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Doxastic Involuntarism, Attentional Voluntarism, and Social Epistemology

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Abstract

Doxastic involuntarism — the notion that humans are unable to choose what they believe — is the standard epistemic stance in psychological and philosophic literature. Theology and popular epistemology, however, still hold that humans freely choose their beliefs. In the case of Abrahamic religions, freedom of will is necessary for theological reasons; in the case of popular epistemology, doxastic voluntarism is required to acknowledge the nature of our felt sense of how humans operate in the sensory world. I suggest here that the distinction between doxastic and attentional voluntarism resolves the latter conundrum, and that attentional voluntarism is the key to understanding the validity of social conceptualizations of epistemology formation. I seek to illustrate these points by reference to Alcoholics Anonymous, the largest and by some measures most successful alcohol addiction treatment group in the world.

Introduction[1]

In this working paper, I attempt to deal with some questions that I believe the readers of the Social Epistemology Response and Reply Collective will find interesting. In a Mertonian sense, linkage issues (Hedstrom and Udehn 2009) connecting lower-range hypothetical and empirical constructs to the larger-scale psychological constructs of our domain are still nascent. Social epistemology, from its inception, represents a daring and synthetic break with the traditional and stifling boundaries of science and philosophy (Fuller and Collier 2003); now that that break has been made, the work of fully conceptualizing our theories (Glaser 2002) and 'grounding' our theories in empirical research has begun.

To fully conceptualize our theories would mean, as Merton (1967) suggests, that we fully articulate the linkages between the grand theories at the highest conceptual levels of abstraction and the empirical tests at the lowest levels of abstraction in our mental explanatory schemata. To 'ground' a middle-range theory (Boudon 1991) such as what I take the theory of social epistemology to be in practice requires empirical tests of hypotheses derived from that theory, as well.

I propose some of those ideas here. I argue that beliefs are a special sort of feeling about the truth-value of statements. Once that conclusion is drawn, beliefs can be seen to have little to do with what is really of import in epistemology — the formation of shared

[1] The author would like to thank Miika Vähämaa and Max Carroll West for their helpful discussions on the topics in this paper.

meanings. I then argue that doxastic involuntarism suggests that we must examine something else — attentional voluntarism — if we are to understand how agents change behaviors, and that once we examine attentional voluntarism, we are thrust into the social realm, and into social epistemology. Throughout, I will be discussing Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization whose use of symbolic language and social support has been demonstrated to create a social epistemology for its members which has an empirical effect upon their behavior. By so doing, I hope to suggest a sort of praxis by which we might 'ground' social epistemology, which I regard as a grand theory in the Mertonian sense.

Beliefs

What are beliefs? That question, while simple enough to formulate, is quite difficult to answer. And a good deal hinges upon its answer. The dominant faiths in the world in the 21st century — Christianity and Islam, which together claim 54.7 percent of the world's population as adherents Hackett (2012) — demand that their followers 'believe' their tenets willingly, and, pursuant to that belief, confess them to others. The awareness that much of the philosophical world has turned its back on doxastic voluntarism as an untenable position, while Christianity in particular holds such voluntaristic concepts of faith as a centerpiece of what it means to be a adherent of their religion, has resulted in significant tension within the theological hierarchy of that religion (Hartman 2011).

We might see the contrast between the epistemic views of a small, highly-educated group of individuals - philosophers and theologians - and those of a much larger group of less-educated group of individuals — the laity — as evidence of epistemic communities (Cross 2013). These communities exist in different locations, with the doxastic involuntarists centered in urban areas around institutions of higher learning and the doxastic voluntarists scattered around the globe. Further, there are substantive socioeconomic divergences between the two groups; the group of doxastic involuntarists has high economic, educational, and social status, while, relatively speaking, the doxastic voluntarists are likely to have lower socioeconomic status.

Taken as a whole, such data supports two arguments. First, social formations are crucial to the epistemic venture, and can be employed in a Comtean manner in the reconstitution of the epistemic domain a la Fuller (1987); second, these social formations have socioeconomic differences which can be used as data in empirical models which seek to predict epistemological differences a la Vähämaa and West (2014).

Voluntarism and Involuntarism

The question of whether beliefs may or may not be justified is in itself troubling enough - see, for example, Oakley (1976) for the argument that it may be impossible to justify beliefs at all. More important, however, is the fact the idea that we can choose what to think and believe, which in at least some significant sense lies at the heart of the modern

notion of the autonomous rational agent capable of self-determination (Schneewind 1991). This conceptualization of the self is important both to democratic notions and to psychological notions; the debates surrounding rationalism and voluntarism at the very dawn of the Protestant revolution (Schneewind 1996) have to do with *de servo arbitrio*, as Luther had it. As Schneewind and others (Erdelack 2011) have suggested, such questions served as the fuel for later debates about the most important questions of ethics and volition in the modern age.

