**Husserl on Epistemic Agency**

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**Abstract:** In this chapter I aim to show that Husserl’s descriptions of the nature and role of activity in the epistemic economy of our conscious lives imply a nondeflationary account of epistemic agency. After providing the main outlines of this account, I discuss how it compares to contemporary accounts of epistemic agency and respond to some potential objections. In concluding I indicate that according to this Husserlian account of epistemic agency we can be said to be intrinsically responsible for holding the beliefs we do as well as for the absence of belief.

When contemporary epistemologists speak of epistemic agency, they are most generally thinking of how we as knowers are active in relation to our beliefs. That we are active in relation to our beliefs or other attitudes means for some contemporary authors that belief itself is active or that believing is something we do. So, for example, Matthew Boyle has argued that “a rational subject’s believing what she does is itself her enduring *act* of holding it true” (2011, 22). And for Boyle we are in a position to give reasons for our beliefs when asked because we are active in this way. As he writes, we expect that a knower “be able to address the question why he holds the relevant belief, and [we] hold him accountable for the cogency of his answer. This suggests that his believing something on a certain basis is itself an active condition” (2011, 21).

Critics of such a robust notion of epistemic agency do not typically deny that we are in some sense active in relation to our beliefs. So, for example, Kieran Setiya acknowledges: “Coming to believe, forming a belief, gaining and losing confidence are all dynamic phenomena” (2013, 183). Moreover, Setiya also acknowledges how certain actions may affect our beliefs when he writes: “We can go out and gather evidence; we can ask other people; we can imagine possibilities; we can run through ideas and arguments in our minds. We can also, more nefariously, manipulate ourselves by avoiding exposure to counterexamples, by associating only with those who share our views, and more fantastically, with the aid of a hypnotist or a belief-altering drug” (Setiya 2013, 183). These things do not in themselves warrant talk of epistemic agency in any robust or notable sense, though, according to Setiya, because, he argues, belief is, unlike acting, which is dynamic, a state and hence static. Further, our beliefs being static is compatible with us having reasons for our beliefs. As Setiya points out: “If all that is meant by the claim that belief is active is that one can believe things for reasons, this is something no-one should deny. It is sometimes true that I believe that *p* on the ground that *q*, whatever this state involves. The only mistake would be to miss its static character” (2013, 182). Given the static character of belief, Setiya argues for a deflationary account of epistemic agency “on which it amounts to no more than the prospect of believing for reasons” (2013, 182).

The sort of activity one allows for in relation to beliefs is not just a theoretical matter—the activity we allow for in relation to our beliefs determines the way we are responsible for those beliefs. On the aforementioned nondeflationary account of active belief defended by Boyle, I am responsible for the beliefs I hold in an intrinsic way. As Boyle writes: “If a person produces grounds for belief that are obviously poor, or if he admits to having no grounds in a case where grounds are obviously required, we are ready to criticize his belief and, significantly, we address our criticism *to him*” (2011, 10; see also 2009, 124). For Boyle, us holding others (and ourselves) accountable in this way is due to belief being active: “believing is itself an exercise of agency, one for which the subject bears a characteristically agential sort of responsibility” (2009, 121). On a more deflationary account of epistemic agency, however, according to which we may be active in relation to our beliefs insofar as revising our beliefs and arranging ourselves to be in an optimal or worse epistemic situation are things that we do, it would seem that we would be responsible for our beliefs in at most an indirect or extrinsic way insofar as we are responsible for these revisions and improving our epistemic situation (see also Boyle 2009, 126).

