

teorema

Vol. XXXVII/2, 2018, pp. 153-164

ISSN 0210-1602

[BIBLID 0210-1602 (2018) 37:2; pp. 153-164

Critical Review: Peels on Doxastic Responsibility and Responsible Belief

Sanford C. Goldberg

RESUMEN

Este artículo revisa y discute el nuevo libro de Rik Peels *Responsible Belief*. El libro representa una adición excelente a la literatura sobre responsabilidad doxástica y contribuye a los debates sobre el alcance de los materiales que son relevantes para la valoración de la responsabilidad doxástica, la naturaleza de las excusas doxásticas y las perspectivas para la ignorancia como excusa. Después de describir esas virtudes, se plantean dos objeciones que conciernen al núcleo de la explicación de la responsabilidad doxástica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *responsabilidad doxástica, justificación epistémica, censura, control.*

ABSTRACT

This article reviews and discusses Rik Peels' new book *Responsible Belief*. The book is an excellent addition to the literature on doxastic responsibility, making contributions regarding the scope of the materials that are relevant to assessments of doxastic responsibility, the nature of doxastic excuses, and the prospects for ignorance as an excuse. After describing these virtues, two objections are raised concerning the core account of doxastic responsibility.

KEYWORDS: *Doxastic Responsibility, Epistemic Justification, Blame, Control.*

I

There are at least two distinct topics one can address under the rubric of responsible belief. The first is epistemological. Suppose you think that justified belief and/or knowledge require(s) that the subject conform (in belief-formation and belief-sustainment) to the standards of epistemic responsibility; you might then want to know how to construe this responsibility condition. Here the question concerns *epistemic* responsibility: what does it take to form and sustain one's belief in an epistemically responsible fashion? The second topic is one that lies at the intersection of ethics, the philosophy of mind, and the metaphysics of agency. Here the question

concerns *doxastic* responsibility: what does it take to be responsible for one's belief? The parallel question concerning moral responsibility is salient: what does it take to be responsible for one's actions? However, when it comes to doxastic responsibility, the question is often raised in the context of a looming worry that such responsibility is impossible: being responsible for a state of affairs X requires a kind of control over the obtaining of X, and subjects appear to lack the requisite sort of control when it comes to our doxastic attitudes (beliefs and credences).

Rik Peels' ambitious and thoughtful new book, *Responsible Belief* [Peels (2017)], focuses primarily on the latter question. (While he does address the former, he does so mainly in an appendix.) His main thesis is that we are responsible for a variety of actions that we perform, as well as the omissions, in the course of forming and sustaining belief. In arguing for this Peels considers the range of alternative accounts of doxastic responsibility. The result is a wide-ranging book that I would enthusiastically recommend to anyone with an interest in the question of doxastic responsibility: this book is crisply argued, is written in a clear way that employs a minimum of jargon, engages with the vast extant literature on agential responsibility, and expands the focus of discussion in several ways (to include such topics as luck and excuses, as these bear on doxastic responsibility). It also makes several important contributions to the existing literature; these I will try to highlight in what follows.

As I say, Peels' interest is in doxastic responsibility: he wants to know when we are properly held responsible for believing as we do. He fixes the subject-matter by appeal to an appraisal conception of responsibility: one is responsible for X when it is appropriate for a fully-informed person to regard one's role in bringing about X as a proper target of the (normative) reactive attitudes – which is to say, one can be properly praised or blamed for it, or can be deserving of an attitude of 'neutral appraisal' etc. [p. 14]. The question Peels seeks to answer is: when is one in this position with respect to one's beliefs?

His general approach is to see our doxastic responsibility as reflecting our capacity to "influence" our beliefs, that is, "to do or refrain from doing certain things that make a difference to what we believe" [p. 9]. This *influence-based* account is meant to contrast with another familiar class of accounts of doxastic responsibility, according to which one is responsible for one's beliefs in virtue of exercising (direct or indirect) *control* over one's beliefs. Different control-based accounts emphasize different sorts of control. But for each of the relevant types of control, Peels argues that we lack such control over belief-formation; and so, his account grounds doxastic

responsibility in the influence we have over the acts and omissions that lead up to the formation of belief. With this as the basis of his account of doxastic responsibility, Peels goes on to argue that what provides the evaluative standard — the standard by which to assess whether a belief for which one is responsible was formed in a proper way — are our intellectual obligations. These are obligations to carry out certain belief-influencing actions, whose satisfaction makes a difference to what we (come to) believe. The obligations themselves make demands on how we exert control over such things as the belief-forming mechanisms we employ, the ways in which we go about acquiring evidence (and the conditions under which we do so), and the intellectual virtues we instill in ourselves (as well as the vices we refrain from instilling).

