

## On some recent moves in defense of doxastic compatibilism

Article (Submitted Version)

Booth, Anthony Robert (2014) On some recent moves in defense of doxastic compatibilism. *Synthese*, 191 (8). pp. 1867-1880. ISSN 0039-7857

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/59411/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

# On Some Recent Moves in Defence of Doxastic Compatibilism

Anthony Booth

a.r.booth@sussex.ac.uk

## Abstract

According to the doxastic compatibilist, compatibilist criteria with respect to the freedom of action rule-in our having free beliefs. In Booth 2009, I challenged the doxastic compatibilist to either come up with an account of how doxastic attitudes can be intentional in the face of it very much seeming to many of us that they cannot. Or else, in rejecting that doxastic attitudes need to be voluntary in order to be free, to come up with a principled account of how her criteria of doxastic freedom are criteria of freedom. In two recent papers, Steup (Steup 2012, Steup 2011) takes up the first disjunct of the challenge by proposing that even though beliefs cannot be practically intentional, they can be epistemically intentional. McHugh (McHugh forthcoming) instead takes up the second disjunct by proposing that the freedom of belief be modelled not on the freedom of action but on the freedom of intention. I argue that both Steup's and McHugh's strategies are problematic.

## 1. Introduction

Are we free with respect to what we believe? The contemporary orthodoxy has it that we are not. This orthodoxy has been challenged recently. Some authors have claimed that the criteria by which compatibilists determine whether an action is free, rule-in our being able to believe freely (cf. Steup 2008, Ryan 2003). Let us call this thesis "Doxastic Compatibilism":

DC: On compatibilist criteria, there is no asymmetry between action and belief with respect to whether or not they are free. If we perform certain actions freely, we can also come to have certain beliefs freely.

Let us call a competing view "the Asymmetry Thesis":

AT: On compatibilist criteria, there is asymmetry between action and belief: while acting freely is possible, believing freely is not<sup>1</sup>.

I think that compatibilism about action is consistent with AT. That is, we can be compatibilists about the freedom of action and coherently claim that we cannot believe freely.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, when I say that believing freely is impossible, I mean that it is at least psychologically (as opposed to conceptually) impossible.

The reason is that belief and action are radically dis-analogous when it comes to one key property: while an action X can at least sometimes be the product of an intention to X, a belief that p can never be the product of an intention to believe that p, or at least cannot ordinarily be the product of an intention to believe that p. In light of this difference, I issued, in Booth 2009, doxastic compatibilists a challenge: Accepting that beliefs can never be intentional, doxastic compatibilists may insist that the criteria by which we should determine whether or not a belief is free ought to be different to the criteria by which we determine whether or not an action is free (cf. Steup 2008), that we do not need to consider the impossibility of belief being intentional a strike against DC. But then the doxastic compatibilist owes us a principled account of why her criteria are criteria about freedom. By “principled account”, I mean here an account that does not presuppose the claim that beliefs can be free. Supplying such an account seems like a superlatively difficult thing to do, especially when the possibility of appealing to criteria about the freedom of action has been obviated, or rendered illegitimate. To the question: why are your criteria, criteria about freedom? The proponent of DC cannot now respond: they determine whether action is free, so they also determine whether belief is free<sup>2</sup>. Instead, and this is the second disjunct of the challenge, the doxastic compatibilist may deny that beliefs<sup>3</sup> can never be intentional. But then she’ll owe us an account of how belief can be intentional and an error theory as to why it seems to many philosophers that it is not. That seemed to me to be no easy feat either.

But two attempts to meet my challenge have now been undertaken, one about each disjunct. The first, proposed by Matthias Steup (Steup 2012, Steup 2011), addresses the last

---

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, the compatibilist could maintain that the criteria for freedom of belief and action are the same *except* with respect to the issue of intentionality. But then the compatibilist needs a principled way of establishing this exceptionalism.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, for ease of exposition, I’ll be using ‘beliefs’ and ‘doxastic attitudes’ interchangeably.

disjunct. Steup claims that there are two different kinds of intentionality, epistemic and practical, and that belief can be epistemically intentional. He explains why people have thought that beliefs cannot be intentional by claiming that they have errantly moved from the premise that beliefs cannot be practically intentional to the conclusion that beliefs cannot be intentional at all. In the following section (2), I argue that this move fails, on pain of there being no such thing as epistemic intentionality. Or, at least, Steup has failed to provide us with good reason to think that there is such a thing, I argue.

