

## **Controlling our Reasons**

Philosophical discussion on control has largely centred around control over our actions and beliefs. Yet this overlooks the question of whether we also have control over the *reasons* for which we act and believe. To date, the overriding assumption appears to be that we do not, and with seemingly good reason. We cannot choose to act for a reason and acting-for-a-reason is not itself something we do. While some have challenged this in the case of reasons for action, these claims seem especially untenable regarding believing for a reason. And extending the scope of control in this way also faces the threat of regress. In the face of this orthodoxy, the present paper argues that we do in fact have control over both believing and acting for a particular reason. It also starts to develop an account of the way in which this would be possible. Given the broad importance of understanding control and agency, this paper bears on a number of topics in epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and ethics.

### **1 Introduction**

We exercise control in various ways. Most obviously, we do so by acting on the world. Many philosophers have also plausibly argued that we can exercise control over our beliefs. But what about the reasons for which we act and believe? Suppose Sally goes to the shop for the reason that she has run out of romesco sauce. Does she just exercise control over visiting the shop, or also in visiting the shop for this particular reason? Here the literature largely remains silent but the widespread assumption seems to be that we do not exercise control over the particular reasons for which we act and believe, or at most only our reasons for action. After all, we arguably cannot choose to act for one reason over another and while it is debatable whether acting-for-a-reason is itself an action, believing-for-a-reason certainly isn't. I.e., we lack the normal voluntary control we have over our actions. In this paper, I reject the standard view, and argue that we can exercise control over believing and acting *for a reason*. To do so, I argue that we are accountable for this broader fact (and plausibly we can only be accountable for matters under our control). The main body of the paper concerns the way in which this control might be possible. This paper's conclusion has the potential to engender multiple lines of research including the structure of agency more broadly and the role of motivation in ethical evaluation. It also provides a new framework for analysing absences of agency and control, such as akrasia and ideological distortion.

To give a quick statement of my view, I take all of the following to illustrate exercises of control (and I will suggest why they count as such in §3).

**ACTION:** Beth starts volunteering because her CV is too short.

**BELIEF:** Tom comes to believe that Smith is a good politician. But he realises that Smith is highly incompetent and changes his mind to instead believe that Smith is an awful politician.

**REASONS FOR ACTION:** Julia volunteers for a charity. She started in order to improve her CV following advice at a job fair. Eventually, Julia considers the issue further. She realises that personal gain is a bad kind of reason for volunteering, but that there are of course many unequivocally good reasons for doing so. She continues to volunteer, but now does so for the reason that it helps others.

**REASONS FOR BELIEF:** Julia believes that Smith is an awful politician. She didn't originally form the belief for a reason – she 'absorbed' the view from those around her. But Julia now reflects on Smith and facts such as his general incompetence. She concludes that this incompetence is a good reason for believing that Smith is an awful politician. She continues to have the belief, but comes to hold it on the basis of this reason.

And to gesture to a line of thought that will be important, note that, just as we can deliberate concerning our beliefs and actions themselves, we can also deliberate about the reasons for which we believe and act.

This paper proceeds as follows. In §2, I offer an argument for the claim that we can exercise control over believing and acting for a particular reason, which I call the Accountability Argument. I then start to further develop and defend the view in response to two objections. §3 forms the main meat of the paper. I say how it might be possible that subjects have this control even though they cannot choose the reasons for which they believe and act, and acting-for-a-reason and believing-for-a-reason are not things that subjects do. (Or, at least, these claims would be especially implausible if applied to the epistemic domain.) §4 addresses the possibility of regress.

In a sense, this paper offers a parity thesis: insofar as the scope of agency and control extends to one's beliefs, it is plausible to think that it further extends to the

reasons for which we believe and act. Indeed, this paper moves between talk of agency and control. But in line with this parity, I would also be sufficiently happy for one to extend their preferred account of whatever grounds responsibility for belief. Perhaps one might think that we have a form of agency over our beliefs but not control, or that something short of either explains our apparent epistemic responsibility. In such cases, I would encourage the reader to accept a similar thesis about the reasons for which we believe and act.

## **2 Why think that we can control our reasons? The argument from accountability**

I will shortly argue that we have a form of control over believing and acting for a particular reason, but first let me start with some preliminaries.

By ‘reasons’ in this context, I specifically mean the subject’s motivating reasons (what we might also call their operative reasons), i.e., the reasons for which they hold a belief or perform an action. These differ from normative reasons - what are in fact good reasons. And they are also distinct from purely causal explanatory reasons such as biases or physical processes - note the way in which rain constitutes ‘a reason’ why Sally gets wet.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we can also hold other attitudes for reasons. Sally might desire romesco for the reason that it contains almonds, or envy Julia for the reason that Julia has several jars of the delicious sauce. I suspect my thesis extends to ‘reasons for which’ in general, but will focus on the cases of belief and action.

Much debate surrounds the nature of believing and acting for reasons. For the purposes of simplicity and generality, I will for the most part assume the following hybrid position with the following two necessary conditions: believing/acting for the reason that  $p$  requires being disposed to believe that  $p$  is a good reason (the ‘doxastic condition’) and for one’s belief that  $p$  to play a causal role in initiating and sustaining the belief/action (the ‘causal condition’).<sup>2</sup> There are related positions, and potentially other

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding the distinction between kinds of reasons (although not always using the same terminology), see e.g.: Baier (1965, ch. 6), Sylvan (2016a, 2016b), and Alvarez (2017).

<sup>2</sup> For hybrid positions of this sort in the epistemic domain, see e.g., Ye (2019), Audi (1993), and Longino (1978). Another way of maintaining the advantages of both conditions would be a ‘treating’ or ‘competence’ based account; see Sylvan, (2016, §3.3), Lord and Sylvan (2019), and regarding reasons for action, Mantel (2018).

necessary requirements, but it will be useful to have something like this in mind.<sup>3</sup> E.g., one might instead hold the first condition to be sufficient (or something similar, perhaps that one in fact believes that  $p$  is a good reason, or that one takes  $p$  to be a good reason),<sup>4</sup> or just the second condition.<sup>5</sup> It will be also useful for later on to emphasise another condition stemming from the first but which one can defend independently: believing/acting for a reason requires that, at the very least, one does *not* believe that  $p$  is *not* a normative reason for believing/acting.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, even accepting this condition will allow us to do important work, even if the reader rejects the doxastic condition.