In this chapter I aim to show that Edmund Husserl’s descriptions of the nature and role of activity in the epistemic economy of our conscious lives imply a nondeflationary account of epistemic agency. Specifically, as I will develop, Husserl’s phenomenological descriptions suggest that the attentive mode of experiencing is active in a nondeflationary sense. While a variety of experiences can be active in this way, the activity makes an epistemic difference in what Husserl calls doxic (*doxisch*) experiences, which include perceptions and propositional judgments.[[1]](#endnote-1)

After providing the main outlines of what I take to be Husserl’s view of the activity characteristic of attentive doxic acts, I respond to the aforementioned contemporary accounts of epistemic agency from a Husserlian perspective. I show that while Husserl would agree with Setiya that our beliefs are indeed states, or static, he also thinks we can only *have* reasons for our beliefs because we are epistemic agents in a specific nondeflationary sense. Hence, I suggest that Husserl would reject the deflationary conclusion regarding epistemic agency that follows for Setiya from the claim that beliefs are states. I also show how Husserl’s claim that beliefs are states does not make him vulnerable to Boyle’s critique of accounts of the relation between judgment and belief as well as the ways in which we can be said to have control over our beliefs, which Boyle uses to motivate his own nondeflationary account of epistemic agency. I conclude by showing how Husserl’s alternative account of epistemic agency furthermore considers the activity that is characteristic of attentive doxic experiences to be nontrivially related to the activities of belief revision and activities by means of which I can improve or worsen the quality of my epistemic situation. And what follows from this, I argue, is that I can be held intrinsically responsible for holding the beliefs I do as well as for the absence of belief.

**Intentionality and Activity**

For Husserl, belief is characteristic of not just certain propositional attitudes but also our perceptions. To state it in the terminology of *Logical Investigations*, both unmodalized perception (i.e., perception not marred by doubt or negation) and propositional judgment have a “quality” of belief and a “matter,” or intentional content” (Husserl 2001a, 128-31; see Erhard in this volume). What differentiates perceptions from propositional judgments is their matter, or content—they present something *as* this or that object or *as* a state of affairs respectively (Husserl 2001a, 152-58). What perceptions and propositional judgments have in common is their quality, or the way they both posit (*setzen*) something as actually existing (*wirklich*) (Husserl 2001a, 158-62). In *Ideas I* Husserl describes the objects we perceive as appearing with a character of being (*Seinscharakter*), and he writes, correlatively, of perceptual belief (*Wahrnehnmungsglaube*) (Husserl 2014, 206; Husserl 2001b, 64) that can be modalized in cases of perceptual doubt (Husserl 2014, 207-208). Intentional experiences that have the character of belief, or are doxic (*doxisch*)experiences, are to be contrasted to evaluative and practical experiences. [[2]](#endnote-2)

By the time of *Ideas I*, it is Husserl’s view that experiences can occur in two modes: current (aktuell) or not current. Current experiences are also characterized by Husserl as explicit (*explizit*) or patent and contrasted to potential (*potentiell*), implicit (*implizit*), or latent experiences (Husserl 2014, 60-2 and 226-28). Importantly, actuality (*Aktualität*) is a mode (*Modus*) of conscious experience, which means that one and the same experience can at one moment be actual or current and the next moment be merely potential. The difference between a current or actual, and potential experience is its relation to the self (or ego). That is, as Husserl writes, experiences that have the mode of actuality have the “character of subjectivity” (Husserl 2014, 184) in that these experiences are implemented or enacted (*vollzogen*) by the self, or I. Hence, Husserl calls the mode of experience that is actual the *ego cogito* (Husserl 2014, 50) and the respective experiences *cogitationes* (e.g., Husserl 2014, 105). In contrast, acts that are not actual are those in which the enacting subject (*vollziehendes Subjekt*) does not yet live or does not live any longer. Intentional experiences that are enacted by a subject are called “intentional acts” (*intentionale Akte*) to highlight their particular active character, in the sense of these experiences being carried out or implemented (*vollzogen*) by the ego. At one point in the manuscripts now published as *Studies on the Structures of Consciousness* (*Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins*), Husserl at times equates this distinction to (one sense of) the distinction between passive and active experiences (e.g., Husserl 2020a, 370n1).

