This is the Accepted Manuscript. Please cite the published version:
Nie, C. (forthcoming). Akratic beliefs and seemings. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy.*

Akratic Beliefs and Seemings

Chenwei Nie

University of Warwick

How does it come about that a person akratically believes that P, while at the same time believing that the available evidence speaks against that P? Among the current accounts, Scanlon offers an intuitive suggestion that one's seeming experience that P may play an important role in the aetiology of their akratic belief that P. However, it turns out to be quite challenging to articulate what the role of seeming experience is. This paper will offer a novel development of Scanlon's intuitive suggestion, with a focus on clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. I will argue that the primary role of seeming experience is unlikely to act as the subject's reason or to provide the subject with prima facie justification; instead, based on the recent work in dogmatism and Cartesian clarity, I will propose a causal account, according to which, when it seems clear to the subject that P, the seeming experience may exert a brute causal force to persistently compel the subject to believe that P. This causal account also has the advantage of helping some existing accounts to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia.

Keywords: epistemic akrasia; akratic belief; seeming; justification; causation; the taking condition

1 Introduction

Philosophical discussion of akratic belief tends to revolve around three questions. (1) The whether-possible question: Is it possible for a person to hold an akratic belief (Heil 1984; Adler 2002; Chislenko 2021). (2) The how-it-comes-about question: Assuming that it is possible for a person to hold an akratic belief, how does the person come to hold the akratic

belief? (Scanlon 1998; Hookway 2001; Greco 2014; Kearl 2019).[1] (3) The rationality question: Is it rationally permissible to hold an akratic belief? (Smithies 2019).

In this paper, I will assume that people sometimes hold akratic beliefs, and will focus on investigating how a person comes to hold an akratic belief. More specifically, I will provide a novel development of Scanlon's (1998) intuitive suggestion that the person's seeming experience that P may play an important role in the aetiology of their akratic belief that P. In my investigation into the possible role played by seeming experience, I will also briefly discuss if seeming experiences can render akratic beliefs rationally permissible.

Consider the following case in which Scanlon (1998: 35) talks about his own akratic belief:

> I may know, for example, that despite Jones's pretensions to be a loyal friend, he is in fact merely an artful deceiver. Yet when I am with him I may find the appearance of warmth and friendship so affecting that I find myself thinking, although I know better, that he can be relied on after all.

According to Scanlon, the belief that Jones is a loyal friend is an akratic belief. How does the akratic belief come about? In my reading, Scanlon's basic suggestion is that the seeming experience in which Jones appears to be a loyal friend is an important factor in the aetiology of the akratic belief. This suggestion on the significance of seeming experience is intuitively appealing. However, it turns out to be quite challenging to articulate what the role of seeming experience is. For example, Scanlon's further proposal—that the subject takes their

---

[1] Whether-possible questions and how-it-comes-about questions are different from each other. For example, we may wonder whether it is possible for anyone to complete a marathon within 2 hours and 1 minute. Some people might think it is impossible; others might disagree. But this question should be settled in the face of the evidence that, on the 8th of October 2023, Kelvin Kiptum completed the Chicago marathon with a time of 2 hours and 35 seconds. Then, we should no longer be concerned with the question of whether it is possible. Instead, we will want to know how Kiptum came to accomplish that. Additionally, it is also worth emphasising that a how-it-comes-about question is not the same as the Kantian how-it-is-possible question, which is about 'how something which looks impossible given other things that one knows or believes is nevertheless possible'. (Cassam 2007: 1)

seeming experience to be a reason for their akratic belief—might strike many philosophers as implausible or even impossible (Raz 2009: 42).

This paper aims to develop a plausible way to understand the role of seeming experiences in the aetiology of akratic beliefs. Here is the plan. Section 2 will introduce the specific form of epistemic akrasia that this paper is concerned with, namely *clear-eyed epistemic akrasia*. Section 3 will discuss various ways to develop Scanlon's suggestion. I will argue that the primary role of seeming experience is unlikely to act as the subject's reason or to provide the subject with *prima facie* justification. Instead, based on the recent work in dogmatism and Cartesian clarity, I will propose a causal account, according to which, when it seems clear to the subject that P, the seeming experience may exert a brute causal force to persistently compel the subject to believe that P. Section 4 will compare the causal account with some existing accounts of akratic beliefs and argue that the causal account is helpful for the existing accounts to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. Section 5 will conclude that the causal account may open a few promising lines of research for future study.

2 Clear-eyed epistemic akrasia

To explain epistemic akrasia, it is essential to be clear about what the explanandum is. Epistemic akrasia is not a familiar term in ordinary language. It is created by philosophers to refer to a large group of baffling phenomena. In this paper, I will focus on a paradigmatic notion of epistemic akrasia that is clear-eyed. Roughly, according to this notion, S akratically believes that P, when the following conditions obtain:

(A) The Belief Condition: S believes that P.

(B) The Evidence Condition: S believes that the totality of available evidence speaks against that P.

(C) The Concurrent Consciousness Condition: S is consciously aware of (A) and (B) at the same time.[2]

This notion of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia differs from several existing notions of epistemic akrasia. In some philosophers' writings, the Evidence Condition (B) is replaced by what we can call the rationality or normativity condition: that is, S believes that it is irrational to believe that P, or that it is normatively required not to believe that P (Heil 1984; Hookway 2001; Smithies 2019; Hawthorne, Isaacs, and Lasonen-Aarnio 2021). The Evidence Condition (B) itself is not committed to a particular conception of rationality or normativity. Therefore, it does not make a claim about whether it is rational or normatively required to believe that P, let alone whether the subject is overall rational.

Another existing notion of epistemic akrasia adds the following requirement (Owens 2002; see also Tenenbaum 1999):

(D) S freely and deliberately forms the belief that P.

It is not easy to get a full picture of what exactly (D) asks for. In her critique of (D), Tanney (2017: 353) writes: '[I]t is not even clear what would count as "freely and deliberately" or "freely and intentionally" believing that something is so'. It looks to me, though, that at least one important aspect of Owens' (2002: 390) notion is as follows:

> For such a[n] [akratic] belief to be formed freely and deliberately, the agent must be in a position to judge that a certain bit of evidence provides some reason for the belief, whilst also judging that this evidence is decisively outweighed by other evidence.