To motivate my central claim that we have control over the reasons for which we believe and act, I will rework an argument form used to defend the claim that we have control over our beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Let's call it the 'Accountability Argument'. It will first involve arguing that we are responsible for believing and acting *for a particular reason*, which is itself a significant conclusion. Leite raises a similar point when arguing that the acts of declaring our reasons and deliberating must be able to make it the case that we believe for a given reason, and ultimately, that being justified in believing that  $p$  requires the ability to justify one's beliefs (2004, pp. 229-331). But I want to remain as neutral as possible at this stage about what basing amounts to and how this control might operate.<sup>8</sup>

The Accountability Argument:

P1 Subjects are accountable for believing and acting for a particular reason.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., we will need to ensure that the causal relation is non-deviant. I think this is best achieved by a self-awareness condition: believing for a reason also requires being in a position to know that you are believing for a reason. On this sort of requirement, see also Neta (2019).

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Leite (2008, 2004) and Setiya (2013) argue that this is both necessary and sufficient for believing for a reason. Similarly in the case of action see literature on the guise of good, e.g., Anscombe (2000), Williams (1979), Velleman (1992), Raz (1997), and Tenenbaum (2013).

<sup>5</sup> Causal accounts of epistemic basing include Bondy (2016), McCain (2012), Moser (1985), and Turri (2011). See Karcz (2015) for helpful discussion. Relatedly, for a counterfactual account of basing, see Swain (1985, 1981), and a dispositional account, Evans (2013). A key causalist account of reasons for action is that of Davidson (1963).

<sup>6</sup> This resembles what McHugh and Way call the 'negative condition' on inference: '[i]nferring  $q$  from  $p$  entails not taking  $p$  not to support  $q$ ' (2016, p. 316).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. McHugh (2013), McCormick (2018, ch.6; 2015, p. 630). See also Hieronymi (2006) on responsibility and (non-voluntary) control over belief.

<sup>8</sup> Leite writes that 'to enable the relevant sorts of epistemic evaluation - and the normative consequences thereof - basing relations must be attributable to the person and not merely to some process which takes place "in" him or her'. As such '[s]tates of a sort which are never directly determined by a person's conscious deliberation, the commitments incurred through her conscious deliberation, or her best explicit evaluation of reasons' as his opponents would say about the basing relation 'are not attributable to her in the relevant sense' (Leite, 2004, pp. 230-1). I also argue in the following that we can appeal to accountability in this context, not simply attributability.

P2 Subjects are only accountable for states of affairs that they can control.

C Subjects have control over believing and acting for a particular reason.

*Premise 1*

I contend that subjects aren't just accountable for their beliefs and actions, but also the reasons for which they believe and act.

This can be made clear in cases where subjects do the right thing or hold the right belief but for the wrong reasons. Intuitively, they are criticisable and ought not act/believe for those reasons – the subjects are accountable for them. Consider how we hold others accountable with the following sorts of admonishments:

'You ought not volunteer because it would make you look good but in order to help others. You're being selfish'

'Don't believe that *p* just because I say so (even though you should believe that *p*)'

[We have just told Tom about Smith's incompetence] Tom: I now agree with you. Smith *is* a bad politician - he has an awful dress sense. Us: No! Don't believe that Smith is a bad politician because of his poor taste in clothes - he's a bad politician because he's incompetent!

When we criticise the self-interested volunteer or Tom, we don't criticise them for volunteering or believing that *Smith is a bad politician*. These are the right things to do and to believe, and Tom and the volunteer shouldn't stop. They should continue. But importantly, we think they should do so for different reasons and hold them responsible for this.<sup>9</sup>

And it isn't just that we happen to hold others accountable for the way in which they are motivated; doing so is fair and, accordingly, it seems that they are in fact accountable. I don't appear to speak infelicitously when I tell my friend that she ought to act from the goodness of her heart. In these cases, it's not that our interlocutor turns

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<sup>9</sup> In the epistemic context, Leite writes that '[b]asing relations thus open the person to epistemic evaluation, and to further normative consequences, on account of the adequacy of the belief's grounds, and they engender an obligation to give up the belief or seek better reasons if its grounds prove inadequate' (2014, p. 227). It is important to emphasise this latter obligation, and how this phenomenon also carries over to the practical domain.

around and says ‘but I can’t control *why* I act. I’m doing the right thing - volunteering - so you should leave me alone’. It would also be uncharitable to a great many speakers to call this kind of speech erroneous. Of course, wide-spread error remains possible but we should at least err on the side of caution in this regard.

Further, subjects seem to be responsible in the sense that they are *accountable* for the reasons for which they believe and act, not just that their reasons are attributable to them.<sup>10</sup> Accountability provides the grounds for obligations and demands. Contrast this with the sense in which we can also praise others for matters that are merely attributable to them, such as being tall. Even if we think that it is good to be tall, we cannot hold others accountable for their height. We wouldn’t say that one *ought* to be tall. Yet we tell others that they *ought not* act for certain reasons and instruct them not to (‘don’t believe *p* for that reason!’). Relatedly, subjects can sensibly provide excuses if they fall short concerning something they are accountable for but not merely attributable. I don’t need to excuse my height (‘erm, I just happen to be short because of genetics’). Yet I might escape admonishment for, say, making a mess in the kitchen by explaining mitigating circumstances (‘I was about to clean up when my friend had an emergency’). Similarly, we can imagine those being criticised for their reasons sensibly giving excuses (‘I’m just focussing on myself because I’m in a bad place right now’, ‘I know I over-rely on testimony - I had authoritarian schooling’).<sup>11</sup>

### *Premise 2*

Subjects are only accountable for states of affairs that they have control over. To motivate this, compare the following cases:

Tom kicks me

Julia’s leg spasms into me

Sally has a headache

Tom seems to be accountable and blameworthy for his violence, and to have failed to meet an obligation (or at least, provided that he knows my whereabouts, he hasn’t been coerced etc.). We might say that Tom was wrong to kick me, that he shouldn’t kick me, and ought not do so. Yet it is surely false to say that Julia is wrong for spasming, or that

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<sup>10</sup> On this distinction, see e.g., McHugh (2013), Shoemaker (2015) and Watson (2004).