Since actuality is a mode of consciousness, one and the same act can change its mode of actuality without changing the way it intends (matter) and posits (quality) what is intended. As Husserl writes:

The cogito thus in fact designates […] the *authentic* act of perceiving, judging, enjoying, and so forth. Nonetheless, the entire structure of the experience in the described cases, with all its theses and noematic characters, is the same if it lacks this actuality. For this reason we distinguish more clearly between *implemented acts* and *acts not implemented*. The latter are either acts that have “fallen outside of implementation” or *stirrings of an act*. (Husserl 2004, 227)

The self enacts or implements a perception or judgment when the experience is actual, current, or a *cogitatio*. As Husserl also puts it: “The explicit, intentional experience is an ‘implemented’ ‘I think’” (Husserl 2014, 226). What this more concretely amounts to is that unlike in nonegoic experiences, the positing is something that I do: “a stance taken, that bears the radiating of the ego in itself, is accordingly an act of the ego itself” (Husserl 2014, 184). This activity is further characterized as an expression of the self’s freedom (Husserl 2014, 184) and as a form of spontaneity (Husserl 2014, 242; see also Jansen 2016, Sheredos 2017, and Kidd in this volume).

Husserl thus suggests that actual, or explicit, experiences, such as perceptions and propositional judgments, are active, free, and spontaneous in that the positing characteristic of doxic experiences is in these experiences enacted by me. What epistemic difference this activity makes, however, is far from clear. That is, potential, or implicit, experiences are for Husserl also positings (*Setzungen*; albeit potential ones), or experiences in which something is posited as existing or as being the case (Husserl 2014, 221, 232). What is more, it is also not immediately clear what kind of experiences these potential, or implicit, experiences are, even if we can descriptively make sense of describing perceptions and propositional judgments as experiences I have insofar as there is a self that is having the experience (see Zahavi in this volume).

However, Husserl provides a further characterization of egoic experience that can clarify this and help us understand the difference the actuality or egoicity of an experience makes in the epistemic economy of our conscious lives: for Husserl, egoic experiences are attentive experiences. Attention is here to be understood as a mode (*Modus*) of consciousness, which is not surprising considering Husserl’s characterization of actuality as a mode of consciousness. Negatively stated, for Husserl, attention is not one mental event or experience amongst others. Rather, attention is a mode of experiencing that any intentional experience can take on. Or, as Husserl puts it: “This attending or apprehending is […] a particular mode of act that every consciousness, or better every act, (that has not done so yet) can assume” (Husserl 2014, 67). So, on this account of attention, there are attentive and inattentive ways of being aware of something.

By conceiving of attention as a mode of consciousness, Husserl is furthermore also suggesting that the difference between attentive and nonattentive consciousness is not essentially a difference in the content of experience (as if it were just a more or less determinate content), and he is also suggesting that it is not a difference in the attitude one has towards the content of experience (e.g., belief or a modalization of it, such as doubt) (see Husserl 2014, 190). Thus, even though one can bring further determination to the content of one’s experience by paying closer attention to the world (Husserl 1973a, 96-9; 2000, 290, 312), and while how the world appears when attentively engaged with might change or modalize my previous perceptual beliefs (Husserl 1973a, 87-96), the difference between an attentive and nonattentive experience is not essentially one of content or attitude but rather a difference in the mode of experience—attentive experiences are egoic experiences in that the self lives in or enacts the experience, which is to say that the self is attentively aware of something.

Having identified egoic experience with attentive experience, we can now also get a better sense of what exactly potential or nonegoic experiences are and in turn better understand the epistemic difference an experience’s relation to the self makes. In the case of perception, implicit or potential experiences are more concretely background perceptions, the existence of which we can in Husserl’s view reflectively attest to. As he writes: “When I reflect on perceptions, I find a distinction between foreground and background experience, distinctions of preference, that are with regard to the perceived object characterized as unnoticed, noticed, and primarily noticed” (Husserl 2014, 282). To state it differently, when perceptually attentive to something, I am perceiving or perceptually experiencing more than what is attended to in that what stands out in my experience of the world stands out on the background of what is also experienced though not attended to—and this background is both spatial and temporal in the sense that it includes both what appears at present and is not attended to as well as what is (emptily) retained (Husserl 2001b, 220) and may inform my perception and perceptual expectations at present through association (2001b, 226-30).

