Normative Epistemology without Freedom of Belief

Mark Mercer
Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
(902) 420-5825
mark.mercer@smu.ca

Our vocabulary of epistemic appraisal, like our other normative vocabularies, is rich and subtle, able to mark many fine distinctions along many axes and able to give voice to various shades of attitude, from censure and disapprobation at one end all the way through to approval and esteem at the other. Some of our terms apply to claims or other candidates for belief; for instance, we can say of the idea that the stars control our destinies that it has little evidence in its favour, or is a silly or fanciful or stupid idea, or we can say of the idea that species evolve by means of natural selection that it is well evidenced, or imaginative or deep or brilliant. Some of our terms apply instead to the activity or state of believing or accepting a claim. Finally, some of them apply to epistemic agents themselves, characterizing and appraising how an agent typically comes to hold or maintain his or her ideas and beliefs. We judge some people to be credulous, easily influenced by the opinions of others or given to wishful thinking. We judge other people to be judicious in their believings, to be circumspect with regard to the search for evidence and careful not to let their desires influence their beliefs. Some people are dogmatic or narrow minded, while others are broad minded and open to the possibility of being mistaken. Moreover, much in our estimation of people's epistemic character depends on what we take to be the strength with which they hold their beliefs, or the modes in which they accept different claims. Sometimes we are pleased to see entertained and investigated as an hypothesis or conjecture a claim we find too little evidenced to

be a fit object of belief. All this is to say that much goes into our finding that a person is wise in her epistemic attitudes and habits and, thus, is to be applauded, and that just as much goes into our finding that a person is instead in some way foolish.

Normative epistemology is the philosophical endeavour of understanding the terms of our, or any, vocabulary of epistemic appraisal, and of describing the conditions of their correct application. It can be contrasted, then, with descriptive epistemology, the psychological or sociological study of belief and the other cognitive attitudes. While descriptive epistemology is concerned with how people do in fact investigate the world and acquire epistemic attitudes toward it, normative epistemology is concerned with how we should investigate the world and acquire attitudes toward it. Central to both sorts of enquiry is the relation between the evidence or reasons we have for and against believing a claim and our beliefs themselves. The descriptive epistemologist seeks to understand what our epistemic standards in fact are; that is, she seeks to understand what sort or amount of evidence is necessary or sufficient for us to acquire a particular belief or set of beliefs and what sort or how much is necessary or sufficient for us to change our minds. The normative epistemologist, on the other hand, seeks to understand what our epistemic standards should be. He wants to know how much and what sort of evidence we should have before accepting a claim, and how much and what sort of evidence should occasion a change of mind.

Normative epistemology is, then, a critical enquiry, one that attempts to go beyond how in fact we do do things to settle questions about how we should do them. Its results can discomfit or shame us, for they might expose a gap between how we happen to be and how really we should be. The normative epistemologist might well conclude that we should change our present ways

with regard to what we believe and how we happen to go about fixing beliefs, and to adopt very different ways.

For these claims about what we should do to make legitimate practical demands on us, two things have to be true. One is that the epistemologist's claims not be arbitrary from the point of view of the agent him or herself, that they not inevitably merely express the epistemologist's, or some other third party's, own desires and wishes. That it would be better from the epistemologist's perspective, or even from the objective perspective of the universe (supposing there is such a thing), that my ways of evaluating evidence and reasons for believing be different than they are is in itself of no practical interest to me. For the claim that I should change my ways to make a legitimate demand on me, I must be able to see from my own perspective what benefits will come with such a change.

The second thing that must be true for a normative claim about believing to make a legitimate demand on me is that it be within my power to change my epistemic ways to conform to how that normative claim says my ways should be. Whatever it is that I need to control in order to align my beliefs with the norms and standards by which the epistemological theory informs me I should believe, it must be something I am able to control. A normative command or ideal can make no claim on me if I am powerless to obey or live up to it; unless I *can* change my standards, any claim that I *should* change them in such and such a way is vain. Thus, the possibility of normative epistemology depends on our having some significant degree of control over what we believe. Without this degree of control, what we believe would remain a centrally important feature of who we are, but, like our sex or our age, it would be one for which we bear no responsibility.