<sup>11</sup> In this way, our reasons bear the hallmarks of responsibility for belief as discussed in McHugh (2013, pp. 132-3).

Sally ought not have a headache even though Sally's incapacitation interferes with her plans and inconveniences others. Julia and Sally do not seem blameworthy or rightly subject to obligations in these regards. These cases differ, it seems, in that Tom has control over kicking me but we lack control over our spasms and pains. Julia and Sally aren't at fault. Or rather, perhaps it is Sally's fault for having a headache, but only in so far as she did something else which brought it about, such as extensive drinking.

It's worth noting that belief resembles action in this regard: ultimately I will suggest that our control over our reasons more closely resembles doxastic control than our voluntary control over our actions. For example:

Sally believes that the meeting will start at noon despite being told several times that it starts at 11am.

We would criticise Sally and issue recommendations: you're silly to believe this; you ought not believe this; you ought to change your mind. And indeed, these admonishments seem apt (or at least, are very commonplace). As such, belief too seems to be something we have control over, unlike our pains.

Two clarifications will further emphasise P2's plausibility. Recall that by responsibility, I have in mind responsibility in the sense of accountability, not mere attributability; this in particular seems to require the possibility for control. Also, I can allow that subjects sometimes seem responsible despite lacking control, or even *because* they lack it. E.g., perhaps Julia cannot attend an important meeting because she is hungover. In this instance we would still criticise her, but for making it such that she isn't able to come to the meeting. Our criticism only makes sense insofar as attending the meeting is the kind of thing which Julia normally *can* exercise control over.

P1 and P2 together lead to my conclusion: that subjects have control over believing and acting *for a particular reason*. As such, just as we can arguably extend the scope of control beyond action to also encompass belief, similarly we should extend it further still to also encompass the particular reasons for which we act and believe. Indeed, this argument concludes that subjects have control over believing and acting for a particular reason *simpliciter*. It is not just that subjects can control which reason they act on insofar as they might decide between two considerations favouring two distinct actions. For example, Clarke (1992) and Nozick (1981, ch.4, §1) seem to offer accounts

that allow for agency over our reasons, but have these kinds of cases in mind.<sup>12</sup> And yet as I have shown, it especially seems that subjects are responsible for, and have agency over, their reasons even when the alternative is to perform the same action for a different reason. And the Accountability Argument also suggests that we have control over both the reasons for which we act *and* believe; as I will discuss, some would accept this claim only in the practical domain.

The following objection concerning P1 should now hold more force than if I considered it earlier. Perhaps subjects' motivating reasons are in fact evaluable, but not in a way that requires the capacity for control. In particular, writers in the ethics literature distinguish between moral worth and obligation. Many take subjects' reasons to determine an action's moral worth without it being that subjects have obligations concerning their reasons themselves. E.g., Audi writes that '[i]t is true, as Kant insisted, that the moral worth of an action (token) depends on why the agent performs it. Motivation can be crucial in deciding how to credit the agent for an action and, in that way, important for appraising character. But what we are obligated to do is, in the first instance, to perform certain acts' (2021, p. 65).<sup>13</sup> Suppose Sally volunteers for the sake of her CV. Here one might say that Sally does the right thing, and does what she ought, but her poor motives prevent her from being praiseworthy. We praise and criticise the reasons for which individuals act in this sense, but they are not accountable for their motivating reasons or subject to obligations concerning them. And perhaps, we might think, this sort of evaluability does not require control. But the objection fails to capture everyday discourse; as emphasised before, we do normally speak as if we ought to do the right thing for the right reasons. We can sensibly instruct a self-interested friend: 'don't volunteer to improve your CV, you ought to do it from the goodness of your heart!'. I suspect that claims to the contrary, and the thought that we lack obligations to act *for the right reasons*, stem from concerns that obligations require that one be able to fulfil them (i.e. P2), and yet it's not clear how we *could* have control over believing and

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<sup>12</sup> E.g.:

The sort of self-determination that constitutes free will may be seen as a power to determine, on the basis of reflective, practical reasoning, which of one's reasons one will act on. Our reasons often enough pull in different directions. Given this fact, if an agent can determine which of her reasons she will act on, it may generally be the case when she acts that there are several alternative courses of action each of which she is capable of pursuing (Clarke 1992, p. 65).

And in a more sceptical context, see also Scanlon (2008, p. 60).

<sup>13</sup> See also Scanlon (2008 p. 56-62), and Ross (2002, p. 3-7).



acting for one reason over another (e.g., Ross, 2002, p. 5-6). The following section addresses this concern as a way to make good on these *prima facie* intuitions.

### **3 Objection: Motivating reasons simply aren't the kind of thing we could control**

I suspect that the main reason for doubting my claim in this paper is that our reasons for belief and action clearly differ from our actions themselves and so don't seem to be the sort of thing we *could* control. In short, we lack the same sort of voluntary control we have over our actions over the reasons for which we believe and act. These doubts parallel those we might have regarding doxastic agency (see McCormick's overview in 2018, p. 628-30). And while there are various points we could press, such moves only seem plausible in the context of reasons for action and not also reasons for belief.