When it comes to propositional experiences, the distinction between actual and potential predicative experience amounts to the distinction between judgments that I enact and beliefs that I have. At any point, what I believe outstrips by far what I currently judge to be the case. Current acts of judging are judgments I at present actually make and in which I am attentively directed towards what is being judged (the state of affairs). My beliefs, in contrast, are what Husserl calls sedimentations (*Sedimentierung*) or habitualizations (*Habitualisierung*) of my actively judging something to be the case—which Husserl characterizes as a secondary form of passivity (*sekundäre Passivität*; Husserl 1969, 26; see also 319-322; 1973d, 203) as it results from active judgments, while the primary form of passivity is the aforementioned perceptual background experiences.

Nonattentive experiences, such as perceptual experiences of what remains in the background or beliefs that I am not currently entertaining clearly have epistemic import in that they inform my attentive perceptions and current judgments. That is, due to the horizonal structure of perception, the sense (*Sinn*) with which something appears is, through association, informed by my past and current perceptual background experiences, which are implicit experiences (see Doyon in this volume on the horizonal structure of perception). Likewise, current judgments are made on the basis of our perceptual awareness, which always outstrips our attentive awareness, and background beliefs. Background experiences have epistemic import, both on a perceptual and predicative level, in that through them the epistemic gains of our past experiences are retained and can count in the present. But what additional epistemic difference does it make that a current judgment or perception is enacted by me and attentive? What a closer look at the attentive nature of egoic perception and judgment reveals, I suggest, is that our *awareness* of the evidence for our perceptions and judgments is tied to the actual mode of attentive consciousness because it is only in this mode that I actually or currently posit the world being a certain way.

For Husserl, when perceptually attentive to something, I relate in a specific way to what is experienced. Specifically, Husserl describes egoic attentive experiences as characterized by a striving to know (*Erkenntnisstreben*), which is an explicit intending (*intentio*) of how things actually are (*wahre Selbst*; Husserl 2001b, 128). We come to know what things are actually like when our intending something *as* this or that (say, for example, when I expect to see something in a certain room upon entering) shows itself to be this or that in our unfolding perception (the thing that I anticipated being in the room is perceived by me as being there)—that is, when our anticipations are fulfilled (see Berghofer and Hopp in this volume). The difference that the attentive mode of perceptual experience makes, epistemically speaking, is that this fulfillment is experienced by *me*. Specifically, I would like to suggest that, in contrast to nonegoic background experiences, my attentively experiencing that what I anticipated the world to be like is how the world appears in my experience is characterized by a “receptive action” (*rezipierende Aktion*; Husserl 2001b, 127), where receptivity is to be understood as the lowest form of activity (511). In a number of recently published manuscripts, Husserl describes this activity in terms of an “accepting” (*akzipieren*) or “taking up” (*aufnehmen*) how something is afforded by our experience (see Jacobs 2016 and 2021 for an elaboration on this point). And in the following passage, Husserl describes what epistemic difference the active I makes:

What does the active I accomplish? It does not produce the objective unity, which is available in a preconstituted manner and affects it before it turns towards it. But the I enlivens the intentionality in the specific manner of an activation, of an active enactment, and becomes itself enacting or, in other words, *becomes a subjectivity* that turns towards, grasps the unity, follows it, and gets to know the unity—this is the case of a “mere” experiencing presentation, which does not already have “categorial form” and hence does not originate out of an original activity. […] In any case, the I gets to know the object and the start of that is *active receptivity*, the *taking up* of what is already constituted as known. (Husserl 2020b, my translation and emphasis)