The debates for doxastic voluntarism and involuntarism proceed by analogy (Nottelmann, 2006). A question posed by Alston (1989, 122) is operative: « I shall merely contend that we are not so constituted as to be able to take up propositional attitudes at will. My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers. »

Imagine that I asked you to imagine that I was General George Custer, and offered you $10,000 USD so to do. You might squint, puzzle upon the thesis, and then assert that you had succeeded. You would then address me as 'George,' ask me how things were going in my preparations for Little Big Horn, comment upon my lush golden hair, and so on. But could you truly say that you could alter your beliefs? You could alter your behaviors to be sure, but your beliefs would remain unaltered. I would surmise, and rightly so, that your actions with regard to addressing me as 'George' were instrumental, based on the hope of persuading me that your beliefs had in fact changed so that the $10,000 USD would become yours. A more extreme argument from Booth (2007) — can you, for a very large sum of money you desperately need, imagine me to be a grasshopper — has a similarly persuasive outcome.

These arguments, for the majority of the philosophical 'in-groups' described earlier, have proven persuasive against doxastic voluntarism. But those supporting doxastic voluntarism have a counter-argument. How, then, is it that people change? Witness the success of Alcoholics Anonymous in the remission of alcoholism (Krentzman et al. 2011); that organization holds that remission from alcoholism begins with a first step:

> We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

Such an admission seems to indicate "taking up a propositional attitude at will;" as the old joke concerning psychotherapy has it, "the light bulb has to want to change." Alcoholics Anonymous is a particularly useful example in that the organization represents not only an organization dedicated to a volitional change of a belief (its members go from thinking that the consumption of alcohol is a pleasant and worthwhile action, to something to be avoided at all costs). Alcoholics Anonymous has been empirically studied and shown to have significant efficacy as a modality for treatment for alcohol addiction (Roman 1988).

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Despite such counter-arguments, doxastic involuntarism has largely held sway in the philosophical realm with Heil (1983), Kornblith (1982) and Price (1954) presenting standard arguments. Another argument for doxastic voluntarism, one that suggests self-deception and magical thinking are ways in which individuals volitionally trump evidence, is dealt with by Cote-Bouchard (2012, 14-15):

> Évidemment, cela ne revient pas à dire que nos croyances peuvent uniquement être causées par des considérations ayant trait à la vérité de P ou « évidentielles ». Il ne fait aucun doute que bon nombre de nos croyances sont influencées par des facteurs « non-évidentiels ». Il est notamment possible et même courant de prendre ses désirs pour des réalités et de former une croyance par la « pensée magique » (*wishful thinking*), c'est-à-dire de former une croyance uniquement parce que cela satisfait un désir profond. Seulement, ce n'est jamais quelque chose que nous faisons en connaissance de cause. Des facteurs non-évidentiels comme les désirs peuvent uniquement influencer efficacement la croyance de S dans la mesure où S n'a pas conscience que sa croyance est le fruit de l'influence de tels facteurs. En effet, aussitôt que S se rend compte qu'il croit que P uniquement parce qu'il désire le croire et qu'il n'a aucune indication que P est vraie, S perd alors toute confiance en la vérité de P et perd *ipso facto* sa croyance que P.

In essence, Booth (2007) advances a similar argument; self-deception is psychologically impossible. How, exactly, would an agent contrive to deceive him or herself successfully regarding a concept, such that they would come to believe some proposition S that was false? How, exactly, would an agent forget the act of self-deceit if it were truly volitional?

Nevertheless, support remains (Holyer 1983; Govier 1976; O'Hear 1972) for doxastic voluntarism. The arguments for voluntarism, as suggested above, arises from a persistent felt sense that humans have free will; if we are free to change, then we must surely be free to believe at least some things, at least some things about agency, in order for that change to occur.

The Dilemma

Hence, as we mentally examine the analogies presented by doxastic involuntarists and voluntarists, we are faced with a conundrum. We clearly cannot force ourselves to believe anything we like; yet people change. Further, we know how they change; they announce that they want to change; then they cast about for how they might change, and eventually they land upon some behavioral mechanism that works, and they change.