A second line of defence has been suggested by Conor McHugh (McHugh forthcoming). McHugh addresses the first disjunct of the challenge and makes an intriguing suggestion as to how one might motivate criteria of doxastic freedom in a principled way, and without appealing to the freedom of action. We cannot control our intentions in the way that we can actions, but that does not mean that they are not free. So perhaps we can model the freedom of belief on the freedom of intention. In section 3, I argue that this line of reasoning depends on an arguably controversial assumption, namely that un-free intentions are possible. Further, I make some trouble for how McHugh's account is meant to explain how belief and intention can be free but not voluntary. More (difficult) work, therefore, is needed before the strategy suggested by McHugh is successful.

## **2. Epistemic Intentionality.**

Here is an argument for AT:

- (1) It is possible for A to X freely only if it is possible for A to X intentionally.
- (2) It is impossible to form a belief intentionally.
- (3) It is impossible to form a belief freely (from 1, 2)
- (4) It is possible to perform actions intentionally.

(5) Relative to consideration regarding intentionality, it is possible to perform actions freely (from 1, 4)

(6) It is impossible that beliefs are free but possible that actions are free (AT) (from 3, 5)

In previous work, Steup (cf. Steup 2008) denied premise (1) by claiming that the freedom of belief ought to be gauged by different criteria to the freedom of action:

Actions and doxastic attitudes differ with regards to what causes them. Actions are typically caused by intentions and desires. Doxastic attitudes are typically caused differently: by cognitive processes that respond to our evidence. We should question, therefore, whether the possibility of being caused by an intention is a necessary condition of both freedom for actions and doxastic attitudes. (Steup 2008, p. 387)

The idea is that (1) is only true of actions; only actions are free only if they are capable of being formed intentionally. Beliefs need not be subject to this criterion of freedom. Unfortunately, as I pointed out in Booth 2009, Steup fails to provide us with a principled account of why his criteria of doxastic freedom are indeed criteria for freedom. In his most recent papers (Steup 2011, Steup 2012) however, he reneges on the claim that beliefs (or doxastic attitudes more generally) are never intentional, since they can be epistemically intentional.

Steup thinks that it seems to us that beliefs are never intentional because we are unjustifiably privileging wanting to X as a result of practical considerations. Why can't we say that we can believe what we desire only when our desires to believe are responsive to our evidence? According to Steup, there are two kinds of intentionality, epistemic intentionality and practical intentionality. To see how they differ, we have to look at how Steup thinks we should identify something as being intentional. Here Steup uses Fisher and Ravizza's (Fischer and Ravizza 1998) compatibilist criterion to determine when an action is free,

namely (roughly) whether it is responsive to reasons. Here is how Steup summarises the position:

Reason responsiveness = good causes = voluntary control.

Lack of reason responsiveness = bad causes = no voluntary control. (Steup 2011, p. 547)

The idea is that we can identify when an agent's action X is voluntary<sup>4</sup> by considering whether the agent would have acted differently had his reasons been different. If I had had good reason not to get out of bed this morning, for instance, I would not have got out of bed. Thus we can say that my getting out of bed this morning is something I did intentionally.

Under the reason-responsiveness criterion, some beliefs turn out to be intentional. Namely those held by S that S would not have held had his evidence been different. That is, if S believes that p, that p is backed up by good evidence, and S would not believe that p if p was not backed up by good evidence, then S believes that p intentionally. The thought is that beliefs are only responsive to a certain kind of reason, epistemic reason. They are not responsive to practical reason. So we can say, then, that beliefs are epistemically intentional, but not practically intentional. Epistemic intentionality is determined by reason-responsiveness to epistemic reasons, practical intentionality is determined by reason-responsiveness to practical reasons.

Responding to practical reasons, we make decisions and form intentions about what to do. Responding to epistemic reasons, we make decision[s] and form intentions about what to believe. There are, then, two modes of intentionality: practical and epistemic intentionality...In response to epistemic reasons, we can and frequently do form intentions to believe otherwise. Neglecting rare exceptions due to deep religious or political commitments, such intentions are not causally inert but are as efficacious as intentions to act. (Steup 2011, p. 558)

---

<sup>4</sup> I'm using 'intentional' and 'voluntary' as synonyms: X is voluntary iff X is intentional.

Thus premise (2) is false. Or, at least, it is under-described, since beliefs can be epistemically intentional. Steup's account also meets the demand of the first disjunct of my compatibilist challenge, since it explains why it seems to us that belief is never intentional. We think that it is not because we are rightly apprehending that belief is never practically intentional and from this come to the conclusion that it is never intentional at all, not realising that there is another mode in which it can be intentional.