What I take this to mean is that when attentive, when perceiving or judging, I am in a position to take up how something presents itself to me as being such or accept that the world is how I experience it to be (or I do not or only provisionally). Insofar as my perceptions go on to inform my future experiences, I would like to suggest that we understand this accepting as *letting something count* epistemically (or not, or only provisionally). This accepting is active, but it is not to be understood voluntaristically. That is, I accept in light of evidence, or I accept that this is how the world is because it appears to me that way. But when accepting in this way I am active because I am both aware of and endorse (or not, or only provisionally) this evidence—which is something I do and can only do in the attentive mode of consciousness. While potential or background experiences contribute to how I experience something so to speak behind my back, in these experiences I am not aware of evidence in the same way. This, I suggest, is due to the positing characteristic of these experiences not being actualized at present. Attentive or patent experiences, on the contrary, do actualize the positing of an experience, and with it the awareness of what speaks in favor of experiencing how one does, which in turn puts the self in a position to accept and go along with how things appear, or not. In other words, attentive experiences are epistemically distinct in that I am aware of and receptive to evidence in these experiences because I actually posit the world to be a certain way. Or again, it is only when I enact a positing that what speaks in favor of this positing can show up for me, and when it does I go along with and let whatever it is that I posit in this way count (or not, or only provisionally).

A perceptual example can elucidate how attention, the actualization of the positing character of perception that it entails, and the accepting that how things appear is how they are are all part of a holistic phenomenon. Imagine that when walking through an empty store my attention is captured by what appears to be another human being. I attentively turn towards them, and I see that it is another person shopping. Here, unlike in Husserl’s familiar example of turning toward what appears to be a human but turns out to be a mannequin (Husserl 2001b, 72), I go from a background to an attentive foreground awareness. However, this foreground awareness does not just foreground. Part and parcel of this phenomenon is that in the turning toward there is also an active receptivity at work which makes sense of the fact that soon after attentively turning toward the other shopper, I turn away from the other shopper and go about my day—there is nothing more to see there. Or, better, I accept that how the world appears is what it is like and there is nothing more to see there.

I have thus far focused on perceptual experience, because this is for Husserl the most basic doxic experience, but what I have described also applies to belief as a propositional attitude. That is, on the proposed account of epistemic agency, predicative experiences can either be current or not. In the first case, we are talking about what is commonly called a judgment. A judgment, when it is not current, is what is commonly called a belief. What this means is that the positing of a state of affairs can be done so attentively, when actually judging or positing that S is P, which in turn can be done in light of evidence of S being P. However, after having judged in this way, the state of affairs still holds for me in that I have the belief that S is P without therefore currently judging that S is P or having the evidence for this judgment present to mind. So, judgment and belief are, on this account, the attentive (or current and explicit) and nonattentive (or passive and implicit) positing that S is P. Or in other words, judgment and belief are two different modes of the same positing that S is P: the occurrent and passive mode respectively or, also the attentive and nonattentive mode respectively. And like in the case of perception, it is only when actually enacting a judgment that I am aware of the evidence for my judging that S is P. And while I have many beliefs, my awareness of the evidence of those beliefs is only available when I actually enact the belief in the form of an actual judgment in which I attend to what is posited. In contrast, when not current in this way, Husserl speaks of the belief-character as “dead” (*toter Charakter*; Husserl 2020a, 378). When the belief character is such, we are dealing with a belief as a state, which Husserl contrasts in the following way from a current or active judgment: “Each spontaneous thinking (each spontaneity of thought) corresponds to a state of thought [*Denkzuständlichkeit*]: a state, which is a passive experience [*Erlebnis*] […] each spontaneous thinking becomes *eo ipso* a mere state after it is over and is not held onto, and each faintly thinking is a state” (2020a, 265). Even when not currently judging that something is the case, I can still hold the belief that something is the case, which is according to Husserl an intentional experience that posits a state of affairs as actually obtaining (*geltend*). Importantly, however, this positing is not active but passive and retained. While it might sound odd to say that we posit something about the world while not currently judging the world to be that way, it does correspond to the commonsense idea that we believe more than what we currently judge to be the case. And our beliefs, as the passive states corresponding to our previously current judgments, inform how we experience—both on the perceptual and predicative level—in the future (unless of course that future experience provides evidence that casts doubt on our past judgments).