Our 'felt sense' of the world, then, is that we don't choose what we believe, or, really, think. We look at evidence, and from there, "arrive' at conclusions. We may "feel' that

we have chosen those conclusions, but the evidence has, so to speak, 'forced our hands.' We could not reasonably see that having two things, and getting two more, results in us having four things, and conclude from that that two plus two equals five; the evidence compels us to conclude that two plus two equals four. The 'felt sense' we have is a matter of no import; to do otherwise, as Plato (1976) has Socrates suggest in the Protagoras, is perverse.

On the other hand, Attentional Voluntarism agents do change their behaviors in a purposeful manner, and that leads us to have the feeling that we have control over our lives. We decide, at some point, that we weigh too much, or that smoking tobacco harms our health, and we modify our behavior. We know that we have volition, and hence free will; but our "felt sense' in this case collides with our 'felt sense' in the case of the beliefs which impelled us to take up the cause of change in the first place. Most books on the subject, whether intended for scholarly (Goldstein and Kanfer 1991) or popular (Wheelis 1973) audiences, sensibly skirt the issue of exactly how people come to believe that they need to change and instead focus on what should or does happen from that point onward.

The question remains, however. How do we change our behavior, if we are unable to volitionally change our beliefs? As Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) suggest, beliefs give rise to behaviors, and hence doxastic involuntarism suggests determinism. Yet we are dispositionally committed to freedom of the will. How do we resolve this conundrum?

Attentional Voluntarism

We may think ourselves out of the above dilemma by way of attentional voluntarism. Clarke (1986) offers an important clue about how people actually engineer change. The individual who attends Alcoholics Anonymous, say, has indeed come to believe that 'they were powerless over alcohol' by dint of perceptions which came their way without (or against) their will. But notice that their next steps are social. They affiliate themselves with an Alcoholics Anonymous group, and they stop going to local bars. They find a sponsor within the movement. They attend meetings, in which they receive social support of various sorts.

Further, they learn a new set of symbols and meanings related to alcohol, in which the concept of 'poison' predominates — alcohol poisons relationships and the body (Antze 1987), alcohol as (metaphorical) storm or fire, destroying property and health (Jensen, 2000). The old reinforcements of the pleasures of drink and of conviviality at bars is gone, replaced by the camaraderie of Alcoholics Anonymous. Via the new affective metaphors taught in the group, entrained through a shift in attention arising through the voluntary creation of new social links, the individual is able to begin the process of remission from alcohol addiction.

As Clarke (1986, 43) says:

> [B]y ignoring the adverse evidence, searching for positive evidence, and concentrating on a particular reinforcing proposition, one has influenced one's belief acquisition processes. One has put oneself in a position not to receive evidence that would force one to believe something one does not want to believe. To this extent, and in this respect, "attention voluntarism" is a true doctrine.

The nascent alcoholic has sensory inputs that tell him or her that drinking is pleasant, and so they drink. Later, they have become addicts, and they have sensory inputs that lead them to develop feeling states that move them to new behaviors concerning alcohol — in this case, the turn to new social structures, within which they adopt a new epistemology. This new epistemology entails a new way of understanding their world and the things in it, as detailed in The Blue Book and other literature from Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcohol itself takes on the role of a boundary object (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Trompette and Vinck 2009), an object that maintains a common identity across communities but serves to highlight the interpretive differences between those communities. Such groups, to use a phrase from Vähämaa (2013, 3), are epistemic communities.

> The willingness of individuals to maintain group membership and to use heuristic methods of thought in understanding both their social and physical worlds invites us to consider the social epistemic dimension of group membership ... I argue that our shared understanding of the nature of things qualifies as an important type of social knowledge, regardless of the truth value of that knowledge.

As Roche (1989) argues, the goal of personal action is the maximization of personal well-being; Vähämaa extends that Aristotelian line of reasoning to include the agent in an epistemological context. In the case of the alcohol addict, the goal of group membership is freedom from alcohol addiction, not a true understanding of the etiology of the nature of their addiction. The symbolic content of the message of Alcoholics Anonymous ('alcohol as poison,' in several different registers) may or may not be 'true' in some veritistic sense (Goldman, 1999); its value to the agent is in its efficacy in reducing suffering. "Truth," as well as "sobriety," for the member of Alcoholics Anonymous, is redefined as honesty (Kurtz 2013, xii), and the epistemological dimension of the organization can be shown through its redefinition of critical terms in its venture to reshape behavior.

What is Belief?