But is there such a thing as epistemic intentionality? In order to make the case that there is such a thing, Steup asks us to consider the following scenario:

#### Car Theft

My wife and I have dinner downtown Lafayette at Bistro 501. We leave the restaurant and return to the spot where I parked the car. Alas, my car is gone. I wonder whether I really parked the car where I thought I did. I ask my wife "Are you sure this is where we parked?" She answers affirmatively. Considering the possibility that, foolishly, I parked in a tow zone, we survey the sidewalk for signs indicating that I parked the car illegally. No such signs can be found. Considering the low rate of car theft in Lafayette, I am initially reluctant to conclude that my car was stolen. Alas, not having available any alternative explanation of why my car isn't there, I decide to believe that, surprisingly, my car was stolen. (Steup 2011, p. 556)

According to Steup, there are five salient features of this case, viz.:

- (i) Wondering whether S is true, I suspend judgment about S.
- (ii) I consider my reasons for and against S.
- (iii) I conclude that I have good reasons for taking S to be true and decide to believe S.
- (iv) My attitude of suspending judgment about S is replaced by that of believing S.
- (v) I believe S because I decided to believe S, and the causal relation between my decision and my belief is non-deviant. (Steup 2011, p. 556)

And these are, for Steup, analogous to the salient features of paradigmatic, intentional action, viz.:

- (i) I wonder whether I should get a cup of coffee.
- (ii) I consider my reasons for and against getting a cup of coffee.
- (iii) I conclude that my reasons for getting a cup of coffee outweigh my reasons against getting a cup of coffee and decide to get a cup of coffee.
- (iv) I go and get a cup of coffee.
- (v) I get a cup of coffee because I decided to get a cup of coffee, and the causal link between my getting a cup of coffee and my decision is non-deviant. (Steup 2011, p. 556)

Steup concludes that we thus have good reason to think that belief is intentional (albeit epistemically intentional, since it is responsive only to epistemic reason). I will not take issue with the claim that these are the salient features of paradigmatic, intentional action. However, I think there are two problems with taking this scenario to show that belief can be intentional.

Firstly, I accept that Car Theft has in it features (i), (ii), (iv). I think it has these features due to the fact that belief is reason-responsive. But, as we'll see shortly, reason-responsiveness alone does not seem to be sufficient for intentionality. In order to say that we can believe intentionally, it must be the case that we can decide to believe that p (as per (iii) and (v)). But Car Theft does not demonstrate that we can decide to believe that p, since we do not have to think the case has in it features (iii) and (v). In lieu of (iii) we could have:

(iii\*) I conclude that I have good reasons for taking S to be true and come to believe S.

Now, Steup claims that in (iii) "the second conjunct is necessary because it's possible to conclude one has good reasons for X-ing without actually deciding to X" (Steup 2011, p. 556). I take it that we can paraphrase Steup to be saying here that concluding that one has good reason to believe that p is not sufficient for coming to believe that p. What is necessary, at least in certain cases, is to make a decision to believe that p. The trouble is that I might well not believe that p even though I think that I have good reasons for believing that p, but this is merely because I think I have better reasons for believing that not-p, or that the reasons have been undercut, or rebutted by defeaters. Or, indeed, I might just be psychologically incapable of believing that p. There might be lots of things that prevent me from believing that p even if I have judged that I have good reason to believe that p. So from the fact that it is possible to conclude that one has good reasons for X-ing without actually deciding to X, it does not follow that we must think that (iii) and not (iii\*) obtains in Car Theft. If we do not



have to think that (iii) obtains, we also do not have to think that (v) obtains. Instead, we could have (i.e. nothing Steup says rules out):

(v\*) I believe S because I take the evidence toward p to be conclusive, and the causal relation between my taking the evidence toward p to be conclusive and my belief is non-deviant.

Secondly, if we are entitled to use the vocabulary of decision-making with respect to belief such that (iii) and (v) obtain in Car Theft then we should also be entitled to use it with respect to fear and love and the other emotions and attitudes that we pre-theoretically do not want to say are intentional. As per:

- (i) I consider whether I should fear the lion in the field.
- (ii) I consider my reasons for fearing the lion (how angry it looks, how far away from me it is etc).
- (iii) I conclude that I have good reason for fearing the lion and decide to fear the lion.
- (iv) I fear the lion where I previously did not.
- (v) I fear the lion because I decided to fear the lion.

