

Owens on Belief and Control

In his *Reason Without Freedom*,¹ David Owens offers an intriguing alternative to traditional conceptions of epistemic norms, and their relation to responsibility. The traditional debate around voluntarism and responsibility for believing, Owens argues, has paralleled the debate in ethics and action theory by centering on the notion of control. If one has control over one's beliefs, meaning that one has the direct ability to bring them in line with internalized epistemic norms, then one is responsible for them. However, if one does not have control over one's beliefs, then attributing responsibility is nonsensical. This intuitive dichotomy, Owens claims, is false; we need not concede that simply because we lack direct control over our beliefs that we must abandon our notions of epistemic responsibility. Owens argues instead that we can still plausibly understand ourselves as responsible for our beliefs, despite our lack of direct control over them. However, in order to motivate his alternative notion of responsibility, Owens must show how the traditional conception of control applied to belief is flawed. It is Owens' argument on this topic which is the focus of this paper. In what follows I will give a brief summary of the main aspects of Owens' argument against epistemic control, and then offer two responses defending the idea that we do have control over our beliefs.

Owens opens his work by locating the problematic notion of control in both historic and current philosophers, focused on the concept of reflection. Descartes and Locke both believed that reflection is critical to the epistemological enterprise; it is the mechanism through which we exercise control over our beliefs, through which we are able to bring them into line with

¹David Owens, *Reason Without Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 2000).

epistemic standards.² Reflection, then, is a key for both epistemic control and responsibility. Owens turns to the work of Christine Korsgaard for a recent picture of what this reflection might look like. For Korsgaard, reflection is the higher order activity which distinguishes humanity from other animals. Humans have the capacity to create a certain reflective distance between themselves and their desires and perceptions. From this reflective position, one can endorse these desires and perceptions as worthy of action or belief, respectively, or reject them. To make this decision, however, one cannot rely on the desires or perceptions alone. As Korsgaard says, “The reflective mind cannot settle for perception and desire, not just as such. It needs a reason. Otherwise, at least as long as it reflects, it cannot commit itself or go forward.”³ Reasons are the primary movers within the reflective space. If one finds the requisite reasons, and endorses a perception, the resulting belief is truly one’s own, a belief for which one can reasonably be held responsible.⁴

It is important to note that for Owens, the mechanism through which reflection or

² This general position is rooted in what Owens calls the juridical theory of responsibility. The name reflects the fact that “...in law, one is held responsible only for that over which one has control and, in this respect, the juridical theory seeks to assimilate all responsibility to legal responsibility.”

³ Owens, p. 10.

⁴ Owens makes a few important emendations to Korsgaard’s picture of deliberation. First, he argues, Korsgaard should not be seen as endorsing a radical intellectualism concerning belief. The most plausible conception of belief, Owens argues, is typically one where external facts cause certain states within the believing subject. A normal case of perception does not involve reflection upon my perceptual experience, endorsement of this experience as veridical based on my philosophical conviction in the general reliability of perception, and then belief. I simply see a tree and believe that it is there. The reflective power is thus best understood somewhat counterfactually, or as a capacity; I am responsible for those beliefs that I could have exercised this control over, even though it is obvious that on a large number of my beliefs I do not perform this kind of reflective endorsement, either in their formation or retrospectively.

Secondly, this picture should not be understood as endorsing a libertarian voluntarism in relation to belief. Korsgaard’s notion of deliberation is in line with compatibilism, as Owens says, “Korsgaard is trying to articulate a modest compatibilist notion of freedom, one which applies to both belief and action.” (p. 11) The function of reflection in determining belief is fully consistent with the contents of reflection being themselves determined by other states internal and external to the reflecting agent. While Owens will ultimately endorse this picture for action, he rejects it for belief, for reasons that will become clear shortly.

deliberation influences belief is judgment, rather than the will. Owens is concerned to avoid certain metaphysical baggage related to the will, not the least of which is the libertarian conception of freedom. More importantly, though, the picture of reflection or deliberation here lends itself to the idea of judgment. “Here,” he says, “reflection sounds like a form of judgment. To reflect on our perceptions and desires is to think about them, to make them the objects of cognition. Reflective judgment is a psychological state which refers to other psychological states, a state with a second-order content.”⁵ It appears, then, that judgment should not be understood here as a kind of activity. Owens seems to equate reflection both with judgment (a state) *and* thinking (an activity), but he is perhaps most plausibly read as meaning that reflection is the activity that leads us to the psychological state of reflective judgment. Judgment, then, is a stance that we take towards our desires or beliefs. It is not an act of judging, but the state we are in in relation to our desires/beliefs at the culmination of reflection.