The result of Peels' reflections is an analysis of the conditions on doxastic responsibility, as well as an account of the conditions under which one's belief was formed in a responsible fashion. According to the account on offer, one is *doxastically responsible* (or responsible for a belief) when one had control over belief-influencing factors bearing on one's belief that *p*, where this includes having had the capacity to fulfill the various intellectual obligations bearing on the formation and sustainment of that belief. When this is so, one is a proper target of normative assessment *qua* believer. A belief for which one is doxastically responsible was formed in a responsible way, and so counts as a *responsible belief*, when for each of the obligations one had in connection with the belief, either one succeeded in fulfilling it or else one had an excuse for not doing so [p. 184]. In a slogan: responsible belief is blameless belief for which one is responsible [p. 11]. (In an appendix Peels makes a case for thinking that this notion of *responsible belief* is very close to the notion of *epistemically justified belief*; it is here that Peels is closest to addressing the question concerning epistemic responsibility.)

II

I want to begin by highlighting what I regard as some of the virtues of Peels' account.

First, I am very much taken with one of the ways Peels' view expands the domain of doxastic responsibility, to include such things as the ways we go about inquiring, the way we decide when to collect more evidence, and so forth [pp. 100-101]. While this idea is a traditional one, it has largely been abandoned by recent theories of doxastic responsibility. Most popular accounts place limits on the materials that are considered relevant to assessments of doxastic responsibility, so that these materials include only

the evidence or reasons which the subject currently has in her possession. On such views, doxastic responsibility is understood in terms of the sort of control we have over our doxastic responses to our reasons or evidence, and responsible belief is a matter of properly responding to one's reasons or evidence. Here there is no scope for the idea that one might fail to have all of the evidence one ought to have – and hence no scope for the idea that if one fails to have evidence one ought to have, then one's response to the evidence one does have might not settle whether one's belief is responsible. In this context, I think Peels is on to something important in construing responsible belief in terms of one's "intellectual obligations;" and I also think he is on to something important when he recognizes that the intellectual obligations one has are often contingent – the result of our *professions*, of the *roles* we play for others, or of the *tasks* we face [pp. 100-101]. While Peels is not the only theorist to emphasize such things [see e.g. McCormick (2015)], this is a welcome antidote to the highly individualistic alternatives offered by most other accounts of doxastic responsibility.

Second, Peels' book makes an important contribution to our understanding of doxastic responsibility by offering an account of doxastic excuses. He countenances two fundamental types of excuse: force and ignorance [p. 9]. (He argues that when luck appears to excuse, luck's role as an excuse can ultimately be reduced to one of these two more fundamental types.) Peels' focus on excuses, as well as his account of force and ignorance as excuses, breaks new ground for discussions of doxastic responsibility. His defense of force as an excuse leads him to defend the doxastic analogue of a 'could have done otherwise' condition. Although I for one remained unconvinced, his novel arguments on this score will command attention. But I was particularly taken by his exploration of ignorance as a candidate doxastic excuse. While ignorance as an excuse has received sustained attention in the literature on moral responsibility, to the best of my knowledge this is the first discussion of this topic in connection with doxastic responsibility. Peels argues that if it is to be a candidate for excusing one from doxastic responsibility, one's ignorance must concern either (i) one's intellectual obligations, (ii) one's ability to perform the acts which these obligations require, or else (iii) the likely consequences of one's current acts on one's knowledge of either (a) one's future intellectual obligations or (b) one's ability to perform future acts required of one by these obligations. He also distinguishes between partial and full excuses. I think it is fair to say that this is one of the more important contributions of this book: as Peels himself notes, doxastic excuses are a topic that has been virtually unexplored in the literature on doxastic responsibility.