By Steup's reasoning, since it's possible to conclude that one has good reasons for fearing a lion, and yet not fear a lion, (iii) should obtain. But, this looks like the wrong result, pre-theoretically. Surely, emotions such as fear are not intentional even though they are reason-responsive. For example, if I had had good reason not to fear the lion running towards me, I would not have feared it. But yet it seems completely implausible to maintain that I fear the lion intentionally.<sup>5</sup> Saying that my emotion is somehow fear-intentional because it responds to a certain kind of reason does not seem to make the claim any less implausible<sup>6</sup>. Ultimately,

---

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to anonymous for this point.

<sup>6</sup> Now, Fischer and Ravizza's account is perfectly compatible with this, since they are trying to define free *action*. We can think that reason-responsiveness captures what it is for an *action* to be intentional without thinking that it captures what it is for a *belief* or other attitudes to be intentional. This is a worry specifically for Steup, since his opponent will not condone the assumption that belief is like action in this context, and not like

8

it seems that Steup has not given us reason to think that belief is intentional beyond the fact that it is responsive to reasons. What seems to warrant talk of decision in (iii) is the fact that the resultant attitude is the result of reasoning, else we should not be able to replace a decision to believe with a decision to fear a lion and keep the analogy. So Steup's strategy cannot help us determine why we should think that belief is like action and intentional, and not like non-intentional, but reason-responsive attitudes such as fear. On this line of reasoning, Steup must accept that fear and other attitudes are, appearances to the contrary, intentional after all. This is quite a hard bullet to bite, I think. The burden of proof is for Steup to show us that it is not, and it is a burden he has not yet discharged.

But maybe Steup does not need to show that there is such a thing as epistemic intentionality. That is, it is not enough for his opponent to show that his scenario can be interpreted in such a way that does not involve talk of a decision; his opponent needs to show that Steup's scenario cannot be interpreted such that it involves epistemic intentionality. In other words, Steup's opponent must show that epistemic decisions are impossible, or at least that such epistemic decisions are causally ineffective. All that Steup needs is for his scenario to show that there are at least some cases that can be taken to involve causally effective epistemic intentionality<sup>7</sup>. However, if that is true, then Steup must be prepared to allow for the possibility of doxastic attitudes that are the outcome of an epistemic reason-responsive mechanism, but are not the product of doxastic decisions. That is, he must not hold that being epistemic reason-responsive is sufficient for epistemic intentionality. If he holds that it is sufficient, then our being able to interpret his Car Theft scenario in such a way that it does not involve a doxastic decision would be vitiating after all. But, and here is the rub, there

---

other attitudes that can be reason-responsive but not intentional. In sum, from the fact that beliefs are responsive to reasons, it does not follow that they are intentional. They might be like other attitudes that are reason-responsive and not intentional.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to an anonymous referee at *Synthese* for raising this point.

must then be something that determines when a doxastic attitude (that is the product of an epistemic reason-responsive mechanism) is also the product of an epistemic intention, and when it is not. And what property could possibly determine that? We cannot appeal here to the property of being epistemic reason-responsive, since both non-intentional and intentional doxastic attitudes can share that property. And we cannot appeal to responsiveness to practical reasons, since such reasons are ruled out a fortiori of an account of epistemic intentionality. It seems that no property obviously fits the bill here; so I think that Steup needs to do some more work here if his account is to succeed. This is not to say that Steup's scenario cannot be taken in such a way that it involves epistemic intentionality, but that if Steup does not claim that reason-responsiveness is sufficient for epistemic intentionality, then he needs to tell us what the difference is between non-intentional and intentional doxastic attitudes that are both epistemic reason-responsive. No account seems forthcoming. If his claim is after all that reason-responsiveness is sufficient for epistemic intentionality, then his Car Theft scenario cannot establish it for the reasons we canvassed earlier<sup>8</sup>. Further, as we also mentioned, we have reason to think that reason-responsiveness is not sufficient for intentionality, since fear for example can be reason-responsive but not intentional.