I propose in this paper to set the first issue aside simply by assuming that the epistemologist's normative claims need not be arbitrary from the point of view of the agent to which they are addressed. This assumption is best served by conceiving of normative epistemology as the attempt to create a reflective equilibrium among an agent's beliefs, his other cognitive attitudes, and his epistemic standards and norms. On this conception of normative epistemology, an agent is justified in acquiring or maintaining a belief, or in failing to acquire or losing one, just so long as having, or not having, that belief creates or strengthens coherence among the agent's attitudes and standards. The agent, then, is justified or not in having or failing to have some belief not from an external point of view, but from the point of view of his own attitudes and standards. Normative epistemology conceived as the search for reflective equilibrium thereby escapes the charge that its results must be merely an expression of the epistemologist's preferences. Having now set this first issue aside, we are free to concentrate on the second issue, that of whether and to what extent we are responsible for what we believe.

I

Are we, then, responsible for believing what we believe, and for not believing what we do not believe? It seems we are not—at least if to be responsible for what we believe requires that we be free to believe or refrain from believing at will. We cannot come to believe that tomorrow will be sunny merely by determining that we want to believe that tomorrow will be sunny and then, on the basis of this determination, deciding to believe that tomorrow will be sunny, even though there might be no contradiction in the thought of our believing that tomorrow will be sunny. Even less can we come through force of will to believe that, say, right now we are underwater, or even

simply to believe with less than total conviction that we are on dry land. We seem not even to be able to will ourselves to take specific attitudes toward claims about matters far removed from observations. A person who believes it merely rather unlikely that Neanderthal genes are to be found in contemporary populations of *Homo sapiens* cannot will herself into the belief that definitely no Neanderthal genes are floating around, even if it would flatter her to believe that definitely none are. Neither what we believe nor the strength with which we believe it, whether we believe it because of observation or inference, is, for the most part if not entirely, under the direct control of our wills.

Despite this, much that we say about our beliefs strongly suggests, if not implies, that in fact we are in control here and, hence, responsible for our beliefs. On occasion we will say of a belief we have acquired that we ought not to hold it and, thus, should give it up, or at least that we should reserve judgement on whether it is true until more evidence is in or we have heard the other side of the argument. We reproach ourselves for being too credulous in these matters, given to believing what we want to believe rather than apportioning our belief to the evidence, and we instruct ourselves to do better in the future. Or we will say of a claim we do not believe that we should believe it, that the evidence in favour of it outweighs the evidence against it or that the weight of argument is behind accepting it. This time we reproach ourselves for dogmatism or pig-headedness, and again instruct ourselves to do better. We decide we should change our minds and come to believe where presently we merely wonder whether the claim is true or even doubt that it is.

Indeed, our talk of our own and others' beliefs would seem to indicate that we find intentions very much present here. We speak of ourselves as reserving judgement, evaluating

evidence, jumping to conclusions, and accepting or rejecting a claim, much as if coming to believe is something we do, an action we perform. Philosophers of science, for their part, frequently cast issues regarding the rationality of epistemic judgement in terms of choosing a theory, as if coming to believe of a theory that it is true could be directly the result of intentionally deciding to accept it as true. Also significant is the fact that sometimes when we mean to excuse ourselves or others for holding racist or religious or other beliefs we deem false or poorly grounded, we explain their presence on the basis of nonjustifying causal factors such as training or environment. These explanations serve to excuse the agent for having these beliefs, if they do, only because they imply that having the particular beliefs in question is something beyond the agent's control and, importantly, that their being beyond the agent's control is exceptional. After all, it is having these particular beliefs that is to be excused, not just having any beliefs. Thus, this pattern of excuse in the end seems to affirm the view that much of our believing *is* under the direct control of our intentions.

In order to be responsible for what we believe, and, thus, for normative epistemology, however best conceived, to make legitimate claims on us, it must be the case that we possess two capacities. First, we need to have the capacity to believe in line with our own epistemic standards, with those standards we happen presently to prefer. We need to have the capacity, that is, to recognize when we are falling short of our standards and to respond appropriately to our epistemic failings in light of our standards. Second, we need to have the capacity to adjust our epistemic standards themselves, to make our own those epistemic standards that we have come to judge the best standards to have.

To have these capacities is to have a significant degree of control over our believings, control enough that by exercising it our beliefs often will be caused to come into line with what we believe they should be. To have this amount of this sort of control is, I think, a necessary condition, if not also a sufficient one, of being responsible for one's beliefs. This means that if we have these two capacities, we are a long way toward being responsible for our beliefs, if indeed we aren't already there. It also means that we are a long way toward showing that normative epistemology is a discipline able to make legitimate practical claims on us.

