obligation are options that are available to her. This kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style scenario, then, has the advantage that it can be used to make a case against PAB without appealing to counterfactual interveners, which is something that certain philosophers find problematic.

I think there is an answer that has been given to the challenge from non-doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios that can be transposed to the doxastic realm. Imagine that Sam strongly dislikes children and that upon passing by a canal he evilly decides to throw a girl who is standing next to him into it. Unbeknownst to him, an evil surgeon, who has implanted a device in his brain, would have forced him to do so if he had not decided to do it. Is he responsible for the unavoidable consequence of *the*

[17] See Nottelmann (2007), p. 162. A few epistemologists have discussed doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios or similar kinds of scenarios. Among them are Corlett (2008), pp. 191–192; Jäger (2004), pp. 218–225; Leon (2002), pp. 424–430; Zagzebski (2011), pp. 148–151.

girl's being thrown into the water? I agree with Peter van Inwagen that the distinction between *event-particulars* and *event-universals* or, more specifically, *consequence-particulars* and *consequence-universals* provides the right conceptual tools to analyse such scenarios.[18] It is, of course, a matter of great controversy how events are to be individuated. But let us assume with Van Inwagen that they are to be individuated by their causes. Thus, the same consequence-universal, say, the girl's being thrown into the water, can be brought about in different ways and may therefore be instantiated by different consequence-particulars, consequences that are more finely individuated than consequence-universals. If Sam had been forced to throw the girl into the water, the same consequence-universal would have occurred, for the girl would have been thrown in the water. But it is *not* the case that the same consequence-particular would have occurred, for it would have been the evil surgeon's device rather than Sam who would have caused the girl's being thrown into the water. Thus, in certain Frankfurt-style scenarios people are responsible for the relevant consequence-particular, but *not* for the relevant consequence-universal.[19]

I would like to suggest that this strategy can be applied *mutatis mutandis* in the doxastic realm. Propositional belief can have different causes. I believe that there are at least two people in the garden when I see two people walking in the garden, when I hear my friend's testimony that there are two people in the garden, or when I hear three different voices in the garden. Thus, the same belief-universal—belief in the same proposition—may have many different causes. But then there are many different belief-particulars.

I think this helps to make sense of doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios. Let us first consider the second variety of Frankfurt-style scenarios. If, contrary to fact, Julia had met her obligations, she would have believed that *p*, but she would *not* have believed that *p on the basis of the demagogue's testimony*. Rather, she would have believed that *p on the basis of the reliable speaker's testimony*. There is, as such, nothing wrong with her believing the crime statistics. There *is* something wrong with her believing them merely on the basis of the testimony of a person who is clearly racist and unreliable. For Julia would not have done *that* if she had met her intellectual obligations. And that is why she is blameworthy for that. More generally, in doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios of the second variety, one is blameworthy for the consequence-particular of one's belief, a belief that has its causes (its sources) essentially, but *not* for the consequence-universal of one's belief. For the former was avoidable and would have

[18] See Van Inwagen (1983), pp. 166–170. This distinction, but not the conclusions drawn by Van Inwagen on the basis of it, is also accepted by many compatibilists. See, for instance, Fischer and Ravizza (1993), pp. 326–327.

[19] Van Inwagen's proposal has been criticized by Fischer and Ravizza (see Fischer (1994), pp. 140–147; Fischer and Ravizza (1998), pp. 99–101). According to Fischer and Ravizza, in Frankfurt-style scenarios, the agent lacks *control* over what happens in the alternative scenario. They conclude that responsibility requires at most that something else *could have happened*, not that one had the *ability to do otherwise*. However, their criticism would apply only in the first and *not* in the second kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style cases and I will grant that in the first kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style cases, the agent is *not* responsible for the belief in question. Hence, their argument does not undermine my response to the objection from our intuitions in doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios.

been avoided if one had met one's intellectual obligations, whereas the latter was unavoidable.