### **3. Freedom of Intention and Belief**

Let us now consider the second disjunct of my challenge for the Doxastic Compatibilist that McHugh engages with in a recent paper (McHugh forthcoming). To recapitulate: if the compatibilist holds that belief cannot be intentional she must offer a principled account of how the freedom of belief, though radically different to the freedom of

---

<sup>8</sup> Steup never explicitly says that epistemic reason responsiveness is sufficient for epistemic intentionality. However, he never explicitly says the obverse either. So it's difficult to know exactly what he had in mind here. I hope to have shown that his account is problematic, either way we read him.

action, belongs to the same genus (and this seems like a very hard thing to do). McHugh, however, tries to offer such an account by asking us to consider the freedom we have over our intentions. According to McHugh, at least some of our intentions are free. I think this can be taken to be uncontroversial for the reasons McHugh offers, viz. that freedom of intention is a necessary condition on full moral responsibility for actions, and that we sometimes correctly hold people to be morally responsible for their intentions to X even if they end up not X-ing (McHugh forthcoming, p. 13). Crucially, and more controversially as I hope to show, McHugh claims that “freedom of intention is something that goes beyond voluntary control of action” (McHugh forthcoming, p. 13), so that we can have un-free intentions, and so that it makes sense to ask: how do we exercise our freedom of intention? To this question, McHugh replies that we cannot exercise our freedom of intention through voluntary control. As Kavka’s toxin puzzle demonstrates<sup>9</sup>, what we intend is not under our voluntary control. So if intentions are free, they are not so in virtue of being (able to be) caused by intentions. It’s plausible, then, that they are free in virtue of the fact that they are reason-responsive. And if it is legitimate to apply the reason-responsiveness criterion to something other than actions, it seems like a case of special-pleading to insist that freedom of belief is exercised through voluntary control, if it is exercised at all. So here we have a principled account of why the freedom of belief, while different to that of action, can be considered to belong to the same genus: we exercise doxastic freedom in the same way in which we exercise our freedom of

---

<sup>9</sup> Kavka 1983. Here is McHugh’s paraphrase of the puzzle: “You are offered a large reward to *intend* today to drink a mild toxin tomorrow. The toxin’s effects are very unpleasant but short-lived and harmless. You are offered nothing to actually drink the toxin. Whether you win the reward or not depends entirely on whether you have the requisite intention today. Can you react to the prospect of the reward by intending to drink the toxin? It seems not. You cannot intend to drink it, knowing that when the time comes you will have no reason to drink it and strong reason against doing so. You would need some reason for actually drinking it, in order to be motivated to intend to drink it” (McHugh forthcoming, p. 14).

intention. Actions are not the only other things that we have freedom over, and so are not the only things that we can model an account of doxastic freedom on.

The proposal seems very promising, but I would like to raise two objections to it. The first is the following. As I mentioned, I think the claim that freedom of intention embodies a different kind of freedom than that which we can exercise through voluntary control should be taken to be a much more controversial claim than McHugh takes it to be. It seems to me plausible to suppose that “A X-ed intentionally” logically entails that “A X-ed freely”, such that it seems confused to say that an action can be voluntary yet not free. When we act intentionally, we necessarily exercise our power of choice, a power we cannot fail to exercise freely (when we exercise it). If we did not have this power of choice, we could not be held to have voluntary control over our actions. This is typically (though not necessarily) an intuition that incompatibilists share; for instance, here is Jonathan Lowe:

...the idea that what is needed is an account how the agent has control over how he exercises his power of choice is, I believe, a deeply confused one. According to libertarianism, it is precisely because we have a power of choice which we can exercise freely – that is, a power of choice whose exercises are not determined by prior events – that we have control over our actions. (Lowe 2008, p. 195)<sup>10</sup>

To translate this into the dialectical strategy espoused by McHugh: because there cannot be a satisfactory account as to how the agent has control over how he exercises his power of choice, we must suppose that he exercises his power of choice via different means. But this is predicated, it seems to me, on the idea that we can have un-free voluntary control over our actions. If we have voluntary control over our actions in virtue of our ability to exercise our free power of choice, it follows that no voluntary action can be unfree. And if that is true, it is confused for McHugh to demand an account of how we exercise our freedom of intention (how we exercise our power of choice).

---

<sup>10</sup> See also O’Connor 2000 and Steward 2012 for similar takes.

To be fair to McHugh, he does offer us a few cases designed to convince us that there can be unfree intentions:

Consider, for example, an agent who compulsively forms intentions to pick up red objects, intentions which he then executes normally.

Or consider an agent whose intentions are, unknown to him, controlled by some external agent by means of a neural implant.

Consider, finally, an agent who forms intentions on the basis of his own consideration of reasons, but whose grasp of those reasons is so utterly unsystematic and incomprehensible that we would consider him insane.