First, we can't act for one reason over another at will, choose our motivating reasons, or intend to act/believe for one given reason. I can act at will, and can act for a great many reasons. If you offer me twenty euros to bake a sourdough loaf I will gladly do so. But suppose you offer me twenty euros to bake bread for the reason that it would make you happy and not for my own personal enjoyment. I can't simply choose to bake for that reason, and sadly, can't collect the inducement. Relatedly, Audi observes that '[w]e do not have direct voluntary control of the reasons for which we act' (2021, p. 65). And Ross notes the way in which '[i]t is not the case that I can by choice produce a certain motive [...] in myself at a moment's notice, still less that I can at a moment's notice make it effective in stimulating me to act' (2002, p. 6).<sup>14</sup>

To an extent, the above claim encounters a clash of intuitions. While I find it implausible to say that we can 'choose' or 'select' the reason for which we  $\varphi$ , some have made this claim (Korsgaard, 2008, ch.7 drawing on Aristotle and Kant; Searle, 2001, pp. 65-6; Setiya, 2013, pp. 39-40; Sinhababu, 2013).<sup>15</sup> For example, contra the above, Setiya finds it intuitive that:

[W]e *choose* the reasons on which we act. There are many reasons for which I might decide to write a book [...] I am not passive in the face of this: even if I believe that books give their authors a kind of immortality, and even if I think

<sup>14</sup> See also Scanlon (2008, pp. 59-60).

<sup>15</sup> While not in the context of *reasons* for action, Herman also attributes to Kant the view that we can 'choose to act for an end' (1993, pp. 221).

that this is a reason - a good reason - to write a book, it may not be *my* reason for doing so. That is up to me (pp. 39-40).

But even if this is the case, it still doesn't suffice for my purposes. As we saw in the case of bread baking, any ability to choose to act for a given reason would be importantly limited in a way that would preclude full voluntary control (and indeed, puts pressure on the choice hypothesis to begin with).<sup>16</sup> And whatever we think about reasons for action, it is presumably uncontroversial that we cannot choose the reasons for which we believe. The potential appeal in the case of reasons for action seems in some way bound up with our ability to choose the actions themselves (for example, see the next paragraph). And it is unclear in what way attempts to cash out this control would extend beyond reasons for action. For example, Sinhababu writes that second order desires can 'block' certain first-order desires, thus leading other first-order desires to become operative (Sinhababu, 2013, pp. 687). And Setiya appeals to taking a consideration to be one's reason. There is something in this, and 'taking' will play an important role in my own account. Yet Setiya construes 'taking' as holding a 'desire-like belief', which involves at once seeing the consideration as your reason (which isn't to say that you believe that it is good) and also 'a decision to act on that reason, something by which I am led to do' (2007, p. 39). But we do not form beliefs on the basis of desires, or decide to form beliefs in any straightforward sense (or at least, I don't want to rely on this). So, even if one does insist that we can choose the reasons for which we act, as things stand, it does not help account for our seeming responsibility and control over our motivating reasons for belief and action alike.

Second, while subjects are generally able to control the things they do, it is debatable as to whether they do something in acting and believing *for reasons*. Audi makes this point in (2020, 2015). So the thought goes, I do something in buying romesco, and I can do this for the reason that it is delicious. But there is arguably no token act of buying-romesco-for-the-reason-that-it-is-delicious. As such, we might worry that, as a metaphysical point, motivating reasons simply aren't the kind of thing one could have voluntary control over. One could press this, and indeed, Korsgaard

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<sup>16</sup> Sinhababu highlights the difficulties we face in choosing our reasons, and thinks that his particular account of reason choosing accommodates this in a way that others don't (2013, pp. 688-9). But note that I cannot even choose to bake bread for the reason that it would make you happy when offered money, even though your happiness is a perfectly good reason and indeed I might already strongly desire to make you happy (though not enough to motivate my action - hence your bribery attempts).

thinks that we can choose to act-for-a-reason (2008, ch.7; see also Glover, 1938). But as with before, even if this move succeeds, it would not help us account for our responsibility and control over reasons for belief. After all, believing-for-a-reason is surely not something we do.<sup>17</sup>

Also, it won't suffice for my purposes to say that we just have *indirect* control over our motivating reasons in virtue of voluntary control over our actions. When debating doxastic agency, few would deny that subjects can exert control in getting themselves to believe *p*, by, say, visiting a hypnotist or focusing on certain pieces of evidence. Hieronymi (2009a) terms this 'managerial' control - we 'manage' our beliefs in a similar manner to how we might get a plant to thrive by watering it. Similarly, it seems relatively uncontroversial to say that we can get ourselves to have certain motives indirectly, and can exert influence over them. Julia might get herself to have good motives for volunteering by deliberately reading the personal stories of those she's helping and making their needs salient.<sup>18</sup> But this kind of control wouldn't suffice to account for the starting intuition regarding accountability. When criticising someone for having acted for a particular reason, we don't just think that they ought to have 'managed' themselves better and that Julia should read more personal stories to indirectly get herself to act for the right reasons. After all, we would criticise the subject even if she has performed all the relevant 'managerial' actions but still doesn't act/believe for the right reasons.

How, then, could subjects have control over the reasons for which they believe and act, given that they lack voluntary control (direct or indirect) over them? That is, how can we make good on our everyday practices, where it certainly seems like we appropriately hold others accountable for their motivating reasons, and indeed, the reasons for which they act and believe alike?

### *Reply*

I agree with the above observations; as such, we shouldn't model our control over our motivating reasons on that of action.

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<sup>17</sup> Although see Moran's brief interpretation of Hieronymi (2006) in (2017, ch. 14, f.n. 62). Yet it seems implausible that belief would be individuated in this way. And at any rate, even if there is a sense in which believing is something we do, it is not in a straightforward way involving voluntary control.

<sup>18</sup> On this, see Glover (1938, p. 73), Scanlon (2008, p. 60-61), and Audi (2015).