This quotation seems to suggest that Owens' notion of epistemic akrasia contains the following condition:

(E) S believes that a small portion of her evidence supports the view that P.

---

[2] Versions of the Concurrent Consciousness Condition could be found in what Hookway (2001) calls 'the most full-blooded form' of doxastic or theoretical akrasia, what Hawthorne et al. (2021: 220) call 'conjunctive akrasia', and what Smithies (2019: 287-288) calls 'open eyed' epistemic akrasia.

The notion of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, as I use it, however, does not require that S has such a belief. Therefore, it does not require (D) or (E). [3]

Yet another existing notion of epistemic akrasia is concerned with the relationship between akratic belief and akratic action (Adler 2002; see also Setiya 2013). It adds the following constraint on other conditions:

(F) There is a structural similarity between akratic belief and akratic action.

While the relationship between akratic action and akratic belief is an important issue, it is beyond my present concern and the notion of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia does not require (F).

To summarise, the notion of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia only requires three conditions (A-C), and these conditions do not make claims about the subject's rationality, normativity, freely and deliberately believing, or akratic action.[4]

Based on this notion of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, we may formulate the akratic belief discussed by Scanlon (1998: 35) as follows:

> FAKE-FRIEND: (A) Scanlon believes that Jones is a loyal friend, despite that (B) he also believes that the totality of available evidence speaks against that Jones is a loyal friend. And (C) he is consciously aware of both at the same time.

With this formulation in hand, we are in a better position to discuss Scanlon's intuitive suggestion that seeming experiences play an important role in the aetiology of akratic

---

[3] Another way to understand (D) is that the subject performs an active reasoning process. In Section 3.1, I will argue it is unlikely that, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, the subject performs an active reasoning process.

[4] Someone might wonder whether the clear-eyed notion is too minimal and might argue that some of the conditions and constraint (D-F) may be necessary for us to capture the essence of other cases of epistemic akrasia. In response, it is important to note that I take the clear-eyed notion to be a starting point to capture a paradigmatic puzzling phenomenon; and I will set aside cases where the clear-eyed notion is not enough.

beliefs, and to explore what the role of seeming experiences is. In the next section, I will argue that the primary role of seeming experiences is unlikely to act as the subject's reasons or to provide the subject with *prima facie* justification. Instead, based on the recent work in dogmatism and Cartesian clarity, I will propose that seeming experiences may act as a causal factor in the aetiology of akratic beliefs.

3 The functions of seeming experiences

3.1 Reasoning

Regarding the role of the seeming experience in the case of FAKE-FRIEND, Scanlon (1998: 36) briefly writes:

> [I]n the case of the false friend, mentioned above, there is something that I take to be a reason for believing in his genuineness, namely his appearance of genuineness. Given all that I know about him, of course, I know that this is not a good reason in this case, but it can serve as my reason nonetheless.

One natural reading of Scanlon's suggestion is that, although the subject (that is, Scanlon) believes that the seeming experience that P (that is, that Jones is a loyal friend) is not a good reason for believing that P, he 'takes' his seeming experience that P to be a reason for believing that P. However, it is not obvious how we are supposed to understand that the subject can 'take' what they know is not a good reason as their reason. More specifically, it is not obvious how we are supposed to understand the nature of the subject's taking.

In the philosophical literature on reasoning, there is an ongoing debate on the nature of a reasoner's *taking* their premises to support their conclusion. Some philosophers argue that taking is believing (Valaris 2020; Marcus 2020; Neta 2019). Others argue that taking is not a doxastic state but something else, such as an intellectual seeming (Chudnoff 2014; Tucker 2012; Broome 2014) or a *sui generis* state (Boghossian 2014). Let us consider these options in turn.

If taking is believing, then we can read Scanlon's suggestion as that, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, although the subject believes that the seeming experience is not a good reason, they 'believe' that the seeming experience is a reason for their belief. However, the challenge for this reading is to explain why the subject follows what they believe to be the

lesser reason. It is not obvious how this comes about. Furthermore, one might think that this is not even possible in the first place. Raz (2009: 42), for example, writes: '[T]here is no possibility of preferring to follow what one takes to be the lesser reason rather than the better one'.

If taking is not believing but, say, intellectual seeming, then we can read Scanlon's suggestion as that, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, although the subject believes that the seeming experience is not a good reason, 'it seems to them' that the seeming experience that P is a reason for their belief that P. The challenge for this reading, however, is to explain how the subject comes to acquire this bizarre intellectual seeming.

There are other non-doxastic conceptions of taking (for review, see Valaris 2020; Titus and Carter 2023). I think that when we use them to interpret Scanlon's notion of taking, they all face a similar challenge of explaining how the subject comes to 'take' his seeming experience to be a reason for their belief. To be clear, my main concern is not about whether it is possible for the subject to acquire this bizarre 'taking', no matter how exactly this notion of taking should be conceptualised. Rather, my concern is that even if it is possible for a person to have this bizarre taking, there is simply no well-developed account to tell us how, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, the subject comes to acquire this bizarre taking. Without the latter, we will not have a complete account of how clear-eyed epistemic akrasia comes about.

On top of this concern, there is a more general worry about invoking these conceptions of taking to explain how clear-eyed epistemic akrasia comes about. These conceptions of taking are all developed to capture an essential part of reasoning that is 'person-level, conscious and voluntary' (Boghossian 2014: 3). When these philosophers say that a person 'takes' something to be a reason, they are describing an *active* mental action. It is something that a person does rather than something that happens to the person (Broome 2014: 19). Therefore, when we use these conceptions of taking to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, we are virtually saying that the subject actively reasons from the seeming experience to the belief. In this sense, we may call this approach to clear-eyed epistemic akrasia *the active reasoning approach*. This approach, I think, faces the immediate challenge to explain the following two puzzles.