II

Of course, were we free to believe at will, were it the case that we have freedom of belief, clearly we would possess these two capacities. If we were free to believe at will, we would have the power simply to choose to align our beliefs with our standards and to reform our standards in light of the results of normative epistemology. However, there are, I think, three quite good arguments against the contention that we have freedom of belief. The first is directed toward the strong claim that our beliefs are all under the direct control of our wills such that we are free to believe anything we want to believe and free to doubt or refrain from believing anything we don't want to believe. If forming a belief or refraining from believing is under the direct control of our wills, then forming a belief is an action we perform, something we intentionally do. If forming a belief is an intentional action, then, as with all intentional actions, in order to form a belief we must have a practical reason for forming it, a practical reason that rationalizes our forming it. A practical reason for performing an action is a belief-desire pair. But this means that in back of each of our beliefs must lie another belief, the belief side of the practical reason for forming the original belief.

If all beliefs have practical reasons behind them, though, then the belief component of a practical reason also has a belief behind it, and so on all the way down. Because this is a causal chain, each belief having been caused by the practical reason behind it, there could not have been first beliefs. Thus, at least some of our beliefs do not have practical reasons behind them, which means that at least some of our acquirings of belief were not actions we performed. Therefore, not all of our beliefs are under the direct control of our wills.

This argument does not show that none of our beliefs is under the direct control of our will, though perhaps, given additional plausible assumptions, it shows that most of them are not. The second argument is directed against the weaker, more plausible, claim that sometimes, on a rare occasion, when conditions are just right, we can believe or not believe some particular claim at will—or at least we can, on a rare occasion, doubt or withhold judgement at will. The argument begins with the claim that to believe that, for instance, some swans are white is to believe that "some swans are white" is true. To acquire at will the belief that some swans are white, though, is to acquire that belief independently of an opinion regarding its truth. To acquire a belief independently of an opinion regarding its truth, however, is to believe that some swans are white without necessarily believing that "some swans are white" is true. But this violates the connection between believing something and believing it to be true. Thus, it is impossible to acquire the belief that some swans are white at will.[1]

The third argument is straightforwardly empirical, appealing to what we discover ourselves able or unable to do when we try to do it. Try to believe something at will, this argument runs,

[1]This is a précis of an argument Bernard Williams develops in "Deciding to Believe," *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 148-149.

and you will discover that you fail. That even occasions on which we can at will withhold judgement or doubt are few and far between can also be established empirically. Try to withhold judgement or try to doubt when one finds oneself both with a belief and a good practical reason not to have it. Try to cast doubt on, for instance, your belief that a bill you must pay is overdue, even when you have a good practical reason for not believing it overdue—a practical reason such as the desire to sleep well and the belief that you will not sleep well should you believe that that bill is overdue. Now, even if only this last of the three arguments holds up under scrutiny, it still turns out that we could have only a small amount of direct control over our believings, doubtings and withholdings of judgement, too small an amount to constitute control sufficient to make us responsible for our beliefs.

If we were free to choose our beliefs at will, we would be responsible for what we believe. Our responsibility for what we believe would run parallel to our responsibility for what we do, the first resting on our freedom of belief, the second on our freedom of action. But the arguments above show that we possess little if any freedom of belief. Does this mean that we are not responsible for what we believe? To conclude that it does would be hasty, for freedom of belief might not be the only possible source of responsibility for what we believe. We need to investigate other possible sources.

It is surprising, then, to find that some philosophers are quick to draw strong conclusions here. Ralph Baergen, for instance, argues that our inability to choose at will what to believe is a reason for abandoning internalism in epistemology, internalism being the thesis that whether a person is justified in having a particular belief depends on the reasons available to the person

herself for thinking that that belief is true.[2] According to Baergen, since we are unable to alter our beliefs in the direction we choose at will, we cannot be responsible for what we believe; and since we cannot be responsible for what we believe, whether we are justified in holding a particular belief cannot depend on whether we have reasons for thinking it true. Baergen thus rejects internalism in epistemology in favour of externalism, and with internalism rejects normative epistemology in favour of naturalized epistemology. Baergan is right, of course, that normative epistemology requires both an internalistic conception of justification (the conception of normative epistemology as the search for reflective equilibrium is an internalist conception) and that we be responsible for our beliefs. Baergen's argument to the strong conclusion that normative epistemology is impossible, though, is based on the assumption that for us to be responsible for our beliefs, what we believe must be under the direct control of our wills, that we must have freedom of belief. This assumption that control over and, thus, responsibility for what we believe requires freedom of belief is precisely what needs to be investigated before we can say anything definite about the possibility of normative epistemology.