Instead, we should turn to the literature on doxastic control. We may well think that subjects cannot choose to believe something, believe at will, or believe for pragmatic inducement.<sup>19</sup> And most philosophers agree that believing isn't something that we do.<sup>20</sup> But as we saw earlier, it nevertheless seems like individuals are accountable for their beliefs, subject to obligations concerning them, and accordingly that they have a form of control over them. We can draw on the rich literature exploring the ways in which we might be said to have control over our beliefs in spite of these differences with action.<sup>21</sup> I will focus on fleshing out one option, but will mention others at the end. Following the Accountability Argument, I claim that subjects have a form of *control* and *agency* over both their beliefs and motivating reasons. But recall that at the very least, I hope that readers will extend their preferred account of whatever grounds epistemic responsibility to also target our responsibility for our reasons.

I propose drawing on a reasons-responsiveness account of epistemic agency.<sup>22</sup> One might argue that the fundamental grounds of practical responsibility lies not the fact that we can act intentionally, or even that we could have done otherwise. Rather, it is our capacity for guidance control: we exercise control in  $\phi$ ing in so far as we act from reasons responsive mechanisms that we take ownership of (see Fischer and Ravizza, 1998). This resembles the way in which learner drivers nevertheless exercise control in driving even though the instructor will step in at any time to ensure the car remains on course (1998, ch. 2). For example, my buying romesco sauce is under my guidance control in resulting from a reasons responsive mechanism: I buy romesco for the reason that I have run out, but wouldn't buy any if I had plenty. If I keep buying and hoarding romesco regardless of need, my behaviour seems to manifest a compulsion and ceases to constitute an exercise of agency. Similarly, the thought goes, we have agency over our

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<sup>19</sup> Although see Ginet (2001), Leary (2017), McCormick (2018, 2015) Reisner (2014, 2009), and Rinard (2019). At any rate, I will assume this as it makes my case harder. But if one prefers, the reader could reframe the following to allow for pragmatism for belief; perhaps there might also be a related pragmatism concerning reasons.

<sup>20</sup> Although see Hieronymi (2009a, pp. 173-9), and Boyle (2011) who thinks that belief is nevertheless fundamentally active.

<sup>21</sup> Or rather, we might appeal to our control over attitudes in general, not just belief. See the literature on attitudinal and evaluative control broadly speaking (Hieronymi, 2009, 2006; McHugh, 2017, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Leite (2004) also denies that being subject to 'normative evaluation' concerning our reasons would have to be grounded in voluntary control, though he writes that our reasons can nevertheless be *attributable* to us; this doesn't go far enough. Here Leite briefly points to Scanlon (1998) and suggests that 'Scanlon argues, correctly in my view, that normative appraisal of the person does not require the person's voluntary control over the condition in question, but rather that the condition be responsive to the person's evaluations of reasons' (2004, n. 30). I will go onto agree with this rough statement, but see McHugh (2013)'s discussion of epistemic agency for criticism of Scanlon's answerability account.

beliefs because they too are formed and maintained by reasons responsive mechanisms (McCormick, 2015; McHugh, 2013, 2014, 2017). Suppose I believe that it will rain. All going well, I will cease to do so if the weather forecast says that it will in fact be sunny. Yet I might lack guidance control if I always believe that it will rain regardless of the evidence; here we might point to delusions and certain obsessive compulsive beliefs.

This provides a framework for the way in which we could have control over believing and acting for particular reasons. Namely: we do so because whether we believe/act for a given reason is itself sensitive to further reasons bearing on the quality of that reason. (The following section addresses the worry that this move risks regress.) First, note three examples that illustrate this form of responsiveness, and thus also motivate appealing to the reasons-responsiveness framework.

(1) Julia believes that it will rain because the News Network weather forecast says that it will. She then talks to her meteorologist friend Tom. Tom warns Julia that NN is completely unreliable, but he shows her the Weather Today forecast which also predicts rain and which he assures her *is* very reliable. She thereby realises that the NN forecast is a bad reason for holding the belief, but that the WT forecast is nevertheless a good reason. Julia continues to believe that it will rain, but now on the basis of the WT forecast.

(2) Julia volunteers in order to include it on her CV. She then learns from her supervisor that academic CVs shouldn't contain extra-curricular activities (suppose Julia wants to be a philosopher). But Julia also learns through her supervisor that the skills she develops through volunteering will impress her referees. Julia continues to volunteer, but now does so in order to develop transferable skills and improve her references.

(3) Julia volunteers in order to include it on her CV. Eventually, Julia considers the issue further, and reads ethics textbooks. On the basis of arguments contained within them, Julia realises that personal gain is a morally bad reason for volunteering, and that one should instead act out of altruistic motives. She indeed recognises the altruistic benefit to her volunteer work. Julia continues to volunteer, but now does so for the reason that it helps others.

I propose that in all of these cases, Julia responds to reasons to respond to particular (putative) reasons, such as Tom’s testimony about the unreliability of the forecast or the new information that she can’t include volunteer work in her CV. I’ll now say more about the way in which subjects respond to these further reasons, starting with the first two examples (the third case concerns responding to exclusively *second-order* reasons, which I will discuss later).

Suppose Julia does indeed respond to reasons for and against responding to a particular reason; in what way is this possible? In cases (1) and (2), she does so in virtue of forming relevant metabeliefs involved in epistemic basing and acting for reasons.<sup>23</sup> E.g., forming the belief that *p is a good reason* will be a way of coming to believe/act for the reason that *p*, and forming the belief that *p is not a good reason* will be a way of ceasing to believe/act for the reason that *p*. This involves responding to specifically undercutting defeat concerning her original motivation despite continuing to hold the same belief/perform the same action. Undercutting defeat consists in evidence that one’s reason is not in fact a normative reason – that the NN forecast is completely unreliable, for example, means that it isn’t in fact a good reason to believe that it will rain.<sup>24</sup>

We can flesh out (1) and (2) as follows. In (1), Julia believes that *it will rain* because the NN forecast says that it will. Julia then learns about NN’s unreliability (and therefore gains undercutting defeat), and comes to believe *that the NN forecast is not a good reason for the belief*. She forms this belief for the reason that Tom told her that the forecast is unreliable. But Julia also comes to believe that *the WT forecast is a good reason for the belief* on the basis of Tom’s testimony. She continues to believe that *it will rain*, but thereby on a different basis. (2) Julia volunteers for the sake of her CV. Upon learning new information, she comes to believe that *including it on her CV is not a good reason for volunteering* (because she cannot include it on her CV at all). And indeed she forms this belief for the reason that her supervisor told her so. But Julia also comes to believe that there is a good (instrumental) reason for volunteering: *it will help improve her references*. And she forms this belief on the basis of testimony from her supervisor.