First, it is puzzling why the subject actively reasons from the seeming experience to the belief, when the subject arguably knows that this is not a good reasoning. In other words, it is puzzling why the subject commits *a commissive form of inferential akrasia*, where a person infers *q* from *p* while, at the same time, judging that *p* does not support *q*.[5]

Second, since the subject arguably knows that the totality of available evidence speaks in favour of the belief that not-P or the suspension of the belief that P, it is also puzzling why, if the subject is to perform an active reasoning, they fail to actively reason from the available evidence to the conclusion that not-P or to the conclusion of suspending the belief that P. In other words, it is puzzling why the subject commits *an omissive form of inferential akrasia*, where a person fails to infer *q* from *p* while, at the same time, judging that *p* supports *q*.

According to Hlobil (2014: 420), the commissive form of inferential akrasia[6] is 'either impossible or seriously irrational'. I think we can say the same about the omissive form of inferential akrasia. If these two forms of inferential akrasia are impossible, then the active reasoning approach is virtually using non-existent phenomena to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. Even if these two forms of inferential akrasia exist, the active reasoning approach still needs to explain how, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, the subject comes to commit these two seriously irrational forms of inferential akrasia.[7]

When we consider how the active reasoning approach may shed light on the rational permissibility of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, it appears that the two seriously irrational forms of inferential akrasia render the akratic subject more irrational than before when the

---

[5] I borrow the term inferential akrasia from McHugh and Way (2016). However, they only use inferential akrasia to refer to what I call the commissive form of inferential akrasia.

[6] Hlobil (2014) calls it Inferential Moorean Phenomenon.

[7] It is of some interest to note that thinking of the akratic subject as an active reasoner appears similar to the sort of akratic case Owens (2002) is concerned with, where the akratic subject 'freely and deliberately' forms the belief (Section 2). If this is true, then the challenges for what I call the active reasoning approach will arguably be challenges for any theories that aim to explain how a case of Owensian epistemic akrasia comes about.

apparent irrationality is mainly about the intuitive tension between the subject's belief that P (The Belief Condition) and the subject's belief that the totality of available evidence speaks against that P (The Evidence Condition). One might hence doubt whether the active reasoning approach attributes unnecessary irrationalities to the akratic subject. The challenge for the active reasoning approach is to offer independent reason for the attribution. It is not obvious to me what the reason could be.

All these difficult challenges render the active reasoning approach to clear-eyed epistemic akrasia less promising.

3.2 Justification

Now the question is one of what alternative role the subject's seeming experience may play if it is not to be 'taken' by the subject as their reason.

In the literature on dogmatism, it has been argued that a seeming experience that P provides *prima facie* justification for believing that P (Pryor 2000; Huemer 2006; for review, see Moretti 2020). This dogmatist conception differs from the previous conception involving a reasoning process, because according to the dogmatist conception a seeming experience can, as a matter of fact, offer *prima facie* justification without necessarily being taken by the subject to be their reason. Could dogmatism help us to understand how clear-eyed epistemic akrasia comes about?

If the akratic subject is an ordinary person rather than a philosopher, then it is likely that they are unaware that their seeming experience provides *prima facie* justification. In this case, the *prima facie* justification will play no role in the subject's psychological process leading to the akratic belief.

If the akratic subject has learned philosophy and become a dogmatist, then the *prima facie* justification might emerge in the subject's consideration of what they should believe. However, the problem is that the *prima facie* justification is defeasible. In clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, since the subject believes that the totality of available evidence speaks against that P, this should undermine the *prima facie* justification provided by the subject's seeming experience. Consequently, the seeming experience 'does not give' the subject justification to believe that P (Silins 2021; see also Pryor 2000: 537-538). In other words,

even if the akratic subject is a dogmatist, the *prima facie* justification still falls short of explaining how clear-eyed epistemic akrasia comes about.

At this point, we might wonder whether it is possible that the akratic subject thinks that their seeming experience provides justification but does not know that the justification is defeasible; and the akratic subject may somehow think that the justification provided by their experience outweighs any other sort of evidence (perhaps because they trust their seeming experience more than anything else). If this is possible, then from the akratic subject's perspective, they are justified to hold the akratic belief. I think this case is possible. But this case will not count as a case of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, because in this case the subject will believe that the totality of available evidence, now including their seeming experience, speaks in favour, rather than against, their belief (compare, the Evidence Condition).

In short, it does not appear that dogmatism can help us to explain how clear-eye epistemic akrasia comes about. Regarding the rational permissibility of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, since the *prima facie* justification is defeasible and should be defeated by the counterevidence in clear-eye epistemic akrasia, dogmatism does not render akratic beliefs rational permissible.

So far, we have considered two proposals about the role of seeming experiences in the aetiology of akratic beliefs: according to the active reasoning approach, the seeming experience is taken by the subject to be their reason; according to dogmatism, the seeming experience provides the subject with *prima facie* justification. Neither is able to offer a satisfactory explanation of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. In light of this, one might wonder whether we should conclude that seeming experiences do not play any important role in the aetiology of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. I think this conclusion is too quick. In the rest of this section, I will argue that there may be an important role of seeming experiences that has been overlooked so far in the literature on epistemic akrasia: that is, seeming experiences may causally compel belief.

3.3 Causation

3.3.1 The positive proposal

While I am doubtful that dogmatism itself can explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, I think in the literature on dogmatism there is a point that is particularly pertinent to our concerns on the role of seeming experiences: that is, seeming experiences may exert a brute causal force to incline the subjects to believe the contents of their seeming experiences. In my understanding, both the proponents and opponents of dogmatism can accept this causal point. Among the proponents of dogmatism, Koksvik (2011: 260; emphasis added) writes: '[Seeming experience] has phenomenology of *pushiness* when its *pushing* its subject to accept its content is itself an aspect of its character'; in a recent paper, Chasid and Weksler (2020: 733; emphasis added) argue that the opponents of dogmatism 'should be willing to accept the minimal characterization of perceptual assertoricity as the property of *inclining* the perceiver to believe the content of her experience'. Let us call it *the Causal Account*:

The Causal Account When S has a seeming experience that P, the seeming experience may causally incline S to believe that P.