Third and relatedly, I am deeply impressed with how Peels proposes to address a prominent worry for any view of responsibility (whether moral or doxastic) on which ignorance can excuse. If ignorance is to excuse, one must not be culpable for being in that state of ignorance: if one was willfully ignorant, for example, then one is blameworthy for one's ignorance, and so one is not excused from the relevant sort of responsibility. Now a worry that has arisen in the literature on *moral* responsibility arises from the thought that it is not appropriate to blame someone for doing something she blamelessly regarded as correct (or anyway as not incorrect). This broadly "subjective" constraint on the conditions for blameworthiness [defended by e.g. Rosen (2002), (2004)] suggests a general point about irresponsible action: if it is to count as irresponsible, an act must always be the result of weakness of the will, that is, of acting against what one knows or has undefeated reason to believe is against one's moral obligations. For insofar as weakness of the will is not in play, then it seems that one's acts were done out of blameless ignorance. This is worrisome because it is plausible to suppose that cases of weakness of the will are rare – with the result that allegedly irresponsible actions will typically be excused (by ignorance).¹ As Peels notes, a similar worry arises in connection with allegedly irresponsible belief.

Peels' response to the doxastic analogue of this problem strikes me as worth highlighting. Two points he makes are noteworthy.

First, he notes that even if wide-eyed akrasia is a rare phenomenon, not all cases of culpable action (which lead to irresponsible belief) need be based on akrasia. In particular, one might be faulted for not calling to mind a *dormant* or *tacit* belief one had [p. 194]. Here a case owed to Angela Smith (2005) offers a lovely illustration: you might be blamed for forgetting your grandmother's birthday, not out of akrasia – that is, not because you knew about it and willfully neglected to call her – but because you did not bring your knowledge of the date of her birthday to mind on the day itself. Peels' point is that the same holds for one's doxastic responsibilities: one might fail to do as one's intellectual obligations require out of a failure to bring to mind some piece of knowledge one already has. Such cases aren't cases of akrasia – at any rate, they are not cases of acting against *what one currently recognizes to be* one's better judgment. Interestingly, they do not seem to count as cases of ignorance either, since one (tacitly) truly believed the relevant proposition.

But Peels makes a second point against the worry that arises when ignorance is regarded as an excuse. He argues that when it comes to belief, cases of weakness of the will are not rare at all. Here his point strikes me

as both novel and insightful: although it is true for a good many of our actions, and certainly for our most morally important actions, that we can foresee the likely effects of acting in certain ways, the same point is not true for our belief-influencing actions. Peels explains,

We usually do not foresee which particular beliefs will issue from them and which actions we will perform on the basis of those beliefs. ... We know that we run a certain risk, but since we do not foresee the precise consequences, we are more likely to succumb to the temptation of violating the obligation in question, despite our belief that we should not [p. 193].

If this is correct, then akrasia is not uncommon in cases of belief-influencing actions, and we can reject the idea that most or all ignorance in these cases is blameless.

III

Still, I have some worries about the core proposals – on the accounts Peels offers of doxastic responsibility and responsible belief.

First, I worry that on at least one important dimension Peels' account does less well than he imagines in its competition against reason-responsiveness views of doxastic responsibility.

To be sure, Peels is not without arguments favoring his view as against reasons-responsiveness views. According to the latter, which have been made prominent by Pamela Hieronymi (2005), (2006), (2008), doxastic responsibility for belief is primarily a matter of one's capacity to be *responsive to one's (epistemic) reasons*. Peels has two main criticisms of such views, when they are offered as accounts of doxastic responsibility. First, he argues that a subject whose beliefs are responsive to her epistemic reasons but who is such that *she has no influence on belief-formation at all* is a subject that bears no doxastic responsibility for her beliefs [p. 75]. This suggests that what grounds our doxastic responsibility for belief is our influence on our belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes. Second, Peels argues that, while many authors [e.g. McHugh (2014)] offer an analogy between responsibility for intentions and responsibility for belief, this analogy breaks down. The alleged analogy was meant to highlight the following: in the very same way that the lack of intentional control over our intentions does not impugn the responsibility we bear for forming the intentions we do, so too the lack of intentional control over our beliefs does not impugn the responsibility we bear for forming the beliefs we do. Peels responds by noting that our beliefs are unlike our intentions in that the

latter (but not the former) are the subject's responsibility in virtue of being either *the exercise* or *the products of the subject's uncoerced will* [pp. 78-79].