More generally, now speaking about all non-neutralized objectifying or positing acts, Husserl describes the contrast between active experiences and passive states as follows: “For all acts, we must distinguish (as positings in a broad sense) between the enactment of an act, act-spontaneity, and the state, the passivity which it passes into, etc.” (2020b, 388). Similarly, describing experiences in general, Husserl writes: “mere states are conscious experiences that are not intending. Each intending experience can be modified into a mere state, and each state of consciousness can become an act” (2020a, 67). And these states of consciousness become acts when the I directs itself to their intentional object, and I can do so in active perception or current judgments, which are spontaneous acts or “spontaneous acts in the broader sense of turning toward as such” (*spontanenen Akte im weiteren Sinn der Zuwendungen überhaupt*) including both “acts of sensibility and the understanding” (*sinnliche und Verstandesakte*) (2020b, 267).

**Husserl’s account in a contemporary context**

As has been pointed out in the literature (Jacobs 2016 and Kidd in this volume), Husserl’s phenomenological descriptions of activity agree in a number of respects with the account that Matthew Boyle has developed. That is, there is according to both Husserl and Boyle something like a robust sense of epistemic agency, and for both this particular epistemic activity is what can account for the fact that we have reasons for belief because of the self-awareness that is characteristic of the activity in question. That is, we can avow or declare those reasons because intrinsic to the “holding” (Boyle) and “actual positing” or “accepting” (Husserl) is a prereflective awareness of how one takes the world to be and the reasons for taking the world to be that way. Specifically, it is the very structure of our holding a proposition to be true (Boyle) or actually positing something to be the case (Husserl) that accounts for us being in a position to declare our reasons for this holding or positing.

A crucial difference, however, between Husserl’s account and Boyle’s Kant-inspired account of epistemic agency is that for Husserl epistemic agency is only actualized in and through the attentive mode of consciousness—and hence, epistemic agency in the sense of accepting and letting something count epistemically speaking is restricted to current experiences such as attentive perceptions, judgements, and other current attitudes. In contrast, as discussed here, beliefs are for Husserl static/states and only the corresponding actual judgments are active/activities. Husserl uses the concept of *hexis* to capture belief states. For example, he writes: “Insofar as I have a ‘fixed conviction,’ I have an enduring egoic property, a relatively enduring *hexis*, out of which acts of this content in the proper circumstances can always again come to spring forth. But I have the conviction, I am not the conviction, and I am not in the conviction in the way in which I have ‘properties’” (Husserl 1973c, 195, my translation; see also Husserl 1973b, 404). In describing beliefs in this way, Husserlat once differentiates beliefs as states from properties of things as well as from egoic acts. While the latter are active, our beliefs are not for Husserl.

The particular way in which Husserl understands the distinction and relation between states and activities does not only differentiate his account from Boyle’s but would also allow Husserl to address a potential important counterargument from Boyle. That is, Boyle motivates his own account of belief as the activity of holding a proposition to be true by way of a critique of theories that consider this activity to consist in the act of judging. Boyle finds these accounts problematic because they consider epistemic agency to be a temporal process that through judgments generates beliefs. However, how this generation is supposed to happen is unclear (Boyle 2011, 12–15). In addition, Boyle likewise criticizes accounts that localize our ability to control our beliefs in the making of judgments that produce beliefs by emphasizing that judging something requires that one believes it and pointing out that this is incompatible with taking the former to produce the latter (Boyle 2009, 130–32). He instead argues in favor of us having an intrinsic kind of control over and responsibility for our beliefs, which is not conceivable if we merely produce our beliefs since then we can at most be held accountable for the activities that produce certain beliefs and not these beliefs themselves (Boyle 2009, 135).

Husserl’s account as I have presented it may appear at first sight to fall under those accounts that are the target of Boyle’s criticism. That is, the activity of actually positing is indeed what Husserl would call judgment in the broad sense (also characterizing attentive perceptions, which are doxic experiences), so this would raise the question for our predicative experience as to how judgements produce beliefs. And it seems that this would entail that the kind of control I have over my beliefs is merely extrinsic in that I produce them through judging but am not responsible for holding them.