Compared with the *prima facie* justification provided by seeming experiences, the causal force of seeming experiences has received relatively less attention in the literature. The shift of our attention from the justificatory force to the causal force of seeming experiences naturally raises many vexed questions. First, although from the literature on dogmatism we can get a rough idea that there is a distinctive kind of phenomenal character that determines the causal force of seeming experiences, it is not clear what this phenomenal character is.[8] Second, it is sometimes mentioned in passing that the causal force of seeming experiences comes in degrees. Huemer (2005: 100; emphasis added), for example, writes: '[W]e are *more inclined* to accept what *more strongly seems* to us to be true'. But it is not clear how much causal force a seeming experience can have. Third, it is not clear what the

[8] Nor is it clear what the relationship between the phenomenal character that determines the justificatory force and the phenomenal character that determines the causal force is. I will set aside this question.

relationship between the causal force and the justificatory force is. Fully addressing any of these vexed questions would demand significant space beyond what this paper can afford. I therefore will not try to do so here. Instead, I will put forward a line of thought with some plausible answers to these questions such that we can get a better understanding of the causal role of seeming experiences in the aetiology of clear-eyed akratic beliefs.

Plausible answers to the first two questions can be found in the literature on Cartesian clarity. According to the phenomenal reading of Descartes (Patterson 2008; Paul 2020), many seeming experiences have a distinctive phenomenal character, that is, phenomenal clarity, which may causally compel belief. Phenomenal clarity 'come[s] in degrees' (Paul 2020: 4); the strength of the causal force of a seeming experience is positively correlated with the degree of the phenomenal clarity of that seeming experience; and the causal force is in its strongest form when the subject has an experience in which it seems completely clear to the subject that P. As Descartes (1642: 45; emphasis added; see also 27; 48) puts it, 'the nature of my mind is such that I *cannot but assent* to these things, at least so long as [to a certain degree] I *clearly* perceive them'.

Admittedly, when Descartes talks about clear perception, he aims to talk about the kind of clear experience that is a guide or even a guarantee that the content of the experience is true. However, it is widely accepted that neither Descartes nor anyone else succeeds in arguing that there is a distinctive kind of subjective experience that infallibly guides us to the truth (Patterson 2008; Paul 2020). Therefore, we may reject the thesis that whatever is clearly perceived is true. While rejecting this thesis on the truth of clear perception, it is important to emphasise that we can still accept Descartes' points about the causal force of seeming experiences with phenomenal clarity.

The Cartesian Causal Account When it seems clear to S that P, the seeming experience may causally incline S to believe that P; and the phenomenal clarity of S's seeming experience may increase to a point where S is causally compelled to believe that P.

Indeed, it is arguable that when Descartes (1642: 25) writes that 'perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident', he might have in mind this line of interpretation of his work that does not endorse the thesis on the truth of clear perception. Without appealing to a God who guarantees that

whatever is clearly perceived is true, it appears possible that in some cases a clear experience may causally compel the subject to believe something that is not true; and this possibility is more explicitly pointed out by Hobbes in his response to Descartes. Hobbes writes:

> [A]nyone who is free from doubt claims he has such 'great light' [that is, great clarity] and has no less strong a propensity of the will to affirm what he has no doubt about than someone who possesses real knowledge. Hence this 'light' can explain why someone obstinately defends or holds on to a given opinion, but it cannot explain his knowledge of its truth. ('Thirteenth objection', in Descartes 1642: 134)

If the analysis so far has been along the right lines, then we may have got a plausible account of the causal role of seeming experiences in the aetiology of akratic beliefs, according to which, when it seems *clear* to the subject that P, the seeming experience may play a causal role to compel the subject to believe that P. Returning to the case of FAKE-FRIEND, Scanlon's (1998) original suggestion was that the experience in which Jones seems to be a loyal friend plays an important role in the aetiology of the akratic belief that Jones is a loyal friend. What is the role of the seeming experience? I have argued that it is unlikely that the primary role of the seeming experience is to be taken by the subject to be their reason or to provide the subject with *prima facie* justification. Instead, according to the Cartesian Causal Account, Jones may be such an artful deceiver that he succeeds in inducing and sustaining a distinctive kind of seeming experience, in which it seems *clear* to the akratic subject that Jones is a loyal friend; and the role of the seeming experience is to exert a brute causal force that compels belief.

3.3.2 Objections and clarifications

Now let us consider two immediate concerns about the Cartesian Causal Account.

One might wonder whether a clear seeming experience can persist in the face of counterevidence. The consideration of the evidence related to P is an important factor that may influence how P is presented in our experience. For example, when Holmes first announced that Moriarty committed the crime, this proposition may seem *obscure* to Watson; however, after careful consideration of the evidence provided by Holmes, the

proposition may become *clear* to Watson. Following this line of thought, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, since the counterevidence is present in the subject's consciousness, one might wonder whether it is possible for the subject to maintain the experience in which it seems *clear* to them that P.

In response, I agree that the consideration of the evidence related to P is an important factor that may affect how P is presented in our experience. But it is crucial to note that the consideration of evidence is not the only factor that can affect how P is presented in our experience. For example, a proposition may seem clear to us to be true in the absence of evidence, and the seeming experience may causally incline us to believe that it is true. According to the phenomenal reading of Descartes (Patterson 2008; Paul 2020), propositions such as that 1 plus 1 is 2 would immediately seem clear to us to be true in the absence of evidence, and this seeming experience would causally incline us to believe that 1 plus 1 is 2. Moreover, a proposition may seem clear to us to be true in the face of counterevidence, and the seeming experience may, to a certain extent, persistently incline us to believe that it is true. Consider the Müller-Lyer illusion, even after we know that the two lines are of the same length, in our experience the two lines may still seem to be of different lengths, and we are, to a certain extent, still inclined to believe so. Although I do not have a comprehensive list of the non-evidential factors that may affect how P is presented in our experience, it suffices for now to recognise that there are non-evidential factors that may influence how P is presented in our experience. In the case of FAKE-FRIEND, the non-evidential factor, I think, could be Jones's artful deceiving performance as a loyal friend. It induces and sustains Scanlon's experience in which it seems clear to him that Jones is a loyal friend.