At this point, it seems, there are only two conclusions we can draw with confidence. The first is that we ought to be suspicious of the suggestion of intentional control found in many of our epistemic descriptions. We ought not take entirely seriously the suggestion implicit in talk of, for instance, accepting a claim as true or reserving judgement on it, that we are doing something directly merely by exercising our will. The second is that if we are responsible for our beliefs, the

[2]Ralph Baergen, *Contemporary Epistemology* (Fort Worth, TX; Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1995), pp. 23-31.

control we can exercise over them that makes us responsible must come from somewhere other than the direct exercise of our will on them.

III

Let us begin with the issue whether we do possess the capacity to believe in line with our own epistemic standards, and, if we do possess it, in what it consists. To form and hold beliefs in accord with one's epistemic standards and norms is nothing other than to form and hold beliefs rationally. That we can form and hold beliefs rationally is evident from the fact that, for the most part, we do form and hold our beliefs rationally. For the most part, that is, we believe what we do in light of what we believe the evidence and other reasons for believing indicates we should believe, even when we would rather believe otherwise. We believe what we believe to be the logical consequences of what we believe, and we don't often believe that which we believe is logically incompatible with what we believe. We find our set of beliefs changing and undergoing revision in response to our changing and growing experience of the world and to others' reports of their experience, and these changes and revisions follow or conform to the canons of logic and evidential support we accept. Of course, there could not possibly be much room for slippage here. We could not adopt a nonconformist attitude to our own standards even if we wanted to and our will was sensitive to these wants. To adopt a nonconformist attitude to one's own standards and norms would be identical to forsaking thinking, reasoning, and having beliefs altogether. That is why such prescriptions as "believe with no greater assurance than you deem the evidence warrants" and "avoid error while maximizing truth" sound hollow as pieces of instruction: they as

much mark out what it is to encounter the world epistemically as they characterize what we believe to be proper ways of doing so.

Still, there is room for *some* slippage between what we happen to believe and what we believe we should believe, room for occasions on which we believe against our own norms of rational belief or epistemic warrant. We are often pushed by forces that interfere with our believing as we deem we should, with our conforming to our preferred standards of rational acceptability. Wishes, hopes, worries, and fears might figure alongside evidence and inference in fashioning belief, and not just by guiding our researches. Sometimes we believe wishfully, sometimes the assurance with which we believe is more a product of fear than of inference. Do we have control here, at least as much as needed for us to be responsible for our wishful or fearful believing? The issue is whether we have the capacity to recognize and respond to the demands of our own epistemic norms on those rare occasions when we transgress them—whether, that is, we have the capacity first to discover by the light of our norms that and where correction in our beliefs is required, and then to effect correction.

Clearly, we can in fact at least recognize them. Our ability to recognize both the demands of our epistemic norms and that we are out of step with them is nothing other than our ability to be conscious of a belief together with the reasons we have for thinking it true. Having present to mind both a belief and the reasons behind it can make us aware that the reasons we have fall short of what we generally take to be good reasons for believing; moreover, having present to mind also our hopes and fears can make us aware of the wishful nature of our belief. After recognition most often follows correction, usually spontaneously. An agent's conscious awareness that her belief is wishful can by itself cause her beliefs, or the strength with which they are held, to change in

accordance with her standards of rational belief. In fact, it must on most occasions result in such a change, for otherwise the agent herself could draw no distinction between what she believes to be true and what she would like to be true.