At the same time, it is worthwhile noting that the reasons-responsiveness account appears to have at least two related advantages over Peels' account. (As we will see, these advantages will make the reasons-responsiveness account more attractive to anyone who hopes to use the notion of responsible belief in an account of justified belief and knowledge.) The two advantages are these. First, on the reasons-responsiveness account but not on Peels' account, what the subject is directly responsible for is *the belief itself*.² Second, there is a way in which the reasons-responsiveness account, but not Peels' account, can maintain an intimate connection between the verdict that a belief was formed in a responsible fashion – the verdict that it is a *responsible belief* – and the verdict that the belief was justified. (Below I will give reasons for thinking that this is a connection we should want to preserve.) My point here, that Peels' account cannot preserve this connection, may not be obvious; after all, Peels himself argues in an appendix that “something very close to responsible belief may well be identical to epistemically justified belief” [pp. 237, 250]. But I believe that if what we are interested in is doxastic justification, his account faces a difficulty not faced by the reasons-responsiveness account.

I can bring this out by illustration. Let us use ‘belief-relevant course of action’ to designate any course of action that involves belief-influencing factors of the sort Peels describes, and let us designate the situation in which subject S follows belief-relevant course of action A in arriving at the belief that p as ‘S(A, p).’ Now consider the case of Susie, who is a model believer in the following sense: she reliably and scrupulously fulfills all of the intellectual obligations she encounters, acquiring the evidence she ought to have, using only approved belief-forming processes, doing everything in her power to cultivate epistemic virtues and to extirpate epistemic vices, and so forth. Unhappily for her, however, there is a glitch in her doxastic system so that her epistemic efforts are for naught. For most ordinary subjects S in Susie's position, if they engaged in belief-relevant course of action A, the result would be S(A, p). However, given the glitch in Susie's cognitive system, for her we have Susie(A, q) (where q is logically independent of p). There is simply a disconnect between her epistemic efforts and the beliefs she forms, in that (unbeknownst to her) the belief she acquires when she engages in A – the belief that q – simply does not conform to the evidence she gets when she engages in A. But the glitch is worse still: also unbeknownst to her, there is a belief-relevant course of action A* such that, while she herself would have regarded engaging in A*

as epistemically irresponsible, had she done so the glitch would ensure that she would have acquired excellent evidence that p , and so would have come to believe that p . Thus we have Susie(A^* , p). And engaging in A^* is something that is within her control. Finally, Susie herself is (blamelessly) unaware of her cognitive glitch, and so is unaware of the disconnect between her epistemic efforts and the resulting beliefs. Consequently, she acts in ways she blamelessly deems responsible, with the result that (unknownst to her) she forms beliefs that are systematically out of whack with her evidence. (To ensure that none of this is apparent to Susie herself and that her ignorance is blameless, we can imagine that an evil demon arranges things so that she takes no note of any of this; everything seems normal to her.) How will Peels' account deal with this case?

Susie satisfies Peels' condition for having influence on her belief. Here is Peels' analysis:

S has *influence* on X-ing iff there is some action or series of actions Z such that

- (i) S has control over Z-ing,
- (ii) if S Z-s, S will X, and if S does not Z, S will \sim X,
- (iii) S cannot X intentionally [p. 90; italics in the original].

I submit that (i) Susie has control over whether she engages in A^* ; (ii) if she engages in A^* , she will believe that p , but if she does not engage in A^* (say, because she engages in A), she will not believe that p ; and (iii) she cannot believe that p intentionally. The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for her belief that q , and so on for any of her beliefs. Accordingly, Peels' view must construe Susie as doxastically responsible for her beliefs. To be sure, Susie is ignorant of, and in any case has no control over, the glitch in her cognitive system. But, as Peels himself acknowledges, neither do ordinary believers have control over the transition that eventuates in the actual formation of their belief – what he calls 'synchronic control' over belief [p. 138]. This is why Peels opts for an *influence*-oriented approach to doxastic responsibility, according to which what grounds our responsibility for our beliefs is the actions we take or don't take on the way to belief-formation and belief-sustainment [p. 87].