Another more fundamental worry about the Cartesian Causal Account may concern the relationship between causation and justification. According to the Cartesian Causal Account, the akratic subject is causally compelled by their seeming experience to give assent, even though all things considered the subject is not justified to give assent. The worry is that this creates a baffling scenario in which causation and justification come apart, whereas in paradigmatic cases causation and justification often go hand in hand. Simply repeating the Cartesian Causal Account that the phenomenal clarity of seeming experiences may causally

compel assent would not suffice to help us to understand the dissociation between causation and justification in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia.

In response, I agree that the justificatory force of evidence and the causal force of evidence often go hand in hand: the more evidence we have for believing that P, the more we are justified to believe that P, and the more we are causally inclined to believe that P. When a piece of evidence, *e*, is concerned, the degree to which *e* causes us to believe that P is dependent on *our consideration of* the degree to which *e* justifies us to believe that P; and our consideration, if rational, is often determined by the degree to which *e* justifies the belief that P. In this sense, the causal force of evidence is dependent on the justificatory force of evidence.

Regarding seeming experience, the crucial question is one of whether it is simply another piece of evidence. I think it is wrong to take seeming experience to be nothing but another piece of evidence. There is an important difference between how a seeming experience holds sway over our belief and how a piece of evidence holds sway over our belief. When we have an experience in which it seems clear to us that P, the seeming experience would immediately cause us to believe that P, independent of our consideration of whether and how much the seeming experience justifies us to believe that P. For example, when it seems clear to us that 2 plus 3 is 5, the seeming experience would immediately cause us to believe that 2 plus 3 is 5, independent of our consideration of whether the intellectual seeming provides *prima facie* justification; when it seems clear to us that a squirrel is playing in the yard, the seeming experience would immediately cause us to believe that a squirrel is playing in the yard, independent of our consideration of whether the perceptual seeming provides *prima facie* justification. That is to say, the causal force of seeming experiences is primitive, in the sense that it is not dependent on the justificatory force of seeming experiences.

This what we may call the Primitiveness (or Independence) Thesis on the causal force of seeming experience is also manifested in the difference between the way in which the causal force of seeming experiences impacts our belief formation and the way in which the justificatory force of seeming experience impacts our belief formation. The justificatory force of seeming experience is impotent. It will not make the subject form a belief, unless the subject *actively* takes their seeming experience to justify their belief (compare, Section

3.2). By contrast, the causal force of seeming experience is brute. When a subject has a seeming experience that P, it will causally incline or even compel the subject to believe that P.

In clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, if evidence is the only factor in play, then it would be puzzling why the subject believes something that they believe is unjustified; once we accept the subject's seeming experience as another factor and recognise the primitiveness of its causal force, we can get a better grip on what the subject is going through: the subject is *passively* compelled by the brute causal force of their seeming experience to assent.

This, of course, is not to deny that in many cases, in the face of counterevidence, we can reject what the seeming experience shows. For example, we may stop believing that a squirrel is playing in the yard after we are shown the evidence that the 'squirrel' is in fact a robot or the evidence that we are hallucinating. The key point offered by the Cartesian Causal Account is that, in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, the phenomenal clarity of the subject's seeming experience may increase to a point where the subject is causally compelled to assent, even in the face of counterevidence. A more comprehensive investigation into the dynamic of the interaction between seeming experiences and evidence can help us to get a better grip on the nature of belief formation beyond epistemic akrasia. But, for now, the aim of this paper is rather modest: that is to offer a plausible way to understand the role of seeming experiences in the aetiology of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. And the Cartesian Causal Account seems to be a suitable candidate.

Once we accept that the Cartesian Causal Account can provide a plausible explanation of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, we may naturally wonder how it is related to other existing accounts of epistemic akrasia in the literature, and why we should take the Cartesian Causal Account as a serious contender. In the next section, I will illustrate the theoretical advantages of this new account by comparing it with several existing accounts.

4 Comparing with existing accounts

4.1 Practical consideration

Consider the following case of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, adapted from Hookway (2001):

> MOTHER: (A) A mother believes that her son is innocent, despite that (B) she also believes that the totality of available evidence speaks against that her son is innocent. And (C) she is consciously aware of both at the same time.

The mother's belief that her son is innocent is an akratic belief. But how does it come about? Hookway argues that there are two conflicting evaluations in the case of MOTHER. One is the evidential evaluation. The other is the practical evaluation which is related to the practical values of believing in her son's innocence. According to Hookway (2001: 187), 'the mother has the goal of preserving the reputation of her family,' and believing that her son is innocent is valuable for achieving that goal. On this practical-consideration account, the akratic belief arises because the practical consideration exerts a *direct* influence on the belief, and the practical consideration outweighs the evidential consideration.

It is worth emphasising that the practical-consideration account is *not* invoking a familiar point that our practical consideration may exert an *indirect* influence on our beliefs. One explanation of how such an indirect influence occurs is that our practical consideration can influence the way in which we collect evidence, and hence influence our overall evidence and evidence-based beliefs. But this is not what is happening in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. This is because the subject's overall evidence is sufficient to reject the belief. This holds true even if the evidence is influenced by the subject's practical considerations. By contrast, the practical-consideration account claims that the influence of practical considerations is *directly* on the belief.

However, it is quite controversial to make a *general* claim that practical considerations can exert a *direct* influence on our beliefs.[9] Alternatively, I imagine that some proponents of the practical-consideration account might argue as follows: they are not making a broad claim about the role of practical considerations in forming beliefs in general; nor are they suggesting that people with akratic beliefs generally regard their practical considerations as

[9] This view is not without defenders (Rinard 2019; for critique, see Christensen 2020). In this paper, I will not engage with this debate. Instead, I will propose that the Cartesian Causal account may offer an alternative explanation of how practical considerations may contribute to the formation of beliefs.

good reasons for their (akratic and non-akratic) beliefs; instead, they are only saying that, in the case of an akratic belief, the subject *selectively* takes their practical consideration as a good reason for their akratic belief. However, this line of defence has a shortcoming: it lacks an account of why the akratic subject would selectively act in this manner.