Though perhaps we must be consciously aware of our beliefs and reasons if the discrepancy between them is to result in a change of belief, this change nonetheless occurs in us passively rather than as something we actively bring about. We find ourselves aware of a discrepancy between a belief and the evidence we have for it, and also aware of a wish that would explain why we have the belief despite this discrepancy; and our conscious awareness of these items produces a change that puts things right. But we ourselves are hardly participants in this change. Moreover, the recognition we have of discrepancy is serendipitous: it just happened that we became aware of the discrepancy between belief and evidence—we needn't have become aware and, perhaps, had we not become aware, our beliefs would have remained the same. Consciousness, though the site of our capacity for recognition and response, is not by itself enough to furnish us with the needed degree of control over our believings.[3]

[3]Philip Pettit and Michael Smith disagree. They contend that the responsiveness of conscious belief to consciousness of evidence and inference *does*, all by itself, provide us with control enough for us to count as both responsible and free in our believing. Their position, though, might rely on the contention that belief *is* directly under the control of the will (it might also rely on an unconventional understanding of freedom). They write that a subject's beliefs not only sometimes automatically undergo revision in the face of evidence (in the ways I have described), but also that at times "the *subject* revises them under the spur of recognizing what the relevant norms require of her" (p. 442; my italics). Instead of the recognition causing the revision, they hold that the recognition causes the subject to make the revision. See Petitt and Smith, "Freedom in Belief and Desire," *Journal of Philosophy* **XCIII**, no. 9 (September 1996), pp. 429-449.

IV

Coming to believe something, I have argued, is not typically if ever an action we perform. Still, we are free to perform at will many actions that do bear, though indirectly, on our believings. Included among these are mental actions of various sorts. That we are free to perform actions that bear on our believings is, I think, ultimately the ground of our epistemic responsibility. The mechanisms of belief formation, maintenance and adjustment might, as I have argued they are, be themselves beyond our control, such that even while these mechanisms are responsive to evidence and reasons, their operation does not make us responsible for what we believe. On the other hand, though, these mechanisms need material on which to work, and it is within our abilities intentionally to supply them with it.

An action that bears on one's believings might be as simple and straightforward as looking out the window when one believes doing so will likely provide one with evidence for or against an hypothesis one finds oneself entertaining. Suppose, for instance, that upon hearing a noise one has the thought that the cat wants in. Should one's epistemic standards indicate that an observation of the cat at the door would suffice to warrant one in believing that the cat wants in, while one's present belief that it sounds as if the cat is at the door by itself does not warrant that belief (one realizes that anything could have made that sound), but one fails to look out the window while yet coming to believe that the cat wants in, then one is believing in a manner out of keeping with one's epistemic standards. It is true that one did not choose to believe that the cat wants in. Nonetheless, because there was something that one could have done that one believed would likely have either confirmed or disconfirmed one's hypothesis, it was within one's control, though beyond one's choice, to have this particular belief rather than some other. One is, then,

responsible for believing that the cat is at the door. We are often well positioned and able to do what we think we should do in order to have warrant for the beliefs we thereby form, and this means that we have control over our believings sufficient for us, in many cases, to be responsible for them.

We are free to move our bodies in ways that bear on our believings, and this affords us a degree of control over our believings. Perhaps even more significant, though, is the fact that there are many mental acts we are also free to perform. We must be careful here, though, for not everything that we might naturally describe as if it were an act is an act. Choosing to believe a claim, we have seen, is not an action we perform, at least not directly; we would do best to dismiss the suggestion of intention in the phrase "choose to believe," or to avoid the phrase altogether. Nonetheless, there is much we can do intentionally without moving our bodies. We can intentionally direct our attention here or there, for instance, or intentionally concentrate on the topic at hand rather than think about something else; we can intentionally attend to evidence or ignore it, or focus on supporting evidence while ignoring the troublesome bits that come our way. Concentrating, attending, ignoring, focusing—even simply thinking or wondering about something—are acts we can perform. They can be caused and rationalized by our practical reasons, by belief-desire pairs. The event of our thinking about something can occur as the result of a choice to think about it, as can the event of our refraining from thinking about it. Because it is up to us which of these mental actions we perform, or whether we perform any of them at all, and because which actions we perform, or whether we perform any, has the potential to affect significantly what we find ourselves believing and not believing, our ability to perform these

mental actions provides us with the amount of control over our believings needed for us to be responsible for them.