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<sup>23</sup> I briefly introduce this possibility in (2022, §4.2.2) when formulating an agent’s awareness account of our self-knowledge of motivating reasons.

<sup>24</sup> See Pollock (1986).

In both these cases, certain facts - namely, testimony from trusted sources - function as reasons to believe and act for one reason over another.<sup>25</sup>

In what way is forming the relevant metabeliefs a way of coming to believe/act for a reason or ceasing to do so? Let me return to my working account of motivating reasons: a putative fact that  $p$  which you are disposed to believe is a good reason, and do not believe is not a good reason, and which causally sustains your belief/action. The picture on the table might say the following. Forming the belief that  $p$  is a good reason constitutively makes it the case that you have the disposition to believe that  $p$  is a good reason. It thereby makes it the case that you satisfy one of the necessary (perhaps even constitutive) requirements on  $p$  being your motivating reason. And, by forming the belief that  $p$  is a bad reason, you thereby cease to believe/act for the reason  $p$ . Even if a causal factor continues to sustain the belief/action, it no longer counts as your *reason*. And how does it make sense to talk about exercising guidance control over a causal relation? To give an analogy, imagine arranging dominos such that by causing the first to fall, you also cause it to cause the second to fall as well. In our case, the relevant mechanism would cause the putative fact  $p$  to have the appropriate causal influence. Forming the belief that a consideration is a good reason, for example, seems to be the sort of mental action which would normally cause the consideration to motivate the you. (Or in cases where you recognise many good reasons, believing that one is the strongest will normally cause it to motivate you.) This causal relation, though, would be of a special rational kind and not mere ballistics due to the role of believing that the consideration is a good reason. In viewing our control over our motivating reasons as a special kind of causal relation, my account parallels 'process' accounts of doxastic agency.

To make this picture more plausible, note that the mechanism which leads us to believe  $q$  for the reason that  $p$  will be the same kind of reasons responsive mechanism that forms and sustains our beliefs themselves: deliberation. The capacity to deliberate is even an important part of the mechanism that sustains perceptual beliefs, given that the subject must be at least disposed to believe that the perceptual seeming is a good

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<sup>25</sup> One might worry about cases where there are several equally good and well-supported reasons for acting/believing (either as a matter of fact or in the subjects' own lights). But I could accept that subjects lack control over the reason they act on when the reasons are equally weighty while still maintaining that they nevertheless have a significant form of control in other cases. After all, note how many people would say that we have agency over our beliefs even though we cannot choose between believing  $p$  and not- $p$  when the evidence for both is equally strong.

reason in order to base her belief on it.<sup>26</sup> Deliberation is also fundamental for our control over our actions, given the role it plays in intention-formation (McHugh, 2017). This reasons responsive mechanism is also responsive to reasons bearing on the quality of one's reasons. As such, the capacity for deliberation furnishes one with guidance control over one's motivating reasons. But we cannot simply subsume this control into control over the belief or action itself. We need to accommodate cases where subjects sustain the same belief/action but come to do so for different reasons.

My discussion of example (3) will be more tentative. In this case, Julia responds to a consideration which is exclusively a *second-order* reason, and she recognises *exclusionary* defeat.<sup>27</sup> (This topic has been less explored in the literature, and so formulating a full account will require more dedicated work.) It is not that improving one's CV is not a normative reason for volunteering per-se, but it seems to be of an inappropriate kind of reason for volunteering. We have reason to *exclude* this kind of reason when considering the first-order reasons bearing on whether to volunteer. And importantly, Julia comes to volunteer for different reasons in light of this exclusionary defeat even though she continues volunteering. A version of my account of (1) and (2) may well also apply in this case: we respond to second-order reasons by forming beliefs concerning *kinds* of reasons. E.g., Julia comes to believe that *instrumental reasons are a bad kind of reason for volunteering* and also that *altruistic reasons are a good kind of reason for volunteering*. And Julia forms these beliefs on the basis of the arguments she encountered when reading. I suspect that there are close normative links between acting for reasons and taking the specific kind of reason to be the best kind of reason for the action in question. After all, it would be irrational in at least some way to continue to act for a reason of a certain kind while believing that it is of an inappropriate kind of reason. That said, we might ultimately deny that exclusionary defeat is distinct from, say, undercutting defeat. Perhaps we might instead understand (3) as a case in which Julia acquires evidence that improving one's CV is not a normative reason for

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<sup>26</sup> Perhaps McHugh (2017) has something like this in mind when talking about capacity form and revise even perceptual beliefs through reasoning. And understanding the relevant mechanisms in this broad way could help us respond to worries in Kruse (2017).

<sup>27</sup> For discussion, see Raz (1999, pp. 35-48 and 178-199), and critically, Whiting (2017). Raz would see (3) as a case in which Julia responds to a reason to respond to a reason. But I think he would instead count (1) and (2) as cases in which reasons such as the reliability of the forecast form part of Julia's complete first-order reason (1999, pp. 22-25). I agree that Julia doesn't respond to properly higher-order reasons in these cases. But I still think she can be said to respond to reasons to respond to reasons in an important sense, given the fact she forms the metabeliefs on their basis.



volunteering. But note that one cause to reject the distinctiveness of exclusionary defeat originates from doubts about how subjects could respond to reasons to respond to reasons (Whiting, 2017). Now we have a promising option: via meta-beliefs concerning whether the consideration is a normative reason, and whether it is the appropriate *kind* of normative reason for the action in question.