I think part of Hookway's insight is correct that practical considerations might be a contributory factor in some cases of akratic belief, but appealing to the view that practical considerations exert a *direct* influence on our beliefs can hardly work. The Cartesian Causal Account may offer an alternative view on how practical considerations may contribute to the formation of akratic beliefs. From the perspective of the Cartesian Causal account, practical considerations do not have a direct influence on beliefs, rather they can (directly) influence the way in which the related propositions are presented to the subjects in their seeming experiences. This idea is not completely novel. Mele (2001: 28-30), for example, writes: '[M]otivation can … affect the salience of available hypotheses'. If we take practical considerations as a source of motivation and take phenomenal clarity as a form of salience, then we can interpret Mele's words as that practical considerations can influence the extent to which it seems *clear* to the subject that an available hypothesis is true. That is to say, when a hypothesis (for example, the hypothesis that her son is innocent) is especially valuable, the phenomenal clarity of the subject's seeming experience may increase to a point where the subject is compelled to assent, even in the face of counterevidence.

4.2 Conflicting belief systems

Consider the following case adapted from Greco (2014):

> MATT: (A) Matt believes that flying is dangerous, despite that (B) he also believes that the totality of available evidence speaks against that flying is dangerous. And (C) Matt is consciously aware of both at the same time.

Matt's belief that flying is dangerous is an akratic belief. But how does it come about? Greco (2014) argues that akratic beliefs arise due to a conflict between a linguistic belief system producing beliefs$_l$ and a non-linguistic belief system producing beliefs$_n$. According to Greco, Matt's belief that flying is dangerous is produced by his non-linguistic belief system and he believe$_n$ that flying is dangerous. The non-linguistic belief system is linked to Matt's emotional response to flying. Greco (2014: 202) writes: 'Matt is extremely afraid of flying'.

Furthermore, Greco (2014: 213) suggests that Matt also 'believes$_l$ that flying isn't particularly dangerous' which is produced by Matt's linguistic belief system and is based on Matt's evidence.

In a recent critique of Greco's account, Kearl (2019: 2514) argues that there exist cases of higher-order epistemic akrasia (where S believes that it is rational to believe that P, and S also believes that it is irrational to believe that it is rational to believe that P); and within Greco's meta-epistemological framework, these cases must be understood as a conflict between different 'linguistic belief-formation systems, which are perhaps sensitive to different aims, or operative in different contexts'.

Both Greco and Kearl propose some conflict between different belief-formation systems. I think they are correct that some conflict between different ways of belief formation may play an important role in the aetiology of epistemic akrasia. However, neither Greco's account nor Kearl's account has told us much about how clear-eyed epistemic akrasia comes about. More specifically, they have not told us much about how the conflict may persist when both sides of the conflict are brought into the subject's conscious awareness (the Concurrent Consciousness Condition).

By contrast, the Cartesian Causal Account may offer a way to help us to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. Like Greco and Kearl's accounts, the Cartesian Causal Account also proposes a conflict between different ways of belief formation. However, it proposes a distinctive kind of conflict that is between the subject's seeming experience, in which it seems very clear to them that P, and the subject's evidence justificatorily speaking against that P. The reason why Matt akratically believes that flying is dangerous is that Matt has an experience in which it seems clear to him that flying is dangerous, and this seeming experience causally compels belief.

In the case of MATT, I think Greco is also correct in linking Matt's akratic belief to his emotional response. But Greco is not explicit about how Matt's emotional response could lead to the akratic belief. This unfilled gap between the emotional response and the akratic belief might invite us to wonder whether the link between the emotional response and the akratic belief is real and whether Matt actually holds the akratic belief. Freedman (2017), for example, suggests that Matt does not akratically *believe* that flying is dangerous, rather what seems to be Matt's belief is actually a form of Matt's somatic response including

Matt's emotional response. This suggestion seems too radical, however. This is because Matt does not only have a somatic response to flying but can also say that he believes that flying is dangerous. There is no reason to suppose that Matt suffers from the disability to distinguish between somatic responses and beliefs.

How can the Cartesian Causal Account help us to fill in the gap? According to the Cartesian Causal Account, our emotional responses can have an impact on the phenomenal clarity of our seeming experiences. The more Matt is afraid of flying, the clearer it seems to him that flying is dangerous, and the more he is causally inclined by his seeming experience to believe that flying is dangerous. When Matte is extremely afraid of flying, he may have such an experience in which it seems very clear to him that flying is dangerous, whose brute causal force compels his belief.

4.3 Appreciating evidence and being moved by it

In an early discussion of epistemic akrasia, Heil (1984: 69-70; emphasis added) proposes that there is a 'gap between appreciating warrant and coming to hold a belief thereby warranted. … [I]t is one thing to appreciate evidence, another thing to be *moved* by one's appreciation of it'. That is to say, for one to *actually* believe what they believe their evidence supports, they need to be *moved* by their appreciation of evidence. According to Heil, an akratic belief arises when the subject fails to be moved by their appreciation of evidence.

Heil does not talk much about how the failure comes about. He is more concerned with the question of whether epistemic akrasia, or doxastic incontinence in his terminology, is possible. For him (1984: 69), 'the instances of apparent incontinence' are good enough to establish that epistemic akrasia is possible.

When we consider how epistemic akrasia comes about, there have been two ways to develop Heil's proposal. One is that the akratic subject suffers from a general deficit of being moved by their appreciation of evidence. This answer can be discerned in Borgoni and Luthra's (2017) account of epistemic akrasia. To overcome the gap between believing that P and believing that their evidence supports that P, they (2017: 885) argue, requires 'the successful exercise of the capacity for critical reasoning'. And epistemic akrasia manifests a failure of the subject's capacity for critical reasoning. The second way to develop Heil's

proposal is that the akratic subject commits some *performance error*. One variant of this answer can also be discerned in various places in Borgoni and Luthra's (2017) paper. They sometimes seem to suggest that the deficit is not a domain-general reasoning deficit, but a mistake made in the subject's *exercising* her reasoning capacity.