Alcoholics Anonymous speaks of 'belief' primarily in terms of Step 2 of the Twelve Steps which members are asked to undergo:

> Step 2 - Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

While belief in a 'higher power' is widely understood in Alcoholics Anonymous to be essential to success in symptom relief, Murray et al. (2003) found that belief in an internal locus of control with regard to alcohol avoidance predicted a greater level of success with cessation than did belief in an external locus of control. In the context of Alcoholics Anonymous, then, 'belief' as it is commonly construed has little meaning in the sense of faith.

Such a finding highlights the difficulty of talking about belief. This problematic has been explored in a number of contexts (Lindquist and Coleman 2008; Netland 1986; Gardenfors 1990; de Lavalette and Zwart, 2011). Simply put, "belief" and "to believe" are in general terms that are used loosely, even in philosophical discourse. As Smith (1994, 21) argues, however, there is at least a general concurrence that there is some connection between "belief" and "desire" — where there is a belief, there is at least a desire that the statement involved in the belief be, or seek to be, true; belief, at the very least, involves a statement, which one asserts to be to the best of one's knowledge, true.

But even this minimal definition is problematic.

Let's consider a statement such as the one Winch (1996, 8) proposes, which derives from Wittgenstein's verbal formulation of Moore's Paradox in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> [A] sentence of the form "p and I do not believe that p" sounds like nonsense-indeed very much like a self-contradiction-while, on the other hand, it also sounds as if it asserts what may actually be the case. If Bob Dole were to say: "I shall be the next President and I don't believe that I shall be the next President" that would sound like nonsense. And yet it may actually be the case both that Dole will be the next President and that he does not believe it.

As Winch suggests, Wittgenstein goes on to suggest that all assertions have a human as their author, and all (rational) statements are assertions of truth (Wittgenstein 1974, *Tractatus* 5.5422) : « The correct explanation of the form of the proposition "A judges p" must show that it is impossible to judge a nonsense. » Note that Wittgenstein uses 'judges' and 'thinks' and 'asserts' interchangeably; and, as Winch argues is the position of Wittgenstein, all assertions are implicitly predicated with "I believe that ..."

Thus, I argue, as Wittgenstein seems to suggest, that belief is an attitude toward a proposition. Propositions are sentences Gardenfors (1990) whose informational content seems to be about a state of affairs in the nX^pwqa, the totality of things, but which is in fact referring to the state of mind of the individual making the utterance.
Further, as Liska (1984, 62) argues, following (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980), an attitude is thus an affective evaluation of a proposition.

> It [the Fishbein and Ajzen model] conceptually distinguishes the three components of the traditional attitude concept (affect, cognition and conation) and specifies a recursive-chain causal structure underlying them. It assumes that behavior is directly caused by behavioral intentions (conation), which are caused by attitudes (affective evaluations), which in turn reflect beliefs about the consequences of behavior weighted by the subjective evaluation of the consequences. (Fishbein/Ajzen use the term 'attitude' to refer to the affective evaluative dimension.)

Thus a belief is a feeling (an affective evaluation) toward a cognition (a proposition, expressed as a sentence). The utterer may tell the truth, may lie, may be incorrect, or some combination of the above; but a belief is a feeling. And, as Mele (1989, pp. 281-282) suggests, it is entirely possible to have *akrasic* (from *axpaoia,* "lack of command") feelings:

> James, a college student, suffers from a severe fear of public speaking. Whenever he considers making a comment in class, his heart beats rapidly and he becomes very agitated and anxious. James has given the problem some thought: he has judged that anxiety is an inappropriate response to the situation; that in the absence of the feeling he would enjoy participating in class discussion and would find student life more pleasant and rewarding; and that, all things considered, it would be best not to be anxious about speaking in class. Suppose now, that during a class discussion, James has an urge to make a comment, and forms a conscious judgment to the effect that there is good and sufficient reason for his not feeling anxious. Unfortunately, he also experiences the customary anxiety.

In such a situation, the student has applied an appropriate cognitive remedy, but he is still anxious; his feeling-state is hence *akrasic*. The involuntary state of those feelings is manifest; just as individuals have *akrasia* concerning beliefs, they have *akrasia* concerning feelings.

At no point in the Fishbein and Ajzen model (perceptions to attitudes to behavioural intentions to behaviors, under the sway of perceived subjective norms) do we see the apparent necessity of the influence of volition. What does become manifest is the sufficiency of evaluative states to form behaviors; evaluative states have a good deal of consistency over time (Ledgerwood et al. 2010). Individuals can have a general disposition to dispositional evaluative states (Hepler and Albarracfn 2013), and individuals with fewer numbers of affective evaluations (feelings) on a given topic are more likely to form their behaviors on the basis of social cues or pressures than are those with higher numbers of affective evaluations (Ledgerwood and Callahan, 2012).