Consider a ship owner who wants to send her vessel on a voyage but will do so only if she believes the vessel is seaworthy.[4] She has, then, a practical reason for believing that her vessel is seaworthy. It is possible for her, by attending to evidence of its seaworthiness and ignoring contrary evidence, to come to a sincere belief that her vessel is seaworthy, even though it is not. Because she would have come to the belief that it is not seaworthy had she attended to the evidence in front of her—had she, that is, lived up to the norms and standards of gathering and evaluating evidence she in fact accepts—she is responsible for falsely believing that her vessel is seaworthy. She is responsible for believing her vessel is seaworthy even though she did not directly choose to have this belief. Moreover, since she is responsible for this belief and her having it offends against her own epistemic standards, she is, by her own lights, in the wrong with regard to having this belief. Now let us suppose further that this is not an isolated incident. Let us suppose that this ship owner is prone to ignore evidence when it runs contrary to a claim that she strongly desires to believe. Should her experience make her aware of her habit of believing against her accepted standards, there is much she can do in order to change her ways. She is far from powerless to effect reform. She can determine to follow any of the various stratagems of self-control described by sages and moralists throughout the ages. None are guaranteed to work, of course, for overcoming a habit of misleading oneself is, like quitting smoking, serious business.

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[4]The example is adapted from W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (abridged), in E.D. Klemke, A. David Kline, and Robert Hollinger, eds., *Philosophy: Contemporary Perspectives on Perennial Issues* Fourth Edition (New York; St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 66.

But that it might be difficult to be as one should be does not remove from one the responsibility to be as one should be, so long as it remains true that one could be as one should be.

V

So far I have been discussing our capacity to form, maintain and alter beliefs in accordance with the epistemic standards and norms we presently accept. Do we also have the capacity to maintain or alter our present epistemic standards themselves? Yes we do; this capacity is entirely continuous with the first.

People around a gaming table sometimes find themselves revising upward their expectation that the next throw will come up snake eyes when they note that the present throw failed to come up snake eyes. Perhaps even more often they find themselves revising drastically downward their expectation of snake eyes immediately after such a throw. These people might well attempt to justify their changes of mind according to their present epistemic standards, and they might in fact succeed.[5] We think, however, that they are wrong to revise their estimates, and wrong to accept any canons of reasoning that justify their doing so. We, then, as normative epistemologists, are critical of their norms and standards of reasoning; our view is that these people should abandon their current epistemic ways and adopt new ones.

Now, if what we think about how they should think is to constitute a legitimate practical demand on them, it must be within their abilities to respond to what we think. First of all, if we

[5]Stephen Stich writes that in 1874, Henry Coppée, in his text *Elements of Logic*, advocated reasoning in accord with the gambler's fallacy (apparently, Coppée was unaware that other writers deemed such reasoning fallacious). Stich, "Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology, and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity," *Synthèse* 74 (March 1988), footnote 11. (I suspect that Stich is pulling our leg here.)

are right that they should change their ways, we should be able to introduce disequilibrium into their present set of beliefs and standards. That is to say, we should be able to create for them disturbing experiences that, given their epistemic standards, they will find difficult to explain or understand. Second, it must be possible that they can follow us as we guide them to new standards and styles of reasoning. We offer them, for their inspection in light of the example of our success where they failed, our own accounts of what was going on and our own ways of thinking about it. It is up to them to pay attention and to perform the experiments we devise. But paying attention and performing experiments are things they are free to do. If they do pay attention and participate, then (if we are right that their thinking needs correction), with luck, they might well come to find that their standards have undergone revision, and they will no longer find the gambler's fallacy attractive. (Of course, it is possible that we will fail to move them an inch. Our failure might well be *for us* a disturbing experience that introduces disequilibrium into *our* present set of beliefs and standards.)

We are responsible for our epistemic standards because of the extent of control we can exercise over what we do in face of recalcitrant experience. Of course, short of meeting with recalcitrant experience, we can have no good reason for thinking anything amiss with our standards. But should we find ourselves unable to predict or control events where we thought we would be able to predict or control them, or should we find ourselves unable to predict and control them as well as others can, then we would be confronted with an excellent practical reason for actively investigating why. We can attend to new ideas and methods or we can ignore them, we can cast about for explanatory hypotheses or we can turn to other tasks, we can subject ourselves to experiences that trouble us or we can avoid them, we can perform experiments or we can decide

not to. We are responsible even with respect to our standards of evidence or styles of reasoning in virtue of the freedom we possess to do things that we believe might cause those standards or styles to change.

