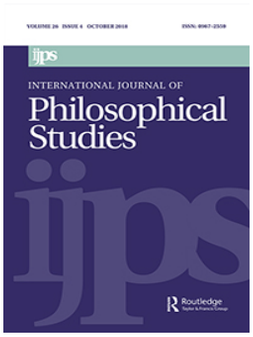

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# Control over Our Beliefs? A Response to Peels

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## Notes

1. Alston (1989, 122) says: 'Volitions, decisions, or choosings don't hook up with anything in the way of propositional attitude inauguration, just as they don't hook up with the secretion of gastric juices or cell metabolism.' For the sake of simplicity, I will use 'belief' to refer to more generally to propositional attitudes such as belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment.
2. Let's understand the will to be the capacity to make choices and form intentions.
3. As mentioned above, Alston intended his rejection of doxastic voluntarism to be free of metaphysical presuppositions. That's the ideal strategy for opponents of doxastic voluntarism. Making the rejection of doxastic voluntarism rest on a preference for libertarianism over compatibilism is a deviation from Alston's strategy and significantly weakens the case against doxastic voluntarism. Peels is aware of this and thus intends (D) to be free of commitments regarding the metaphysics of free will. My point is that it isn't.
4. This is, of course, a highly controversial assumption. For a classic worry, see Taylor (1992, 48): If, Taylor says, we think of an agent's actions as being undetermined, then 'the conception that now emerges is not that of a free person, but of an erratic and jerking phantom, without any rhyme or reason at all.'

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# Control over Our Beliefs? A Response to Peels



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## Introduction

Intuitively, some of our beliefs seem to be more responsible than others. But is it possible to distinguish responsible from irresponsible believing,

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and does the notion of *control* play any role in such a distinction? Peels' (2017) book offers a thorough and thought-provoking answer to these questions. His account is novel in that he adopts an incompatibilist perspective on responsibility (holding both that if S has no control over whether or not she holds some belief that p, she cannot be held responsible for whether or not she believes that p (148), and that responsible belief entails the ability to believe otherwise (133)), subsequently arguing that it is nevertheless possible to distinguish between believing responsibly and non-responsibly. In this commentary, we will elaborate on Peels' proposal for making this distinction, and contrast it with another proposal, based on a different notion of responsibility and control.

Relatively early in the book, Peels introduces the problem of *doxastic control*, or control over our beliefs. Peels' starting point (66) is the widely-held view that we cannot believe at will (doxastic involuntarism: see e.g. Williams 1973). According to Peels, accepting doxastic involuntarism leads to a problem because it entails that we do not have control over our beliefs. Combined with the familiar assumption that responsibility requires control, this in turn seems to imply that it is impossible to bear responsibility with regard to our beliefs. Peels' main aim is to show that even if one accepts both doxastic involuntarism *and* the connection between control and responsibility, there are possibilities for ascribing responsibility for beliefs. More specifically, he argues that we frequently have indirect control over our beliefs, in the sense that there are things we can *do* that influence our beliefs. And because we do have voluntaristic control over our actions, our responsibility for believing still depends on such control (although in an indirect way).

Peels' proposal is very rich and thoroughly elaborated. As it would be impossible to do justice to his complete argument, we will restrict our discussion to the two issues we consider most pressing. First, we will raise the question of whether Peels' account is really an account of responsibility for *belief*, or actually an account of responsibility for *action*. Second, we will critically evaluate his basic assumption that doxastic responsibility requires *voluntaristic* control. As an alternative view, we suggest that responsibility for believing might depend on a different, non-voluntaristic form of control – a notion that is much more intimately connected with the notion of epistemic justification.

## Responsibility for belief, or for action?

Peels argues that 'to believe responsibly is a matter of not having violated an obligation to *influence* what we believe' (89). Let's have a look at an example Peels himself briefly mentions, the accusation 'The prime minister should have known about the fraud' (2). In such a case, the prime

minister believes that fraud X did not take place, and we consider him or her blameworthy for believing this. But doxastic involuntarism suggests that we cannot base our ascription of blame on the claim that the prime minister had direct control over his/her beliefs. So what's the ground for ascribing blame in this case? Peels suggests that the relevant ground is that the prime minister could have taken steps (performed actions) that would have given rise to the prime minister no longer believing that there was no fraud. For example, the prime minister could have ordered an investigation. And because such actions are under our voluntaristic control (at least according to Peels), they provide grounds for ascribing doxastic responsibility. But what is the Prime Minister responsible for, exactly? On the basis of Peels' argument, couldn't one just as well say that because actions (and not beliefs) are under our voluntaristic control, we are only responsible for our actions and not for our beliefs? Peels does not seem to provide reasons for transferring responsibility from action to belief. In the example of the prime minister, when we say that the prime minister could have started an investigation, this clearly grounds the ascription of blame for not starting an investigation, but we do not see how it could ground the ascription of blame for not knowing about the fraud. After all, the connection between belief-influencing actions and beliefs is just that: the one *influences* the other. But there might be numerous other factors that would have influenced the prime minister's beliefs, some of them possibly actions that the prime minister has voluntaristic control over. let's imagine that had the prime minister ordered orange juice instead of coffee that morning, he or she would (by sheer accident) have encountered definitive evidence for the fraud. Would this entail that the prime minister should have known about the fraud, given that he/she could have performed an action that would have led to knowledge about the fraud? We do not think so – and the reason is that we take there to be a closer connection between responsible believing and epistemic justification than Peels is willing to accept.