Husserl’s descriptive account of the relation between current judgments and static beliefs can, I think, respond to the charge that their relation remains mysterious. That is, for Husserl, judgments are active modes of belief that can be modalized into passive belief states and they do so when I stop paying attention to what is posited in the judgment. In other words, when I judge something and believe what is taken to be the case in the judgement, I have *one* experience that can be either actual (when attentive in the form of an actual judgment) or not (when retained in the form of an abiding belief). So a current judgment does not produce a belief but rather *is* this belief—albeit in a passive or nonattentive mode. And while, like for Boyle, according to Husserl, I do *hold* beliefs, my holding a belief is a state and is to be differentiated from the activity characteristic of epistemic agency—which I have suggested is the activity of letting something count by accepting that something is how it presents itself in attentive perception or a current judgment. My holding a belief shows forth in the validities that inform my experience and actions now and in the future. But importantly, in order to hold beliefs, I need not be actively holding them—beliefs and the validity of what they posit are retained passively without the need to actively hold them. In other words, the holding that Boyle is interested in is accounted for by Husserl’s sophisticated account of time-consciousness and his account of how the past is retained in the present (see Rodemeyer in this volume). And, for Husserl, and as Boyle wants to argue, I do have a control over these beliefs that is not captured by the fact that I have produced them in me. But in order to exercise that control I need to pay attention to what they posit—or modalize the experience from a passive into an active one.

My beliefs are hence states for Husserl, but that does not entail that I produced them and it does not entail that the control I exercise over my beliefs is limited to producing them. Rather, my beliefs are passive states of holding the world to be a certain way, and this state can be actualized in attentive modes of experience in which the evidence for holding this belief becomes available to me and my beliefs can be reassessed as to their validity. And I have control over my beliefs insofar as I can actualize them in current judgments in which I reassert or reassess the validity of what I take to be the case.

Husserl thus agrees with the skeptic of epistemic agency that beliefs are states and hence not active in the sense that matters for understanding epistemic agency. However, that concession does not necessarily mean one should be deflationary about epistemic agency. That is, it is Husserl’s view that belief states can be modalized into attentive judgements which are active in a robust sense in that they accept or let something count epistemically. And it is only because I am active in this way that I can *have* reasons for belief. That is, it is only when actualizing my belief states through paying attention to what they posit (state of affairs) that this positing is made current and that I can become aware, assess, and avow what speaks in favor of this positing. So, if for someone like Setiya epistemic agency just refers to being able to have reasons for belief, Husserl would argue that *having* (in the sense of having access to) reasons for belief already entails a commitment to a more robust or nondeflationary account of epistemic agency. For without attention, we do not have access to the reasons for our beliefs. In other words, as soon as our active judgments modalize into passive beliefs, or as soon as we stop paying attention to what we believe to be the case, our grounds for believing such are not accessible—until we pay attention to the posited state of affairs again, which will also make available the grounds for my judging it to be so. Importantly, when attentive in this way, I will accept the posited state of affairs (or not), and in my doing so I am active. This is not to say that our passive beliefs do not inform our current judgments—but it is to say that I do not have access to the reasons for those beliefs unless I make these beliefs current in the form of actual judgments, and only then do the reasons for my belief become available. It goes without saying that for most of my beliefs, I have not made the corresponding judgment or attended to what is believed. Indeed, this is what it means to be socially-historically embedded—most of what I believe does not originate in me, even though these beliefs do inform my experience of the world.