Of course, one may feel some inclination to blame Julia for her belief itself in the second doxastic Frankfurt-style scenario that I sketched above, but my account provides a double explanation of that inclination. First, we easily mentally confuse this situation with one in which Julia *could* have failed to believe the crime statistics upon hearing the demagogue's testimony, because in that alternative situation there is no reliable testimony in support of those crime statistics. Second, there is something very similar to Julia's believing the crime statistics with which it is easily confused, namely Julia's belief-particular in the crime statistics, where that belief would not be that belief if it had been based on different testimony.

This implies that, even though Julia is blameworthy for her belief (more precisely, her belief-*particular*) in the *second* kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style case, she is *not* blameworthy for her belief in the *first* kind of doxastic Frankfurt-style scenario—neither for her belief-*universal* nor for her belief-*particular*. In the first scenario, Julia freely decides not to attend the racial issues class, but would have been forced not to attend it by her family if she had intended to attend class. In the actual scenario, the causes of her racist belief—say, the testimony of her parents and her psychological constitution—are the same as the causes of her belief in the counterfactual scenario in which her family forces her not to attend the meeting. Thus, even her belief-particular is unavoidable in this scenario. It seems to me, however, that this squares well with our intuitions (or, at least, with mine and those of many other philosophers that I know of). If we know that her family was watching her and would have prevented her from attending class if she had intended to attend class, we can only properly blame her for having decided not to attend class and for the consequence-particular of freely not having attended class, but *not* for maintaining her racist beliefs (assuming, at least, that attending class has been the only opportunity to get rid of her racist beliefs). For we know that even if she had acted as she should have acted, she would have maintained that belief.

This means that PAB, properly understood, comes in two varieties:

PAB_1: Some cognitive subject S is responsible for the *consequence-universal* of believing that p at some time t only if there is some action or series of actions A that S did not perform but could have performed (or did perform, but could have failed to perform) at some time prior to t such that if S had performed (not performed) A, the *consequence-universal* of S's believing that p would not have obtained at t;

and:

PAB_2: Some cognitive subject S is responsible for the *consequence-particular* of believing that p at some time t only if there is some action or series of actions A that S did not perform but could have performed (or did perform, but could have failed to perform) at some time prior to t such that if S had performed (not performed) A, the *consequence-particular* of S's believing that p would not have obtained at t.

Responsibility for a belief-universal requires that one could have failed to have that belief-universal, whereas responsibility for a belief-particular requires that one could

have failed to have that belief-particular. Responsibility for a belief-particular does *not* imply responsibility for a belief-universal, and responsibility for a belief-universal does *not* imply responsibility for a belief-particular (it is possible that one had influence on whether or not one believes that p, even though someone made sure that if one came to believe that p, one would believe it on a particular evidential basis).[20]

Does it follow from what I have argued that compatibilism in general is false? If it did, many philosophers would perhaps be strongly inclined to jettison PAB, for many philosophers are compatibilists. It seems to me that, fortunately, there is good reason to think that no such thing follows. First, in what I said about beliefs and belief-influencing actions, I have confined myself to *consequence*-universals and *consequence*-particulars. I have not said anything about actions and omissions. It is not at all uncommon among philosophers writing on this topic to argue for an asymmetry between the extent to which responsibility for respectively an action, an omission, and a consequence requires the ability to avoid that action, omission, or consequence.[21] Strict compatibilism may still be true for actions and omissions—my account says nothing about that.

Second, doxastic attitudes are different from many other consequences of our actions and omissions for which we are responsible in that in performing belief-influencing actions or omissions, we hardly ever foresee which particular doxastic attitude we will acquire as a result of that. When, in a typical Frankfurt-style scenario, I shoot the mayor or walk on without attempting to rescue a drowning girl, I foresee which consequence-particular will occur as a result of that, namely respectively the major's being shot and the girl's drowning.[22] In a *doxastic* Frankfurt-style scenario, however, I do *not* foresee which belief I will form or maintain as the result of the violation of an intellectual obligation. Usually, we merely foresee which *kinds of belief* we will maintain or acquire. Thus, by not reading a book on herons, I know that I will remain ignorant of certain propositions about herons, but I do not know which things I would come to believe or which beliefs I would abandon if I were to read the book.