VI

It is important that we be clear about the nature and extent of our control over our beliefs and, thus, of our responsibility for what we believe. We cannot at will believe or even try to believe what we want to believe. Thus, the extent of our responsibility for what we believe is much less than the extent of our responsibility for what we do.[6] What we can do at will regarding our beliefs, however, is to improve the chances that what we will come to believe, whatever it is, is in line with what our epistemic norms and standards enjoin that we believe in that situation, given our other beliefs and attitudes. By choosing to perform such worldly or mental acts as looking for evidence or concentrating on the issue at hand, we can increase the probability that the beliefs we find ourselves with are the ones that, from an epistemic point of view, we should have. That the belief we come to have is or is not in line with our standards is a fact about that belief which is, to a significant degree, something we have brought about intentionally and, thus, are responsible for. Though we cannot exercise control over what specifically we will believe, we can exercise a high degree of control over a belief's property of being in or out of line with our epistemic standards,

[6]Actually, we can sometimes bring ourselves to believe what we want to believe, though not directly by willing that we believe it. We can sometimes set out to acquire some particular belief—that is, we can sometimes decide to accept some particular proposition as true—and predict fairly accurately that we will acquire it as a consequence of our actions. Pascal is quite right that on occasion, acting as if one believes something can bring one to believe it. Blaise Pascal, "The Wager," *Pensées* (Harmondsworth; Penguin, 1966), pp. 152-153.

whatever that belief is. For a belief to be in line with our epistemic standards is for us to be justified in holding it. We have, then, a measure of control over whether we are justified in holding the beliefs we find ourselves holding. This control is sufficient to make us responsible enough for what we believe for the results of investigations into what we should believe and what our standards should be to make legitimate demands on us.

That we have this measure of control might explain why we do not balk at the suggestions of intention in our talk of acquiring and holding beliefs and other cognitive attitudes. We do—*intentionally* do—evaluate evidence or reserve judgement, but we do not do it directly; rather, we do it by intentionally directly doing something else first. We do it by first performing a test, for instance, or thinking over our reasons. That we find ourselves evaluating evidence or reserving judgement is then the consequence—the desired consequence, since we desire to be epistemically upstanding—of what we intentionally did directly. (Jumping to a conclusion is, similarly, the undesired consequence of failing to do something else.)

VII

Are we responsible for what we believe? Can the results of normative epistemology make legitimate practical claims on us? My position is that we *are* responsible for what we believe and, because we are responsible, one necessary condition of the possibility of normative epistemology is fulfilled. Our responsibility for what we believe does not, however, rest on our freedom of belief; it cannot, for we do not possess freedom of belief. Instead, our responsibility is neither identical to our freedom of will or action nor independent of it, but is almost wholly derived from that freedom.

I began with an argument showing that we cannot, for the most part, choose at will what to believe, or even choose the degree of strength with which we will hold a belief. If we are responsible for our beliefs, the source of our responsibility must lie in something other than the direct application of our will to our cognitive attitudes. Our beliefs are, I then said, to a great extent directly responsive to evidence and inference, especially when beliefs and evidence are objects of our conscious awareness. Believing is a self-correcting process—or, at least, given that our epistemic standards might be faulty, it is a self-regulating one. But, of course, believing is far from inevitably self-correcting or self-regulating. Even more important from the perspective of responsibility, though, is the fact that we ourselves are merely passive observers of this process and these correctings; they are happenings that befall us. The degree of control afforded us by the responsiveness of our beliefs to evidence is hardly enough to make us responsible for what we believe. Yet, I continued, there are many mental and other acts we can perform that bear on our believings. We can search or not search for what we think would be evidence, we can attend to or ignore the evidence we find. These actions are not directed toward turning those hypotheses we entertain and would like to believe into beliefs. We can only rarely predict what beliefs we will come to have as an effect of these actions. Still, by performing them we can increase the probability that our beliefs, whatever in the end they turn out to be, are in line with our epistemic standards. We can even alter our epistemic standards themselves through acting in the world, although, again, we cannot be at all confident how our standards will be altered by our doings. The direct control we have over our actions affords us a large measure of indirect control over whether we are justified in holding our beliefs. The measure of indirect control we possess over

our beliefs is, I conclude, control sufficient to make us responsible for our beliefs and epistemic standards.[7]

[7]I thank Sophie Beaulé, Lynd Forguson, Stephen Haller, and Catherine J.L. Talmage for criticism and advice.