Thus, we find it difficult to see why the strategy of grounding responsibility for belief in control over action, would be a plausible move, given Peels' own assumptions. Our point is not that we think that we never blame people for their beliefs – for as we will discuss in the next section, we agree with Peels that we frequently do so, and that we have reasons for doing this. However, we think that the grounds for ascribing doxastic responsibility are different than those proposed by Peels.

## Voluntaristic control versus rational control

Peels assumes that responsibility for belief (as for actions) requires voluntaristic control: the ability to believe otherwise. He writes: 'if there

is no way we could have avoided having [the beliefs we have] then we are not responsible for them. We simply have to put up with them' (141). That responsible belief entails the ability to believe otherwise is the lesson Peels draws from force as a doxastic excuse. In a way all beliefs are forced upon us by the available evidence: we have no choice about what to believe once the evidence presents itself. Peels creates room for responsible belief by focusing on the actions for which we are responsible and from which responsibility for beliefs can be derived. Some beliefs turn out then to be not only *synchronically* forced upon us but also *diachronically*, such that there is no action one could have intentionally performed such that if one had done so one would not believe that p (138).

For those strictly unavoidable beliefs, one is not responsible, says Peels. Whereas he is clear about beliefs never being under our voluntaristic control, he claims that many of our actions *are* under such control (see his discussion on belief-influencing factors at90–92). And because we have voluntaristic control over belief-influencing actions, we can be held responsible for beliefs that we could have influenced.

Peels' position has a counterintuitive implication: we cannot be held responsible for believing self-evident truths. After all, these are precisely cases where it is *not* possible to believe otherwise. Peels explains:

> That a belief was formed on a good evidence base, that it is true, that it was formed reliably … is epistemically valuable but it does not follow that we are responsible for it, in the same way as the fact that we did the right thing does not mean that we acted responsibly, since we might have been forced to perform the action. (141)

In other words, for Peels, responsibility and epistemic justification are very different things. But this is a peculiar position to hold, and we wonder whether it adequately covers our actual practices of responsibility ascriptions. For example, think about holocaust deniers. What do we blame such people for? It seems to us that we do not so much blame them for not believing the holocaust took place, nor do we blame them for not performing certain actions that would have influenced their beliefs: in contrast, what we mainly seem to blame them for is *not accepting the evidence* that is presented to them! In other words, the responsibility we ascribe to holocaust deniers is strongly connected to epistemic justification: we blame them because we think they have good reasons for believing what they 'refuse to believe'.

With regard to the self-evident beliefs, Peels could appeal to common sense by saying that we never praise a person for believing that 2 + 2 = 4 or for believing that he or she exists. But given his own specification of being responsible for a belief as being the proper object of a normative attitude

that is either positive (e.g. praise), negative (e.g. blame) or neutral (mere responsibility-attribution), the fact that we do not praise nor blame someone for having a belief does not exclude the possibility that he is responsible for the belief. Perhaps Peels would go so far as to concede that self-evident beliefs are beliefs that we are responsible for but not responsible beliefs. Though his terminology indeed allows for this distinction, the deeper question is how to make sense of both responsibility for beliefs and responsible believing without reliance on epistemic justification: what else is a responsible belief responsive to, than to the available evidence?

The term 'refuse', used in the example of holocaust deniers, is one that Peels would probably have objections to. After all, wasn't the whole starting point that we lack control over what we believe? In the final part of our review, we want to suggest an alternative approach to doxastic control that offers a very different solution to the problem of doxastic responsibility. It is based on a recent way of thinking about rational capacities and their relation to human agency in which believing plays a central role (Boyle 2009; Hieronymi, 2007; Moran 2001).