How is this relevant? Well, if I intend to shoot the mayor, then I foresee that if I am successful, I will bring it about that the consequence-universal of the mayor's being shot occurs. One might think, therefore, that I bear responsibility for the mayor's being shot, even when a counterfactual intervener was waiting in the wings, so that the occurrence of the consequence-universal was strictly unavoidable. After all, I took it to be avoidable and I took it that whether or not it would occur was up to me. When one violates an intellectual obligation, however, one has no such foresight. It hardly ever happens, if ever at all, that some belief is unavoidable but that one takes it to be avoidable, that is, that one takes it that there is some belief-influencing action such that if one performs it, one will not have that specific belief. It is much more plausible that one is responsible for something unavoidable but foreseen and taken to be avoidable than for

[20] For a discussion of what this means for belief individuation, see Nottelmann and Peels (2013).

[21] Van Inwagen, for instance, agrees that compatibilism is true for actions, but argues that it is false for omissions and consequences (see Van Inwagen (1983), pp. 161–170). And Fischer argues that compatibilism is true for actions and consequences, but not for omissions (see Fischer (1985–1986)).

[22] See, for instance, Fischer and Ravizza (1992), pp. 376–379; Fischer and Ravizza (1998), pp. 93–95; Haji (2000a), p. 264.

something unavoidable but neither foreseen nor taken to be avoidable. Hence, even if one is not a compatibilist about beliefs and other non-foreseeable consequences, one might still be a compatibilist about foreseeable consequences. Of course, these are not more than a few very broad brushstrokes. A substantial defence of this position would require more detail and much more by way of argument. Nonetheless, I think it shows at least that there is some room to argue that doxastic incompatibilists may remain compatibilists about foreseeable consequences. In conjunction with the fact that my account says nothing about actions and omissions, I do not think that the fact that many philosophers are compatibilists poses a problem for PAB.

6 Objection 3: the doxastic asymmetry thesis

A third and final objection to PAB runs as follows. All the examples in favour of PAB that I gave above are cases of *blameworthy* belief. According to some philosophers, though, *blameworthiness* requires the ability to do otherwise, whereas *praiseworthiness* does not.[23] The suggestion, then, is that although blameworthy belief requires the ability to believe otherwise, praiseworthy belief (or neutrally appraisable belief) does not.[24] Since on this thesis praiseworthy belief and blameworthy belief are *asymmetrical* as to whether they require the ability to believe otherwise, let me call it the *doxastic asymmetry thesis*.[25]

Since I know of no philosopher who has defended this thesis, let us consider the main arguments that have been provided for the asymmetry thesis in ethics and see whether they can be transposed to the doxastic realm. First, according to Susan Wolf, if one's actions are not psychologically determined, they seem rather whimsical and it is hard to see how one could ever be praiseworthy for them.[26] By 'psychological determination', she means the inability to do otherwise, given one's beliefs and other evidence, one's desires, one's character, and so forth. Transposing this to the doxastic realm, the idea would be that *belief-influencing* actions should be psychologically determined in order for them not to be a matter of whim. For, it is widely agreed that virtually all of our beliefs are psychologically determined in the sense that what we believe is determined by our evidence and our cognitive constitution.[27] I do not

[23] The thesis says nothing about neutral appraisability. Maybe this is because this reactive attitude is hard to distinguish from certain merely evaluative attitudes (what Strawson calls 'objective attitudes'). In what follows, I focus on praiseworthy belief, taking it that if both blameworthy and praiseworthy belief entail the ability to believe otherwise, then neutral doxastic appraisability does so as well.

[24] For the issue of how praiseworthy belief relates to responsible belief, see Booth and Peels (2010).

[25] This thesis, then, is analogous to the asymmetry thesis in ethics according to which *blameworthiness* for actions requires the ability to act otherwise, whereas *praiseworthiness* does not. It is *not* analogous to two other theses in ethics that have also been referred to as the 'asymmetry thesis', namely the thesis that responsibility for *actions* entails the ability to act otherwise whereas responsibility for *omissions* does not (see Fischer (1985–1986)) and the thesis that *rightness* and *wrongness* entail the ability to act otherwise, whereas *praiseworthiness* and *blameworthiness* do not (see Haji (2000b)).