I agree that a deficit in the subject's capacity for critical reasoning and/or some performance error might play some roles in some cases of epistemic akrasia that are not clear-eyed in the sense that the subject may not realise that they fail to be moved by their appreciation of evidence. However, more is needed to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. Given that in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia the subject is consciously aware that they fail to be moved by their appreciation of evidence, it is not obvious why the subject still fails to overcome the putative deficit in their capacity for critical reasoning and/or still fails to correct their performance error, and consequently fails to reject the akratic belief.[10]

Here, the Cartesian Causal Account may be helpful in offering an alternative explanation of why the subject fails to be moved by their appreciation of evidence. According to the causal account, whether one would come to believe that P can be influenced by both one's appreciation of the evidence related to P and one's seeming experience in which it seems clear to them that P; and the reason why the subject fails to be moved by their appreciation of evidence may be that their seeming experience that P causally compels them to believe that P.

In clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, the Cartesian Causal Account agrees with Heil that there is an apparent gap between believing that P and believing that their evidence supports that P. However, in many ordinary cases, the Cartesian Causal Account can remain neutral about whether there is a general gap between one's appreciation of the evidence and being moved by it; it can also remain neural about Borgoni and Luthra's (2017: 885) proposal that overcoming the gap requires 'the successful exercise of the capacity for critical reasoning'. For example, when it seems clear to Holmes that Moriarty committed the crime and Holmes also has abundant evidence that it is true, a version of the Cartesian Causal Account can

[10] These issues are similar to the challenges faced by the active reasoning approach in explaining the subject's putative inferential akrasia (Section 3.1).

agree with Raz (2009: 39) that '[t]here is no gap [contra Heil's proposal], no extra step in reasoning [contra Borgoni and Luthra's proposal], between believing that the case for the truth of the proposition is conclusive and believing the proposition'.

5 Conclusion

This paper develops a novel account of clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, according to which, when it seems clear to the subject that P, the seeming experience may exert a brute causal force to compel the subject to believe that P; and this Cartesian Causal Account is also helpful for some existing accounts to explain clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. If the analysis so far is on the right track, then it may have the potential to open a few promising lines of research for the future.

First, this paper focuses on clear-eyed epistemic akrasia, and particularly FAKE-FRIEND, MOTHER, and MATT. However, the Cartesian Causal Account may be further developed to help us to explain other notions of epistemic akrasia and other cases of akratic beliefs.

Second, this paper focuses on the seeming experiences in clear-eyed epistemic akrasia. It naturally invites further investigation into the possible role played by seeming experiences in more striking cases of beliefs, such as delusions. For example, this project has the potential to offer a way to develop the phenomenological theory of delusions, according to which patients' 'hyper-real' experiences play an important role in the aetiology of their delusions (Feyaerts et al. 2021). Specifically, with the help of the Cartesian Causal Account, patients' 'hyper-real' experiences could be conceptualised as a new cognitive factor which could help us to address the challenges faced by the existing cognitive theories of delusions (Nie 2023), and to foster conversations between phenomenological theories and cognitive theories of delusions (Brar et al. 2021).

Third, the Cartesian Causal Account could be a starting point for a new approach to the question of how non-evidential factors contribute to the formation and maintenance of beliefs that are against the evidence, including but not limited to superstitious beliefs (Vyse 2019), religious beliefs (Fuqua, Greco, and McNabb 2023), and beliefs in conspiracy theories (Cassam 2019). For example, some modest evidentialists argue that non-evidential factors, such as motivation, can influence a person's belief indirectly by skewing how the person

evaluates evidence (Flores 2021); pragmatists argue that it is rationally permissible to form a belief directly based on practical considerations (McCormick 2015). By contrast, with the help of the Cartesian Causal Account, we might argue that non-evidential factors can influence a subject's belief indirectly by contributing to the formation of the subject's seeming experience that compels belief (compare, Section 4).

Fourth, based on the work in Cartesian clarity, this paper assumes that it is possible for the causal force of a seeming experience to increase to a point where the subject is compelled to assent, even in the face of counterevidence. The explanatory power of the Cartesian Causal Account suggests that a more comprehensive investigation into the dynamics of the interaction between the causal force and justificatory force of seeming experiences and the causal force and justificatory force of evidence across a wide spectrum of diverse doxastic phenomena may further advance our understanding of the nature of belief formation beyond epistemic akrasia.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Johannes Roessler, Naomi Eilan, Martin Davies, Thomas Crowther, Stephen Butterfill, Guy Longworth, Christoph Hoerl, Quassim Cassam, Matthew Parrott, Ian Lyne, Alexander Bird, two anonymous reviewers, and the editor, for constructive feedback and support. This paper expands on the research first introduced in my doctoral thesis. Over this summer, it was presented on various occasions at the University of Oxford, the University of London, and the University of Cambridge. I would like to thank the audience, particularly, Ursula Coope, Veronique Munoz-Darde, Roman Frigg, Alex Grzankowski, Clare Chambers, Neil Dewar, and Rowan Williams, for the helpful discussion.

Funding Information

None.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Chenwei Nie https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6862-8879

References

Adler, J E (2002) 'Akratic Believing?', *Philosophical Studies* **110**: 1–27. doi:10.1023/a:1019823330245.

Boghossian, P (2014) 'What Is Inference?', *Philosophical Studies* **169**: 1–18. doi:10.1007/s11098-012-9903-x.

Borgoni, C and Y Luthra (2017) 'Epistemic Akrasia and the Fallibility of Critical Reasoning', *Philosophical Studies* **174**: 877–86. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0711-6.

Brar, P S, L Sass, and M A Kalarchian (2021) 'Advancing Research on Delusions: Fostering Dialogue between Cognitive and Phenomenological Researchers', *Schizophrenia Research* **233**: 62–63. doi:10.1016/j.schres.2021.06.023.

Broome, J (2014) 'Comments on Boghossian', *Philosophical Studies* **169**: 19–25. doi:10.1007/s11098-012-9894-7.