I can also note a potential upshot of this paper's broad project and my particular account. It will help us make sense of how, as McHugh and Way write, '[r]easoning is a paradigmatic way of coming to base one attitude on another' (2018, p. 184). I have already explored how certain forms of reasoning might do this, via forming metabeliefs about one's reasons. Of course, many instances of reasoning do not in fact involve consciously judging that '*p* is a good reason', especially when we are forming our beliefs for the first time. Sometimes I will just reason from *p* to *q* without further ado. Of course, how we explain the role this plays in basing will depend on our precise account of the basing relation itself. But one strategy might be to say that in using a consideration in reasoning, you make it the case that you are also disposed to believe that it is a good reason. And by judging *p* in this context, you thereby set yourself up in a distinctly rational way for this to play a causal role in forming and also sustaining the belief that *q*. That said, further discussions on the role of mental action in how we exercise control over our motivating reasons will have to wait.

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Insofar as we allow for doxastic control, the fact that acting-for-a-reason is not itself an action, and the fact that we can't choose to act and believe for a reason, does not preclude our motivating reasons from being within our control. I've explored one account which might help us: guidance control.

That said, we could also appeal to other accounts of doxastic control. The view we ultimately form will also depend on prior commitments, such as one's account of motivating reasons (certain combinations of views will feel more natural than others). There is also scope for both causal and non-causal accounts of this control. Let me briefly mention a couple more options. One is to draw on Hieronymi's account of evaluative control. Hieronymi (2014, 2009b, 2009a, 2006) grounds epistemic agency in the activity of believing *p*, where this amounts to the activity of settling the question of what to believe. You can exercise control over your belief insofar as believing *q* just is to

evaluate  $q$  as true in answer to the question of what to believe. So one option could be that we exercise evaluative control over our reasons for belief and action in settling the question of whether  $p$  is a good reason. This would fit naturally with a purely doxastic account of basing: believing that  $p$  is a good reason just *is* for  $p$  to be the reason for which you believe. Perhaps one might wonder if this sort of self-constitution counts as control, but it has an advantage in avoiding talk of ‘causing a causal relation’.<sup>28</sup> Or alternatively, following Sosa (2015), we might say that our epistemic agency consists in skilled performances such as forming beliefs, and that this *performance* normativity legitimates epistemic obligations and evaluations. Just as the skilled archer exercises agency in her skilful performance of shooting the target, similarly, we exercise epistemic skill in forming knowledgeable beliefs. But performances do not just consist in what we do but the way in which we do it, and we exercise control in both of those components. When shooting an arrow, the subject makes it the case that the arrow hits the target. But she also exercises control over using an *arrow* and moving her hand in *such-and-such a way* to do so. Perhaps believing and acting *for reasons* is also part of the performance in a way that our reasons too constitute exercises of agency.

Also, perhaps one might want to extend the extant account closest to mine - found in Leite’s (2004) discussion concerning believing for a reason - to also encompass the practical domain. As part of arguing that epistemic justification requires the capacity to justify one’s beliefs, Leite argues that subjects can ‘directly establish’ the basing relation through the acts of deliberation and justifying (2004, §2-3) and specifically by ‘making certain endorsements and taking on certain commitments’ (p. 237). On this account, believing for a reason consists in endorsing that reason and committing to revise the belief in light of it, where these both play a role in explaining the belief (2004, p. 237). I take it as a virtue of my own account, though, that I can be more open about what basing precisely amounts to. I need not rely on this particular commitment-based account, for example, and am eager to allow that basing might be a (distinctive) form of causal relation. And I have also suggested that even just accepting the more minimal condition that believing for a reason requires *not* believing that the consideration is not a normative reason enables us to do important relevant work. There is much scope here for further research.

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<sup>28</sup> Thank-you to Matthew Chrisman for pressing this option.

#### **4 Objection: Regress**

The risk of regress provides the other main cause to doubt that we have control over our reasons. For example, Ross worries about the risk of regress if one has the obligation to act *out of duty* (2002: 6). And Galen Strawson worries that true responsibility in acting for reasons would require subjects to be ‘responsible for how one is, mentally speaking - at least in certain respects’. This requires the subject to have brought about the way in which they are mentally speaking, and that they did so in a way they are responsible for, and so on (1994, p. 6-7. See also 2010, p. ch. 2).<sup>29</sup>

My guidance control account seems especially liable to this objection. The thought is that subjects have guidance control over their actions and beliefs in virtue of the way in which they can act and believe on the basis of reasons. I have also suggested that subjects have control over believing and acting for a particular reason, and that this in itself is also responsive to reasons. But suppose, then, that it is possible to believe/act for a given reason *for a reason*. Presumably we also have control over this further motivating reason as well, thus leading to a regress. For example, we might end up with the following chain:

Julia believes that *it will rain* because the Weather Today forecast says that it will. She can exercise control over believing for that reason in part because she is responsive to further reasons bearing on whether the forecast is a good reason for believing that *it will rain*. She can respond to these reasons by forming the belief that *the WT forecast is a good reason for believing that it will rain* for the reason that, say, Tom tells her that WT is reliable. But presumably she would also be accountable for, and have control over, her reason for responding to that reason. We might hold Julia accountable for believing that *Tom’s testimony is a good reason for believing that it will rain* for the reason that she does. After all, suppose we gave her evidence that Tom is in fact is a poor meteorologist. We would therefore hold Julia accountable in a way which would require her to have control over her reasons for responding to reasons, i.e., we would expect her to respond to a reason to respond to a reason. And presumably also Julia must be

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<sup>29</sup> See also Alvarez and Hyman’s discussion of the regress objection to agent causation in Alvarez and Hyman (1998, pp. 222-3). Potential upshots to this paper, then, include the possibility for novel responses to skepticism about moral responsibility and agential causation.

able to respond to reasons to respond to reasons to respond to reasons and so on ad infinitum.

This looks problematic because: a) the regress might be potentially infinite such that control, agency, and responsibility themselves would lack any bedrock; b) the chain seems to become increasingly complicated in a way that would be hard for subjects to follow.