[26] See Wolf (1980), pp. 153–154, 162.

[27] Paradoxically, Wolf also says that praise is compatible with its not being determined what one does and that its not being determined what one does, does not render one's action whimsical (see Wolf (1980), p. 165; Wolf (1990), p. 81).

think that this argument works. Imagine that I *culpably* rather than *praiseworthily* believe that p. On the doxastic asymmetry thesis, this means that I could have performed a belief-influencing action such that if I had performed it, I would not have believed that p. That means that if I had performed that belief-influencing action, such an action would have been neutrally appraisable or even praiseworthy and the ensuing beliefs would have been neutrally appraisable or even praiseworthy. But if that is true, then at least *some* praiseworthy belief-influencing actions are *not* psychologically determined, namely those that I could have performed while I did in fact perform a blameworthy belief-influencing action. Thus, one can have praiseworthy beliefs and one can perform praiseworthy belief-influencing actions, even if the latter were not psychologically determined and if, therefore, the former were avoidable. Hence, psychological underdetermination does not entail whimsicality.

Second, Wolf claims that we praise people without asking ourselves whether they could have done otherwise.[28] Thus, we praise people for not telling a lie, not hurting a fly, buying a present for a friend, speaking out against injustice, helping a family member who is in trouble, and saving a drowning child, without asking ourselves whether they could have done otherwise. In fact, it seems that we continue to praise them if we find out that they could *not* have done otherwise. All that we require for praiseworthiness is that people do something *for the right reason*. I think it is not easy to transpose this argument to the doxastic realm, for it seems much harder to think of belief-influencing actions that one could not fail to perform. Let us, nonetheless, assume that there are such actions. Perhaps certain people are so intellectually conscientious that they cannot fail to gather further evidence on beliefs that they consider incompatible and which they believe themselves to hold. Unfortunately, I think all these examples provide no good reason to think that praiseworthy belief does not entail the ability to believe otherwise. There are at least two good reasons why we often praise people without asking ourselves whether they could have done otherwise. First, not all kinds of praise express *reactive* attitudes. In other words, in praising people for φ-ing, we do not always hold them responsible for φ-ing. I can praise Miranda for her beauty in the same way as I can praise my Chevrolet for its speed. Many instances of praise seem to express admiration or gratitude or some such *evaluative* rather than *reactive* attitude. Second, in those cases in which we do express a reactive attitude in praising someone for φ-ing, we often assume that they had control over or influence on φ-ing. Maybe we praise Fred for being unable to tell a lie, but it seems that that is because we assume that in the course of his life he has done so much character building that now he cannot but tell the truth. If science made such incredible progress that we could create adult human beings and we could create human beings who cannot but tell the truth, it seems incorrect to take the reactive attitude of praise towards such creatures and thereby hold them responsible for not telling a lie.

Third, it seems clear that when it comes to *blameworthy* belief we value the ability to believe otherwise. For, to be able to believe otherwise in such a case is to be able to believe responsibly and we value believing responsibly. But when it comes to *praiseworthy* belief, what value would there be in the ability to believe otherwise, say, to

[28] See Wolf (1980), pp. 155–159; Wolf (1990), pp. 59, 67–93. Thus also Adams (1985) and Smith (2005), pp. 251, 257.

believe blameworthily?[29] There is nothing desirable about such an ability. In response, I would like to stress that my claim that praiseworthy belief entails the ability to believe otherwise is *not* based on the idea that that ability is valuable.[30] The ground for my assertion is merely metaphysical. We should not hold someone responsible for some belief if she cannot believe otherwise, because that would be incorrect: such a person would not be the proper object of one of the reactive attitudes for holding that belief.