The main idea represented in these views is that we can be held responsible for our beliefs precisely in so far as we have *direct* control over our beliefs, but the kind of control required is not voluntaristic. Even though we cannot believe at will (in this sense the starting point is still the same kind of doxastic involuntarism that Peels defends), believing can be understood as a form of rational *activity* (see Boyle 2009). Rational activity is understood as the exercise of a generic capacity for responding to reasons or rational self-determination, and both willing (in the domain of action) and holding true (in the domain of belief) are seen as different forms such rational activity could take. Boyle (2009, 125–126) acknowledges that many epistemologists (Peels is one of them, we believe) hold the view that the control or discretion that we have over our beliefs must lie in our capacity to deliberate and make judgments because, as they think, judging is an act whereas believing is not. Boyle however introduces a notion of *intrinsic* discretion over our beliefs according to which 'we exercise our capacity for cognitive self-determination, not primarily in doing things that affect our beliefs, but in holding whatever beliefs we hold' (127). He explains this form of control in terms of an attitude of endorsement regarding the content of our beliefs. Hieronymi (2007, 14) expresses a thought similar to Boyle's, but she relates the kind of control we have over our beliefs to a possibility to believe otherwise, although different in kind than what Peels has in mind:

> There is a minimal sense in which to call something a belief is already to guarantee that one could have believed differently. To call something a belief, rather than a fixation or illusion or stubbornly recurrent thought, is to assign

> it a particular kind of place in a person's mental economy. It represents the person's take on what is the case, and it must interact more or less rationally (though far from perfectly rationally) with the person's other beliefs and attitudes. So, if the person changes her mind sufficiently, her belief will change. A minimal degree of rational capacity – the capacity to have beliefs – will secure this much control and possibility.

The suggestion that rational activity encompasses more than voluntary action can also be found in Richard Moran's (2001) account of avowal as activity: Moran explains how in avowing our beliefs we exercise active control over them in a way that is not voluntaristic but not indirect or external either. If we only had external control over beliefs, beliefs would be like sensations, or like having a malfunctioning heart: there are all kind of things we can do to influence them. But we are much closer and more directly identified with our beliefs than our bodily sensations or conditions, because belief requires a normative assessment and is at least intrinsically open to the why-do-you-believe-this question. In forming a belief, no matter how spontaneous and in that sense non-voluntary, we respond to reasons and thus express our rational agency. This rational agency involves an activity, in Moran's terminology: an activity of making up one's mind, of taking a stance, of resolving oneself. The kind of activity involved in forming a belief in response to reasons is very different from the activity that we could exert upon ourselves so as to produce a belief.

Peels could contest this, by arguing that the feeling that our beliefs are up to us can be explained by the fact that we have control over all sorts of factors that influence what we believe. We can always re-open the deliberation and present new evidence to ourselves and hence exert influence, creating the feeling that the resulting belief is up to us. On this interpretation, this feeling is due to the preceding belief-influencing actions, not to the nature of believing in itself. And without this possibility of influence, we would not be responsible nor hold one another responsible. In support of his own incompatibilist and action-derived interpretation of responsibility, Peels presents a thought-experiment:

> Imagine a possible world in which there are creatures who are like us in that their belief-forming mechanisms are largely functioning properly: upon having the experiences and beliefs we have, they roughly form the same beliefs as we do. In one regard, however, they are crucially different from us: they cannot influence what they believe. Thus they cannot gather evidence, work on their intellectual virtues, improve their cognitive mechanisms, and so forth. Would we hold those creatures responsible for their beliefs? (75)

The question is meant to be rhetorical. And sure enough, these creatures might not be responsible. But we believe that the example is misleading, because neither would we describe these creatures as being reason-responsive. It is their lack of rational agency that explains the absence of responsibility rather than the lack of control over influencing actions. Being

a reason-responsive believer entails more than having belief-forming mechanisms that respond differently to different inputs, like thermostats that register and respond to changes in temperature. Reflective agents are reason-responders, they think of their beliefs as responses to reasons *understood as reasons*.

Is the kind of control we have over our believing, according to the approach exemplified by Moran, Boyle and Hieronymi, a compatibilist notion of control? Peels argues that for the doxastic compatibilist, 'having the kind of control necessary for having a doxastic obligation does not require that one is able to *intentionally* acquire or maintain a belief' (72) We think that whether or not that is a correct description, depends on one's understanding of intentionality. Peels seems to adopt a very strong notion of intentionality that requires the formation of an explicit conscious intention. For example, he rejects an understanding of intentionality in terms of responsiveness to reasons because 'then we will be responsible for all sorts of things for which we are clearly *not* responsible' (such as our emotions: 80). But it is far from clear that we are never responsible for states such as emotions: it has been argued that certain emotions are in fact reason-responsive states that might certainly reflect the 'quality of one's will' (Strawson 1962; Hieronymi, 2007) and as such, provide legitimate reasons for blame.

This shows that contrary to Peels, we take there to be a much more intimate connection between responsible belief and epistemic justification: we are responsible for believing because believing itself is an activity over which we have rational control – and it is precisely the exercise of such rational control that makes our belief epistemically justified. So we end up in a very different place than Peels. While he argues that responsibility for beliefs does not require that beliefs are up to me (understood as under my direct voluntary control), yet does require the ability to believe otherwise, we end up thinking the other way around: it is irrelevant whether one is able to believe otherwise as long as a belief is formed in response to reasons, and is in that sense up to me.

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