Cassam, Q (2007) *The Possibility of Knowledge*. Oxford University Press.

Cassam, Q (2019) *Conspiracy Theories*. Polity Press.

Chasid, A and A Weksler (2020) 'Belief-like Imaginings and Perceptual (Non-)Assertoricity', *Philosophical Psychology* **33**: 731–51. doi:10.1080/09515089.2020.1751104.

Chislenko, E (2021) 'How Can Belief Be Akratic?', *Synthese* **199**: 13925–48. doi:10.1007/s11229-021-03404-0.

Christensen, D (2020) 'The Inelimninability of Epistemic Rationality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. doi:10.1111/phpr.12712.

Chudnoff, E (2014) 'The Rational Roles of Intuition', in Anthony Booth and Darrell Rowbottom, eds., *Intuitions*: 9–35. Oxford University Press.

Descartes, R (1984) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 2*, John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, trans. Cambridge University Press.

Feyaerts, J, W Kusters, Z V Duppen, S Vanheule, I Myin-Germeys, and L Sass (2021) 'Uncovering the Realities of Delusional Experience in Schizophrenia: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study in Belgium', *Lancet Psychiatry* **8**: 784–96. doi:10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00196-6.

Flores, C (2021) 'Delusional Evidence-Responsiveness', *Synthese* **199**: 6299–6330. doi:10.1007/s11229-021-03070-2.

Freedman, K L (2017) 'Akratic Believing, Psychological Trauma, and Somatic Representations', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* **24**: 337–46. doi:10.1353/ppp.2017.0049.

Fuqua, J, J Greco, and T McNabb (2023) *The Cambridge Handbook of Religious Epistemology*. Cambridge University Press.

Greco, D (2014) 'A Puzzle about Epistemic Akrasia', *Philosophical Studies* **167**: 201–19. doi:10.1007/s11098-012-0085-3.

Hawthorne, J, Y Isaacs, and M Lasonen-Aarnio (2021) 'The Rationality of Epistemic Akrasia', *Philosophical Perspectives* **35**: 206–28. doi:10.1111/phpe.12144.

Heil, J (1984) 'Doxastic Incontinence', *Mind* **XCIII**: 56–70. doi:10.1093/mind/XCIII.369.56.

Hlobil, U (2014) 'Against Boghossian, Wright and Broome on Inference', *Philosophical Studies* **167**: 419–29. doi:10.1007/s11098-013-0104-z.

Hookway, C (2001) 'Epistemic Akrasia and Epistemic Virtue', in A. Fairweather and L. Zagzebski, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility*: 178–99. Oxford University Press.

Huemer, M (2005) *Ethical Intuitionism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Huemer, M (2006) 'Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition', *American Philosophical Quarterly* **43**: 147–58.

Kearl, T (2019) 'Epistemic Akrasia and Higher-Order Beliefs', *Philosophical Studies* **177**: 2501–15. doi:10.1007/s11098-019-01323-y.

Koksvik, O (2011) *Intuition*. Ph.D. Thesis, The Australian National University.

Marcus, E (2020) 'Inference as Consciousness of Necessity', *Analytic Philosophy* **61**: 304–22. doi:10.1111/phib.12153.

McCormick, M S (2015) Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief. Routledge.

McHugh, C and J Way (2016) 'Against the Taking Condition', *Philosophical Issues* **26**: 314–31. doi:10.1111/phis.12074.

Mele, A R (2001) *Self-Deception Unmasked*. Princeton University Press.

Moretti, L (2020) Seemings and Epistemic Justification: How Appearances Justify Beliefs. Springer.

Neta, R (2019) ‘The Basing Relation’, *Philosophical Review* **128**: 179–217. doi:10.1215/00318108-7374945.

Nie, C (2023) ‘Revisiting Maher’s One-Factor Theory of Delusion’, *Neuroethics* **16**. doi:10.1007/s12152-023-09521-6.

Owens, D (2002) ‘Epistemic Akrasia’, *Monist* **85**: 381–97. doi:10.5840/monist200285316.

Patterson, S (2008) ‘Clear and Distinct Perception’, in Janet Broughton and John Carriero, eds., *A Companion to Descartes*: 216–34. Blackwell.

Paul, E S (2020) ‘Cartesian Clarity’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* **20**: 1–28.

Pryor, J (2000) ‘The Skeptic and the Dogmatist’, *Noûs* **34**: 517–49. doi:10.1111/0029-4624.00277.

Raz, J (2009) ‘Reasons: Practical and Adaptive’, in David Sobel and Steven Wall, eds., *Reasons for Action*: 37–57. Cambridge University Press.

Rinard, S (2019) ‘Equal Treatment for Belief’, *Philosophical Studies* **176**: 1923–50. doi:10.1007/s11098-018-1104-9.

Scanlon, T (1998) *What We Owe to Each Other*. Harvard University Press.

Setiya, K (2013) ‘Epistemic Agency: Some Doubts’, *Philosophical Issues* **23**: 179–98. doi:10.1111/phis.12009.

Silins, N (2021) ‘Perceptual Experience and Perceptual Justification’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/perception-justification/.

Smithies, D (2019) ‘Epistemic Akrasia’, in *The Epistemic Role of Consciousness*: 284–311. Oxford University Press.

Tanney, J (2017) ‘Trauma and Belief’, *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* **24**: 351–53. doi:10.1353/ppp.2017.0051.

Tenenbaum, S (1999) ‘The Judgment of a Weak Will’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **59**: 875–911. doi:10.2307/2653561.

Titus, L M and J A Carter (2023) ‘What the Tortoise Should Do: A Knowledge-first Virtue Approach to the Basing Relation’, *Noûs*. doi:10.1111/nous.12460.

Tucker, C (2012) ‘Movin’ on up: Higher-Level Requirements and Inferential Justification’, *Philosophical Studies* **157**: 323–40.

Valaris, M (2020) ‘Reasoning, Defeasibility, and the Taking Condition’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* **20**: 1–16.

Vyse, S (2019) *Superstition: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.