Fourth and finally, one might object that if God exists, he is praiseworthy if anyone is. But God could not fail to be praiseworthy and could not fail to perform praiseworthy actions. Hence, there is asymmetry between blameworthiness and praiseworthiness. Again, I think it is quite difficult to transpose this particular argument to the doxastic realm. First, it seems that we praise God for who he is and for certain of his actions, but not for his *beliefs*. Nor do we praise God for performing certain *belief-influencing actions*, that is, actions that make a difference to what he believes. For, we do not believe that if God exists, there are any belief-influencing actions that he could perform, for God is necessarily omniscient. Nevertheless, we do seem to praise God for *certain things*. But I do not think that this counts in favour of the asymmetry thesis in general or the more specific doxastic asymmetry thesis. First, we praise God for being gracious, generous, loving, almighty, and so forth. And, presumably, God could not have lacked these attributes. But it seems that in praising God in this way we do *not* express a *reactive* attitude, an attitude by which we deem God responsible for having these attributes. The whole idea seems bizarre. Rather, believers stand in awe and express their feelings and convictions by way of praise. Second, there are other instances of praising God that *do* express reactive attitudes. Thus, Christians praise God for creating the world, sending his Son, giving his Holy Spirit, and so forth. However, these are all actions that, according to mainstream Christian theology, God could have failed to perform. I conclude that the fact that many people praise God, a being who could not fail to be praiseworthy, does not count in favour of the doxastic asymmetry thesis.

This means that we have not been given a good reason to think that there is doxastic asymmetry. But most people, including many philosophers, at least initially have the intuition (or hold the belief) that responsibility for φ-ing requires the ability to $\sim\varphi$. If both blameworthiness and praiseworthiness entail responsibility and doxastic blameworthiness entails the ability to believe otherwise, then, unless we have good reason to think otherwise, it is hard to see why doxastic praiseworthiness would *not* entail the ability to believe otherwise. On balance, then, we have good reason to reject the doxastic asymmetry thesis and to accept PAB.

7 Some implications of PAB

In this paper, I have defended the thesis that responsibility for belief entails the ability to believe otherwise. More precisely, I have provided a defence of the claim that some

[29] Here, I again adopt and adapt an argument by Susan Wolf (see Wolf (1990), pp. 55–58).

[30] This is not to deny that I *do* believe that such an ability is valuable. Since we value freedom and responsibility, we do value such an ability more than we value the mere ability to believe responsibly.

cognitive subject S is responsible for believing that p at some time t only if there is some action or series of actions A that S did not perform but could have performed (or did perform, but could have failed to perform) at some time prior to t such that if S had performed (not performed) A, S would *not* have believed that p at t. I have argued that this principle applies to both belief-universals and belief-particulars (as long as the term 'belief' is understood univocally in the definition of the PAB). If I am right that this principle is true, then what follows from that? What are the epistemological and ethical ramifications? Here, I will sketch three of them.

First, it follows that, contrary to what some have claimed, an account of (epistemically or morally) responsible belief in terms of intellectual obligations to (not) perform certain belief-influencing actions can plausibly be construed *counterfactually*. Certain philosophers, such as Nikolaj Nottelmann,[31] have opted for a non-counterfactual construal of responsible belief because they are convinced that construing it counterfactually leads to problems in doxastic Frankfurt-style scenarios. If what I have argued is correct, however, Frankfurt-style scenarios provide us with no reason to reject accounts of responsible belief along the following lines (what follows is just an example of what a counterfactual analysis of responsible belief could look like):

> S responsibly believes that p iff (i) S believes that p, (ii) S is the proper subject of intellectual obligations to perform certain belief-influencing actions, (iii) there is some belief-influencing action or series of actions A that S could have performed such that if S had performed A, S would not have believed that p, and (iv) S has *not* violated any intellectual obligations such that if S had met those obligations, then certain belief-influencing factors would have changed in such a way that S would not have believed that p, or (v) S has violated such obligations, but is excused for that.[32]

Second, if PAB is true, then the *deontological conception of epistemic justification* faces a serious difficulty. On the deontological conception—from the Greek word '*deomai*', 'ought to'—, one epistemically justifiedly believes that p if and only if one is responsible for believing that p and one is blameless for believing that p. According to Laurence BonJour, for instance, the core of the concept of epistemic justification is epistemic responsibility.[33] In believing as one does, one meets one's epistemic obligations.