I do not want to suggest that these initial responses to both Boyle’s Kant-inspired account of epistemic agency and Setiya’s skeptical response to it can settle the matter in favor of the Husserlian account. Indeed, as becomes increasingly clear, the phenomenological account of epistemic agency, as everything in Husserl’s phenomenological epistemology, depends on other commitments regarding the nature of conscious experiences (attention, perception, judgment, time-consciousness, sense, etc.). What I would like to do in concluding is point out how for Husserl the activity characteristic of attentive experience—namely, receptive activity—is nontrivially connected to the activities that make our epistemic situation better or worse. What this means, I argue, is that we are not only intrinsically responsible for the beliefs we have but also for what we fail to know about the world and others—i.e., the absence of belief.

**Responsibility for Belief**

Thus far I have tried to lay out what I consider to be Husserl’s nondeflationary account of epistemic agency, according to which we are active when attentively experiencing or judging something because when doing so we accept how something presents itself or let it epistemically count. It is not difficult to see how the proposed account of this activity of letting something count is nontrivially tied to the activity of improving or not improving one’s epistemic situation. And this further differentiates Husserl from the aforementioned accounts.

While Husserl has a lot more to say about the phenomenon of attentive experience, what follows from what I have discussed thus far is that the activity of accepting is related to the activity in relation to belief that deflationary theories allow for—my feeling the need to improve my epistemic situation by going out and gathering evidence, asking other people, etc. is due to my not or not fully accepting the evidence I have for taking the world to be a certain way. Concretely, I will not pay further attention to something in a certain respect if I have accepted how the world is in this respect, if I think I have seen what there is to be seen and believe what there is to know. This means that in being responsible for the receptive activity of attentive experience I am also responsible for the ignorance that may result from this accepting. It is especially in the latter respect that it seems to matter that we hold each other personally accountable. That is, we can easily imagine a situation where someone has a range of valid beliefs but is also ignorant about much of the world and others within it. If we connect personal or intrinsic responsibility to the holding of certain beliefs, as Boyle does, it is not immediately clear how we could hold someone personally responsible for the absence of belief. On the Husserlian account I have sketched, however, I do think that one can be considered personally responsible not just for what one receptively accepts the world to be like but also for what one does not know or want to know. After all, it is me who accepts while attending to something that this or that is the case and it is this same self that attends more or less to the world in a given respect. And both my accepting and attending are something I do and can be held accountable for. And it seems that this constitutes an advantage of a theory of epistemic agency—namely, that it can account for how we do not just hold each other accountable for the beliefs we hold but also for the absence of beliefs about how the world actually is, where the latter may not clearly or simply be the flip side of the holding of false beliefs. Ignorance can be blameworthy on this account as it can be in our daily interactions.

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1. When I speak in what follows of perceptions and judgments as experiences, I do so to capture the German term “intentionales Erlebnis.” Dahlstrom (Husserl 2014) likewise translates “Erlebnis” with experience, which emphasizes the lived-through character that the German term conveys. Since I am focusing on intentional experience throughout this chapter I do not reiterate the designation “intentional” throughout the paper when characterizing perceptions and judgments as experiences. At the time of *Logical Investigations* Husserl used the term “intentional act” to refer to all intentional experiences. However, by the time he was writing of *Ideas I*, Husserl distanced himself from this use of the term and began to use the term “Akt” only to refer to a particular mode of intentional experience—i.e., the actual or explicit mode of being intentionally aware of something. The account of epistemic agency that I develop in what follows tracks this terminological shift. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. While Husserl’s analyses of our experience often focus on a detailed description of a specific intentional experience such as perception or propositional judgment, he also describes how these experiences contribute to an unfolding and holistic experience of an actual world (which is ontologically plural, in that we experience things, values, artworks, people, and institutions, etc.) as being a certain way. And our experience of the world is likewise characterized by Husserl in terms of belief as a he speaks of a “general positing of the world” (*Generalthesis der Welt*; Husserl 2014, 68). In follows I will more narrowly focus on unmodalized perceptions and predicative judgments with the aim of elucidating the sense in which these particular intentional experiences can be active and what difference this makes in the epistemic economy of our conscious lives. I will likewise abstract from the evaluative and practical dimensions of our concrete perceptions. For the latter, see Drummond and Rinofner-Kreidl in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)