(McHugh forthcoming, p. 12)

Someone, like Lowe, who holds that “A intends to X” logically entails that “A freely decided to X” [exercised his free power of choice to X] will not be convinced that the subjects in these cases can be properly described as having intentions<sup>11</sup>. The fact that the agent has been manipulated, or that he is insane, or that he is in some way mentally incapacitated, attenuates our ability to sensibly ascribe to him an intention. For instance, take the case of the external agent controlling me via a neural implant:

For him to have, per impossible, control over how I exercise my power of choice would be for him to deprive me of that power, so that this is, logically, not a sort of control that he can have over me. If he had such control over me that I no longer had any power of choice, he would now be the only one of us capable of possessing such a power: there would not be two distinct powers of choice, mine and his, with his the dominant power. He would be in control of me, but not in control of my power of choice, for I would have none. (Lowe 2008, p. 196)

But perhaps we nevertheless have the intuition that in McHugh’s cases the agents really do have intentions; doesn’t that fact, if it is a fact, require some diagnosis? I think McHugh’s opponent does have the means to explain away the intuition, however. She can claim that in each case the subject has a mistaken belief with the content “I intend to X”. We misidentify

---

<sup>11</sup> I should stress that there is no reason I can see for why compatibilists as regards freedom of action cannot hold this view too.

the subjects' mistaken beliefs about their intentions to X to be genuine intentions to X. We notice that the mental state they are in explains why they act<sup>12</sup> as they do, so we rule that the relevant mental state must be an intention to X. But their having a mistaken belief that they intend to X also explains why they enact what they think they intend. The subjects here have unfree and mistaken beliefs, but not unfree intentions. So McHugh's case is not conclusive, since his opponent may be committed to an account of intention that makes it impossible to have unfree intentions, and she also has resources to explain away the putative intuitions solicited by the kinds of cases McHugh mobilises to oppose her.

The second problem I see with McHugh's account is the following. According to McHugh, the reason-responsiveness account of freedom can explain why we cannot intend or believe voluntarily. That's because beliefs and intentions are responsive only to a certain kind of reasons, namely object-given reasons. Object-given reasons bear on the objects of intention and belief (e.g. evidence that a belief that p is true or considerations that would make X-ing desirable or good) and state-given reasons are reasons that bear on whether one should be in the state of belief or intention (e.g. that having the belief that p might make it more likely that I recover from an illness, or being in a state of intending to X might cause me to get a reward). Both beliefs and intentions are responsive to object-given reasons and are not responsive to state-given reasons because both are regulated by a constitutive aim ("truth" in the case of belief, and "do what is all things considered right" in the case of intention); one cannot, for instance, consider oneself to believe that p if one "believes" that p for reasons that do not bear on whether p is true. To believe and intend voluntarily would be to believe and intend for state-given reasons, so since we have an account of why belief and intention are

---

<sup>12</sup> Note that I claim merely that the agents here *act*, they do not perform *actions*. One might insist that one cannot perform unintentional actions, but to insist that the agents here perform actions is somewhat question begging in this context.

not responsive to state-given reasons, we have an explanation as to why we cannot believe and intend voluntarily<sup>13</sup>.

The account is an elegant one, but the problem is that the constitutive aim of belief does not always determine that one ought to have a unique doxastic attitude and the constitutive aim of intention does not always determine that one ought to perform a unique action. That is, the aim of belief does not rule out that one's epistemic reasons make it permissible to either believe that *p* or suspend judgement on that *p*. Nor does the aim of intention rule out that one's reasons make it permissible that one either intend to *X* or not intend to *X*. For instance, my evidence could be such that it indicates to a small but not negligible degree that Rufus, the dog, ate my homework. From the fact that belief aims at truth one cannot infer that either belief or suspension of judgement would be impermissible. Firstly, because suspension of judgement is unlikely to aim at truth: i.e. we do not aim to suspend judgement on whatever we deem to be true. Secondly, because if I believe that Rufus ate my homework when I merely take it to be permissible to believe it, I still believe in line with the aim of belief, since I have evidence that the belief is true. Suppose that in those situations someone respectively believes that *p* and intends to *X*. Her intention and belief are either free or not free. What verdict will McHugh's account give? Did she believe freely, for instance? If it gives us the verdict that she did not believe freely, then his account does not, after all, explain why she did not believe freely, since both belief and suspended judgement are sanctioned by the constitutive aims of belief. If it gives us the verdict that she believes freely, then we should ask in virtue of what does the person choose between believing that *p*

---

<sup>13</sup> As McHugh puts it: "The aim of belief is constitutive of belief-regulation as such. An episode doesn't count as a judging that *p*, for example, if it is not directed at this aim. That's why, when you judge that *p*, it's not true to say that you could have performed *that* action for any kind of reason you recognised. And that's why freedom in the regulation of belief does not require reactivity to truth-irrelevant reasons. It's also why intentions are not involved in the regulation of belief." McHugh forthcoming, p. 32.



and withholding judgement on p (and correlatively between intending to X rather than not-X)? Since the respective aims do not determine that she ought to do either then she must base her decision on state-given rather than object-given considerations, else the decision will be arbitrary. So McHugh is not, after all, entitled to the claim that doxastic attitudes or intentions are not, ever responsive to state-given reasons. And if he's not entitled to that claim, then it looks like his account does not rule out our being able to believe or intend voluntarily, that intentions can be involved in the "regulation of belief".