The problem for adherents of the deontological conception of epistemic justification is the following. Knowledge does *not* require the ability to believe otherwise. Clearly, I know that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that I exist, even if I am unable to fail to believe that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that I exist. In others words, I can perfectly well know that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that I exist even if there is no action or series of actions that I could perform or could have performed such that if I had done so, I would not have believed that $2 + 2 = 4$ or that I exist. Knowledge, then, does not require the ability to believe otherwise.

[31] See Nottelmann (2007), pp. 161–163.

[32] In order for this analysis of responsible belief to be plausible, it should be read as: (i) $\wedge$ (ii) $\wedge$ (iii) $\wedge$ [(iv) $\vee$ (v)]. This definition comes close to how I would analyze responsible belief myself.

[33] See BonJour (1985), p. 8.

But knowledge is widely taken—also by the adherents of the deontological conception of epistemic justification—to entail epistemic justification. One cannot know that p without being epistemically justified in believing that p. And that means that there are situations in which I am epistemically justified in believing that p despite the fact that I could not fail to believe that p. If, however, the deontological conception of epistemic justification is correct, then to be epistemically justified in believing that p means that one is responsible for believing that p. And PAB claims that being responsible for believing that p implies that one could have failed to believe that p. PAB, then, conflicts with the deontological conception of epistemic justification.

This does not mean that the deontological conception of epistemic justification is untenable. It *does* mean that it needs an important revision (or, at least, an important restriction). What it should say is that one is epistemically justified in believing that p if and only if one is *blameless* for believing that p or one did not violate any obligations in believing that p, *not* also that one is *responsible* for believing that p or that one has met one's epistemic obligations in coming to believe that p. For all I have said here, this revised version of the deontological conception of epistemic justification may be tenable.

Third, as I said in Sect. 5, there might be an important asymmetry between beliefs on the one hand and actions and non-doxastic consequences on the other: it might be the case that the former, but not the latter require that one could have prevented the action or the consequence in question. As we saw, this is because actions and most non-doxastic consequences come with foresight: upon some reflection, we see that buying a car will lead to us having a car and that throwing a stone will lead to the window's breaking. Beliefs are not like that. In working on our intellectual virtues and vices, in improving the functioning on our doxastic mechanisms (such as our reasoning abilities), and in gathering evidence, such as reading books and articles, we do *not* foresee which particular beliefs we will acquire. We might foresee towards which propositions we will acquire a doxastic attitude, but normally we do not foresee which attitude that is going to be. It is much more plausible that we are blameworthy or, more generally, responsible for some X if we foresee or are able to foresee X than if we do not or cannot foresee X. The idea that foresight makes a difference to the scope of our responsibility is one that needs to be taken seriously and that could create room for embracing PAB while rejecting an analogous principle for non-doxastic consequences and actions.

8 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise. More precisely, I have argued that being the proper object of one of the reactive attitudes for believing that p entails that there was an action (omission) or series of actions (omissions) that one could have performed such that if one had done that, one would not have believed that p. I provided one consideration in favour of this claim by arguing that unavoidability normally counts as a good excuse that removes all responsibility. I also argued that the thesis that doxastic responsibility entails the ability to believe otherwise is not undermined by the fact that we sometimes control or

influence which properties our beliefs exemplify, by our intuitions in doxastic analogues of Frankfurt-style scenarios, or by a presumed asymmetry between blameworthy belief and praiseworthy belief. If PAB is correct, then this has important ramifications. First, an account of responsible belief might plausibly be cast in counterfactual terms. Second, the deontological conception of epistemic justification needs revision on one important point: epistemic justification does not entail doxastic responsibility. Third, there might be an important asymmetry between actions and many non-doxastic consequences on the one hand and beliefs on the other in that responsibility for the latter requires the ability to believe otherwise, whereas responsibility for the former does not require that one could have failed to perform the action or that the non-doxastic consequence could have failed to obtain.

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