The last empirical finding is important for the social epistemologist. If affective evaluations are the source of behavioral intentions, and in turn, behaviors, as Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argue and later empirical research suggests, then it should not be the case that fewer feelings lead to different sorts of behavior in the case of those with less direct experience of some phenomenon (who then turn to the social realm). What must be the case is that they turn to other feelings, and those other feelings are feelings which arise as a result of direct or indirect (mediated) social experiences.

Epistemology and Group Membership

Do individuals, then, turn to groups in order to alter their epistemologies?

In the case of Alcoholics Anonymous, almost certainly not. People do not think in those terms; no one ever says they 'have a faulty epistemology, and need a better one.' People, rather, turn to groups like Alcoholics Anonymous in order to be free from addiction — and changes in manners of thought are the modality by which they find relief. "Stinkin' thinkin'", the term Alcoholics Anonymous uses for the thought patterns associated with alcoholism, but not necessarily with drinking (Gorski and Miller 1982) is cured by 'truth,' which Alcoholics Anonymous construes as honesty. 'Honesty,' in turn, is verisimilitude in interpersonal relations, and adherence to a set of meanings assigned to concepts by the group; it is demonstrated by a set of behaviors that lead to sobriety. The group is the provider of a social epistemology, whose adoption leads to the behaviors that lead to a desired state — the cessation of a given type of suffering.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a very specific sort of group, and, of course, not all groups are so goal-directed. But, as Vähämaa (2013) suggests, individuals join groups for instrumental reasons which all, ultimately, involve the desire for well-being, or *eudaimonia*. Groups provide social knowledge and cues to behavior, and that group knowledge is at least in part the linkage to the *eudaimonia* which groups provide. The turn to a group involves a desire to change behavior; the desire to change epistemologies, or ways of knowing, need never appear. The alcoholic wants to stop drinking, not to learn a new mode of knowing; yet they come to have both.

The same is true for the individual who joins a political party. One might, in the U.S. context, join the Republican Party hoping to gain useful acquaintances for business purposes, or to make friends, or to become more informed about local politics. What might well happen is that one might become persuaded that, say, science matters less than politics in the determination of how best to handle global warming (Demeritt 2001; Vähämaa 2013). The same would hold true for almost any social group; groups have group epistemologies and group membership eventually entails the adoption of a group epistemology.

Conclusion

The social is the domain in which humans operate. We turn to groups because we are social beings; being outside of groups has empirically-demonstrable health consequences (Hawkley et al. 2003; Cacioppo et al. 2006), and, in turn, membership in voluntaristic groups have profound effects upon socialization (Harris 1995), the political process (Langton 1967) and a whole host of other crucial domains, in the adult as well as the child (Mortimer and Simmons 1978). Such socialization makes society possible, and forms the matrix in which 'the social' exists.

Plato (1976, 345d-e) has Socrates argue in the *Protagoras* that *akrasia* is impossible, he suggests that one can only act in accord with what one knows, and that agents acted in accord with what they thought to be the good.

> [S]imonides was not so ignorant as to say that he praised those who did no evil voluntarily, as though there were some who did evil voluntarily. For no wise man, as I believe, will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonorable actions; but they are very well aware that all who do evil and dishonorable things do them against their will.

Our knowledge, though, must always be limited, and so we turn to "folk epistemologies" (Mercer 2008; Mercier 2010), home-made tests of credibility or likability (Kellner 1993) and, at a less-obvious level, various mechanisms of selective perception (Johnston and Dark, s. d.) and selective retention, both in the psychological and the Campbellian sense (Simonton 2010).

At every turn, however, these heuristics are cognitively expensive, and the movement to the social has numerous benefits beyond the avoidance of *akrasia.* The ancients understood that humans were embedded in the social, and that with limited knowledge, we each sought to act in accord with what the groups we were embedded within had led us to understand was correct. It is only in a modern age, in which a theory of the self as 'Victor and Invictus' (Weinstock 1957), the sovereign master of itself under all circumstances, has emerged. Such an autonomous rational agent, *homo oeconomicus*, controls its thoughts, its actions and its beliefs; it owes nothing to agents outside its own mind. Such reductionist strategies can be seen as impoverishing to the arts and interpersonal relations (Glynn 2005), privilege the current economic and political system (Read 2009), and as removing the social dimension from consideration in many domains tout court.

I would argue that such a definition of the human has also limited our understanding of the nature of knowledge itself; and it is through a return to the social that we can work our way out of some of the problematics which trouble us in the realm of epistemology.

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