Given that Peels' account construes Susie as doxastically responsible for her beliefs, we can ask: are her beliefs *responsible* ones? Recall that Peels' account of responsible belief construes it as *blameless* belief [p. 43]. And consider that Susie is not lazy, has excellent motives, aims to believe only what is true, performs what she blamelessly regards as her intellectual ob-

ligations, and so forth. It is true that Susie's beliefs are (from our perspective) haphazardly formed. Still, I submit that Peels' view must regard her as forming *responsible beliefs*. After all, she satisfies the condition on being doxastically responsible for her beliefs, *and* each of her intellectual obligations are such that either she has fulfilled it or she is excused, through force or non-culpable ignorance, for not having fulfilled it. But surely – surely! – this is not a notion of responsible belief that has a significant role to play in a theory of epistemic justification or knowledge. At a minimum, it isn't a notion that is happily *identified* with epistemically justified belief.

I take two lessons from this. First, the reasons-responsiveness approach to doxastic responsibility appears to be in a superior position on this score. For one thing, it is open to the proponent of the reasons-responsiveness approach to deny that Susie is doxastically responsible in the first place: after all, it is questionable whether she has the capacity to respond to her reasons. But even if we insist that she is doxastically responsible (because she has this capacity), the reasons-responsiveness account will not yield the 'responsible belief' verdict: whether or not she has the capacity to do so, Susie's beliefs are formed in ways that are *not* properly responsive to her epistemic reasons. But there is another, more fundamental point to be made on behalf of the reasons-responsiveness view. Even supposing Peels is right to think that doxastic responsibility involves having control over factors that influence belief, mere influence is not sufficient: we want *the right sort* of influence, *effective* influence (as it were). Unless the connection between (i) what one does to influence one's belief and (ii) what one comes to believe *is the sort of connection for which one can be held responsible*, one's control over what one does on the way to forming and sustaining belief is not going to ground one's responsibility for one's beliefs.

I move now to a second, related worry I have concerning Peels' account. I worry that Peels' analysis of what it is to have an intellectual obligation yields deeply counterintuitive results. Here is Peels' analysis of having an intellectual obligation:

Some person S has an intellectual obligation to Z iff (i) S has control over Z-ing, (ii) whether or not S Z-s will make a difference to S's beliefs, and (iii) \sim Z-ing is objectively or subjectively bad in that it leads to or maintains beliefs that are objectively or subjectively bad [p. 99].

Given this analysis, Susie has intellectual obligations which are impossible to satisfy. Consider first what Susie's intellectual obligations are, according to this analysis. Given that analysis, there are cases in which she is under

an obligation to conform in her belief-influencing behaviors to those behaviors she (non-culpably) regards as enhancing the truth-conduciveness of her beliefs. As an example, consider the belief-influencing course of action A, which Susie non-culpably regards as enhancing the truth-conduciveness of her beliefs. Susie has control over engaging in A (satisfying (i)); engaging in A will make a difference to what she believes (satisfying (ii)); and *not* engaging in A is (objectively good but) *subjectively* bad in that it leads to or maintains beliefs that are subjectively bad (satisfying (iii)). Nor is this the only obligation she has. Consider the obligation to engage in the series of acts that (while she herself would have regarded these acts as *truth-infirming*) would have resulted in beliefs that conformed to the evidence she then would have. As an example, consider the belief-influencing course of action A*, which Susie non-culpably regards as infirming the truth-conduciveness of her beliefs. She has control over engaging in A* (satisfying (i)); engaging in A* will make a difference to what she believes (satisfying (ii)); and *not* engaging in A* is (subjectively good but) *objectively* bad in that (given her cognitive glitch) it leads to or maintains beliefs that are objectively bad (satisfying (iii)). So, it would seem that on Peels' view she has both sets of obligations. But notice that she cannot satisfy either set: given her cognitive glitch, satisfying the obligation that would render her beliefs subjectively good would result in beliefs that are objectively bad, while satisfying the obligation that would render her beliefs objectively good would result in beliefs that are subjectively bad!