To be fair to McHugh, however, he does seem to allow, in other passages (than the one quoted in footnote 6), for the possibility that intentions and beliefs can sometimes be responsive to state-given reasons, precisely because there being a constitutive standard of belief or intention "does not entail that there is always one unique correct action [or belief] available to the agent." And that is because, from the claim that the relevant constitutive aims need not prescribe one unique correct action or belief, "it follows that intention-regulation [and presumably belief-regulation] will sometimes have to be influenced by more than just what is correct, in order to fix a determinate intention [or belief]." (McHugh forthcoming, p. 21). I think it is reasonable to interpret intention-regulation's being "influenced" above as involving an agent's recognition of a state-given reason in favour of holding the belief or intention in question over holding a different but equally correct (relative to the constitutive aims) belief or intention, and thus that the agent voluntarily comes to believe or intend. McHugh's account should then be taken to give us an explanation as to why belief and intention are not ordinarily voluntary, viz. that they are not ordinarily responsive to state-given reasons. But then I think that McHugh owes us an answer to this question: what explains our being able sometimes to believe or intend voluntarily, in response to state-given reasons?

I think McHugh owes us this explanation for the following reason. If beliefs and intentions can be responsive to state-given reasons (that is, reasons that are irrelevant to the constitutive aims of belief and intention) then surely this renders questionable the claim that the aims of belief or intention are constitutive aims. For instance, why is the belief that I acquire for state-given reasons a belief at all in these circumstances given that I formed it for non truth relevant reasons? Perhaps here McHugh could say that beliefs and intentions are not responsive to state-given reasons at  $t$  unless object-given reasons make at least two intentions or doxastic attitudes permissible to take at  $t$ . As long as state-given reasons do not lead to us believe or intend against their respective constitutive aims, they can legitimately be considered beliefs and intentions.

But the problem is that, on McHugh's account, it should not be the case that only state-given reasons can figure in the belief-forming or intention-forming process.

The process of regulating your intentions is, constitutively, directed towards a certain aim, namely the aim of acting correctly. (McHugh forthcoming, p. 19) [my italics].

The process of regulating your doxastic states is, constitutively, directed towards a certain aim, namely the aim of truth. (McHugh forthcoming, p. 27) [my italics]

Yet, suppose that my evidence makes it permissible (according to the truth aim) to either believe that  $p$  or suspend judgement on whether  $p$ . Suppose I have acknowledged this yet think it irrelevant, and now come to consider whether to believe that  $p$  or suspend judgement on whether  $p$ . So I now consider state-given reasons, such as whether it would be beneficial for me to believe that  $p$ , and come to believe that  $p$  because I rule that it would be beneficial. In this case, and at this point in the process, the process through which I regulated my doxastic state was not at all directed toward the aim of truth, even though it did not go against it. A similar thing can be said of correlate intentions. If McHugh means to deny that I am

engaged in the process of belief-regulation here, then he owes us an explanation as to how state-given reasons can enter the belief-regulation process so that we end up with a determinate intention or belief, in a way that preserves truth's being the constitutive aim of that regulation process.

At one point, McHugh makes the following remark (which might be helpful here): "it is one thing to aim at correctness, it is another to be influenced by nothing but what is correct" (McHugh forthcoming, p. 21). Earlier, I interpreted a belief or intention's being "influenced" by state-given reasons to involve those reasons figuring in a subject or agent's process of belief-regulation or intention-regulation. Perhaps that interpretation was not warranted. Perhaps McHugh means to say that state-given reasons can determine what some of my determinate beliefs or intentions are without my realising, or without those reasons entering into my regulation process. But this is obviously problematic. What happens if I do realise they are what fix those determinate beliefs or intentions? Must we then say that upon so realising I necessarily drop the belief or intention? That sounds rather ad hoc. Perhaps, alternatively, McHugh means to say that when state-given reasons enter into the relevant regulation processes, those processes nonetheless continue to be directed toward the truth. But this is also problematic. Once I have settled that a belief that *p*, for instance, is permitted according to the truth-aim, when I consider whether it would be advantageous to believe that *p*, my deliberative and so regulative process is not at all directed toward truth.