### *Reply*

I have many options here. First, this worry only seems to get off the ground for certain accounts. It is not clear, for example, that we would face the same worry if we ground our reasons-control in belief-formation and acting for reasons as a performance.

But let me take some time to show how even an account where this objection seemingly has bite nevertheless has many lines of response. What might a reasons responsiveness account say?

1) My claim is that we *can* exercise control and agency over our motivating reasons, not that we always do. We are responsible for believing and acting for a reason insofar as we can come to believe/act for a different reason if appropriate (as well as revise the belief itself or change the way in which we're acting in certain cases). We don't often find ourselves in Julia's increasingly complicated epistemic situation. This is like the way in which we are responsible for beliefs that we haven't deliberated over - the point is that we *could* do so, and will revise our beliefs in light of new reasons. Furthermore, there will likely be regress-stoppers in many cases, such as fundamental principles about what counts as a normative reason.

2) Perhaps, though, my opponent might reply that appealing to the capacity for this sort of complicated reasoning is over-demanding. But my picture is more psychologically plausible than it may seem: subjects can use demonstratives when thinking about their beliefs. Julia wouldn't need to form the belief that *Tom's testimony is a good reason for believing that [the WT forecast is a good reason for believing that it will rain]*. Rather, she could just believe that *Tom's testimony is a good reason for holding that belief*. Indeed, think about how we can answer a small child constantly asking 'why?' and asking us to further explain each explanation. We may become frustrated but not confused, and we can continue answering them so long as our patience allows.

3) We might particularly worry that responsibility on this picture loses its bedrock. Responding to reasons is what is supposed to make it the case that we are responsible for our beliefs and actions in the first place (see Sartorio, 2019). I.e., it is not that agents ‘are responsible for *the fact that their own reasons and deliberation brought about their decision*’, or indeed, their belief or action. Rather, it is instead ‘that the agent is responsible for his decision *because* his own reasons and deliberation brought about his decision’ (Sartorio, 2019, p. 102).<sup>30</sup> But, I do still think that responsibility is grounded in reasons responsiveness and in the capacity for deliberation; it’s just that this capacity can turn inwards on itself.

4) I see the potentially iterative structure of control as an upshot and question for further research than a criticism per-se. Various accounts of epistemic basing and justification also encounter the possibility of regress.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps rational control also has the potential for this iterative structure.<sup>32</sup> Philosophers in these debates can and should work together on these issues. But the problem is not insurmountable, for reasons suggested above.

### **Conclusion and further topics**

This paper argued that subjects can exercise direct agency and control over believing and acting *for a particular reason*. We should think this because, so I have argued, subjects are not just responsible for their beliefs and actions, but also *why* they believe and act as they do. This is most apparent in cases where the subject believes/does the right thing but for the wrong reasons. The Accountability Argument is a simple one, and the remainder of the paper motivated taking it at face value. While surely we lack the same control over our motivating reasons that we can exercise regarding our actions, this isn’t to preclude that we have another form of control over them. Namely, our agency, responsibility, and obligations concerning the reasons for which we believe and

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<sup>30</sup> Sartorio makes this observation when arguing against certain ‘flicker of freedom’ analyses of Frankfurt cases; as such, observations in this paper could also help defendants of this view. Thanks also to Daniel Whiting and David Heering for pressing this distinction.

<sup>31</sup> On replies to this criticism of doxastic accounts of basing see, for example, Setiya (2013, pp. 187-8) and Leite (2008, pp. 426-7)

<sup>32</sup> Reasons responsiveness accounts would also face another regress apart from anything I have said in this paper. Plausibly, when we respond to the reason *p*, we believe that *p*. Why do we believe that *p*? Presumably on the basis of reason *q*, which we believe. Why do we believe *q*? And so on.

act will more closely resemble those regarding belief than action. Indeed, the paper as a whole can be read as a parity argument: if we have control over our beliefs, then we should also be open to thinking that we have control over believing and acting *for a particular reason*. Or at the very least, we should think that whatever grounds responsibility for belief also extends to ground a related responsibility concerning our motivating reasons.

In fact, even if one remains wholly unconvinced, this paper still has important upshots. The reader might instead take this paper as a *reductio ad absurdum* for other positions, and one may well be pushed to abandon certain views that potentially engender my conclusion. For example, rejecting my conclusion will make it harder to also defend doxastic control. The Accountability Argument closely resembles the key argument for thinking that we have direct control over beliefs. And the features that might make one doubt that we have control over our reasons - we don't choose them, and they are not actions - also apply to belief. Also, my paper's thesis creates large questions for reasons responsiveness accounts of agency in particular. I take examples in this paper to illustrate that believing and acting for a particular reason at least *can* be reasons responsive (recall the cases in which we sustain the same belief but for different reasons, and seemingly in light of further reasons). It's not clear how a reasons responsiveness account can deny that this also amounts to exercising guidance control; at the risk of accepting that we have agency over our motivating reasons, one might therefore might deny a reasons responsiveness account of agency.

Suppose, though, that I have succeeded in persuading the reader that we at least can sometimes exercise control over believing and acting for a particular reason. What next? First, this paper has only introduced some tentative first steps and work remains to formulate the best account of the way in which this is the case. Further, this bears on a great number of topics. For example, ethicists often take our motives to fall under the domain of moral worth but not that of obligation. I have suggested how we might make good on the prima facie intuition that we ought to do the right thing *for the right reasons*, but that our obligations concerning our motivating reasons are closer to epistemic obligations than practical obligations. So one project concerns exploring the interplay between these different kinds of obligation. Similar questions also apply in the case of epistemic value. And this framework will provide an exciting new way to analyse failures of agency and control. I suspect that subjects often lack control over their

beliefs and actions partly in virtue of lacking control over the reasons for which they believe and act. Relevant cases include that of akrasia, obsessive compulsive beliefs and actions, and ideological distortion. In short, this framework will provide a new lens to view discussions of rationality, responsibility, and control.<sup>33</sup>

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