Peels might respond by saying that she has both the subjective and the objective obligation just noted, but she is excused for violating the objective obligation by her non-culpable ignorance of having that obligation. If so, she meets her subjective obligation and violates her objective obligation due to non-culpable ignorance and, thus, believes responsibly.³

I think two things can be said in response.

First, I think this response only relocates the problem but does not solve it. Anyone who has any sympathy for the idea that we have intellectual obligations will want a theory of such obligations to recognize the possibility of excuses: there are some cases in which one does not succeed in fulfilling one's obligations but where one's violation is excused. It is a virtue of Peels' account that it recognizes this and offers an account of the conditions under which one is excused. But now the worry is that the combination of (i) his analysis of intellectual obligations together with (ii) his account of the conditions on excuses yield implausible verdicts. We might not blanch at the idea that there can be subjects whose violations are often excused; for example, we can make sense of the idea that there

are subjects whose doxastic lives reflect some sort of psychological compulsion not under their control. But it should strike us as peculiar indeed if one's account of intellectual obligations and excuses implies that there can be subjects of whom it is true both that (i) they are subject to intellectual obligations, and yet (ii) it is in principle impossible for them to satisfy any of those obligations, as the obligations themselves systematically make conflicting demands of them. Such an account cannot be happily defended on the grounds that, after all, such subjects are excused from fulfilling their obligations; the question is whether it is right to see them as even having such obligations in the first place.

Second, I note that the response above, according to which Susie has the various intellectual obligations but she is excused from satisfying the objective ones due to ignorance, jeopardizes the epistemic significance of the resulting notion of responsible belief. As I mentioned above, Peels' appendix aims to defend the claim that "something very close to responsible belief may well be identical to epistemically justified belief" [pp. 237, 250]. But if the relevant notion of responsible belief is one that extends to include beliefs formed in blameless violation of one's intellectual obligations, such an account would face all of the traditional challenges facing deontological conceptions of justification. What is more, if justified belief is supposed to be belief enjoying some non-negligible amount of objective epistemic support, the case of Susie, in which she is excused from all of her objective intellectual obligations, suggests that Peels' notion of responsible belief is not "very close" to something that should be identified with justified belief. Rather, it would seem that Peels' notion of responsible belief inherits all of the challenges associated with highly internalist and deontological accounts of justification. His account may be no *worse* off than others; but this is cold comfort for an account that had been advertised as offering us greater prospects for resuscitating deontological accounts of epistemic justification [p. 238].

*Department of Philosophy
Northwestern University
Kresge 3512, 1880 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208 USA
E-mail: s-goldberg@northwestern.edu*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank Rik Peels for his very thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and Carry Osborne for discussions of this and related material.

NOTES

¹ This has been emphasized in connection with moral responsibility by such thinkers as James Montmarquet, Michael Zimmerman, Gideon Rosen, William Fitzpatrick, and Neil Levy.

² On Peels' account, the subject is 'originally' responsible for the actions she took, or failed to take, in influencing her belief-forming and belief-maintaining processes, and she is only 'derivatively' responsible for her beliefs. Below I will argue that this aspect of his view gets him into some trouble.

³ I thank Rik Peels for noting the availability of this response (in private communication).

REFERENCES

- HIERONYMI, P. (2005), "The Wrong Kind of Reason"; *Journal of Philosophy* 102: 9, pp. 437-57.
 — (2006); "Controlling Attitudes"; *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 87: 1, pp. 45-74.
 — (2008), "Responsibility for Believing"; *Synthese* 161: 3, pp. 357-73.
 MCCORMICK, M. (2015), *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*; New York, Routledge.
 MCHUGH, C. (2014), "Exercising Doxastic Freedom"; *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88: 1, pp.1-37.
 PEELS, R. (2017), *Responsible Belief. A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*; Oxford, Oxford University Press.
 ROSEN, G. (2002), "Culpability and Ignorance"; *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103(1), pp. 61-84.
 — (2004), "Skepticism About Moral Responsibility"; *Philosophical Perspectives*, 18, pp. 295-313.
 SMITH, A. (2005), "Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life"; *Ethics*, 115, pp. 236-271.