Maybe the problem can be evaded by formulating the relevant premises in terms of constitutive norms, as opposed to aims, as per:

The process of regulating your doxastic states is, constitutively, regulated by a certain norm, namely the norm, believe *p* iff *p*.

The process of regulating your intentions is, constitutively, regulated by a certain norm, namely the norm of being correct iff it is not the case that the intended action is one you all things considered ought not to perform<sup>14</sup>.

The thought here being that one need not explicitly “direct” or “aim” one’s regulative process toward a constitutive aim for that process to be constrained, constitutively, by certain norms of correctness. So even if I do not explicitly “direct” my regulative process toward the aim of truth when I consider whether believing that *p* would be more beneficial to me than suspending judgement on whether *p*, that process must still itself be regulated by certain constitutive norms. After all, I can only believe that *p* for state-given reasons when a belief that *p* is as permissible as withholding judgment on whether *p*. But, unfortunately, this move does not really evade the problem. Once you have settled that the truth norm sanctions either belief that *p* or suspension on whether *p*, your deliberation process need not be sensitive to that norm, if you are only considering whether to believe that *p* or suspend judgement on whether *p*, in order not to violate it. As such, the norm cannot be constitutive of belief-regulation.

On a stronger reading of the state-given/object-given reasons distinction (than McHugh’s seems to be), no state-given reason can be a genuine reason for belief or intention. Furthermore, state-given reasons cannot come into conflict with object-given reasons, since they are directed at different ontological categories, viz. belief (or intentional) states, and the propositional objects of those states. Under this picture, the idea that state-given reasons can somehow enter into the regulative process when the constitutive aims (or norms) of belief or intention sanction no unique, determinate attitude seems wrong-headed. But then the problem as I stated it earlier returns: (provided we are willing to admit that the constitutive aims of

---

<sup>14</sup> This seems to be the interpretation offered by Shah & Velleman 2005.

intention and belief can sometimes fail to sanction a unique belief or intention) when my evidence, for instance, sanctions both belief that p and suspension of judgement as to whether p, can my belief that p be voluntary? If it can, then state-given reasons can be, after all, reasons for belief. If it cannot, then an account that appeals to the constitutive aim (or norm) of belief cannot explain why it cannot.

#### **4. Conclusion**

My original challenge to the doxastic compatibilist was to either come up with an account of how doxastic attitudes can be intentional in the face of it very much seeming to many philosophers that they are not. Or else, in rejecting that doxastic attitudes need to be voluntary in order to be free, to come up with a principled account of how her criteria of doxastic freedom are criteria of freedom. Steup's recent attempt to meet the first demand fails, I have argued, since he has yet to show that there is such a thing as epistemic intentionality. McHugh's recent attempt to meet the second demand has been shown to be the more promising, but it is unclear whether it succeeds. Whether it does, I have argued, depends on whether the controversial claim that there can be un-free intentions is true and on whether some further, crucial details (regarding when and how state-given reasons can rationalise beliefs and intentions) can be properly filled out. I'm afraid I remain sceptical about the prospects of either being vindicated<sup>15</sup>.

#### **References**

Booth, A.R. 2009: "Compatibilism and Free Belief" *Philosophical Papers* **38** pp. 1 – 12.

Fischer, J. M & Ravizza, M. 1998: *Responsibility and Control* (Cambridge: Cambridge

---

<sup>15</sup> Thanks!

University Press).

Kavka, G.S. 1983: "The Toxin Puzzle" Analysis **43** pp. 33- 36.

Lowe, E.J. 2008: Personal Agency: The Metaphysics of Mind and Action (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

McHugh, C. Forthcoming: "Exercising Doxastic Freedom" Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.

O'Connor, T. 2000: Persons & Causes: The Metaphysics of Free Will (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ryan, S. 2003: "Doxastic Compatibilism and the Ethics of Belief" Philosophical Studies **114** pp. 47 – 79.

Shah, N. & Velleman, D. "Doxastic Deliberation" The Philosophical Review **114** pp. 497 – 534.

Steup, M. 2012: "Belief, Control and Intentionality" Synthese **188** pp. 145 – 163.

----- . 2011: "Belief, Voluntariness and Intentionality" dialectica **65(4)** pp. 576 – 559.

----- . 2008: "Doxastic Freedom" Synthese **161** pp. 375 – 392.

Steward, H. 2012: A Metaphysics for Freedom (Oxford: Oxford University Press).