Owens calls the content of these judgments *second-order content*, and refers to the content as psychological states. *Second-order content* is to be distinguished from *first-order content*, which for Owens refers to features of the world. These features of the world, as mentioned above, typically directly determine the contents of my beliefs. While I may have some bleed-over of freedom from the practical realm in that I can attend to one piece or set of evidence rather than another, once this choice is made, any freedom seems to evaporate. The evidence simply strikes me in a certain way, and beliefs are formed. Thus, any meaningful control, and thus any basis for responsibility, cannot be found at the level of first-order content.

Second-order content, then, refers not to the world, but to one's own psychological states,

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

to one's beliefs, perceptions, and evidence. Second-order judgment is about my beliefs, and whether they bear certain evidential relations to the belief or beliefs in question. On this conception of belief, it is my judgment, obtained through reflection, that ultimately determines whether or not I believe, or continue believing in a certain proposition. This is the aforementioned sense in which we may own our beliefs, the sense in which they are under our direct control through reflection. Insofar as we exercise such control over beliefs, or possess the capacity to do so, we can be held responsible for them.⁶ This conception clearly matches up with many of our pre-theoretic ideas about responsibility for beliefs. "You should have thought more about it," is a criticism frequently leveled against those whom we think had the time and ability to properly examine and understand the lack of evidence for their mistaken belief. On the other hand, as Owens notes,⁷ we would hardly fault someone who leaps out of the way when she perceives an oncoming truck, even if it turns out that the truck was a hologram or through some failure of her visual faculty she was in fact in no danger. This is because we recognize the immediate and involuntary nature of perceptual belief, and further recognize that the situation in question provided no possibility of reflection which might have led the individual to a different belief and a different decision.

II.

We have now articulated enough of the framework of this position to feel the force of Owens' criticism of it. Owens begins his criticism by examining more closely the notion of

⁶ This notion of control will most certainly be unsatisfying to libertarians on free will. Owens notes this (p. 11), as mentioned above, he is concerned only with satisfying a compatibilist notion of freedom and thus only a compatibilist notion of control.

⁷ Owens, p. 14.

reflective control outlined above. He argues that reflective control must involve two distinct aspects, one epistemic and the other motivational. The epistemic requirement for reflective control is that my judgment of what I should believe must accurately reflect my reasons for believing, my perceptions, other beliefs, and other evidence. This requirement simply falls out of the idea that reflective control is a form of rational control. If our reflection on our beliefs did not accurately reflect our reasons for believing, then our control of our beliefs could hardly be said to be epistemically rational.

The motivational requirement for reflective control is that the judgment resulting from our reflecting must be motivationally efficacious towards belief. Owens dubs this requirement “Reflective Motivation”, and characterizes it in the following way:

Reflective Motivation: If R is a prima facie reason to believe that p, reflection on R provides the rational subject with a motive to believe that p.

Owens goes on to say, “Reflective Motivation claims that reflection on prima facie reasons for a certain belief is a source of motivation for that belief; such reflection provides a subject with a way of exercising rational control over his beliefs.”⁸

In his criticism Owens focuses primarily on the motivational aspect of Reflective Motivation (RM), perhaps because it is more closely tied with the idea of control. Owens further analyses the concept of RM into two theses which jointly entail it:

Rational Motivation: If a rational subject is aware of something R which provides them with a reason for belief, it also provides them with a motive for belief.

Reflective Rationalization: If R provides this subject with a reason for belief, the judgment that they have reason R also provides them with a reason for belief.

⁸ Ibid, p. 20.

Rational Motivation boils down to the innocuous idea that a reason is a motivation for a rational agent, and indeed it is Reflective Rationalization (RR), and through it RM, that Owens ultimately rejects. Rejecting RM leads to a rejection of reflective control, and in the end to a rejection of any plausible method of grounding epistemic responsibility in control over our beliefs.

Owens offers both intuitive and theoretical arguments for his rejection of RM. At an intuitive level, he asks what reflection upon an evidence set for a belief formed through unconscious processes can possibly add to the motivation for that belief. The set of evidence is itself not more evidence for the belief, what then can it provide in the way of motivation? Nothing, according to Owens. Motivation towards belief, according to Owens, is provided only by evidence, as he explains further in his theoretical argument.

An important concept for Owens is operative in this discussion of evidence and reflection. In the type of case just envisioned, the believing subject is reflecting upon a belief formed through what Owens calls a “non-reflective awareness” of the evidence, epistemic norms, and other aspects relevant to belief. The idea of non-reflective awareness is rooted in the reality that many of our beliefs are formed without reflection, on the basis of sub- or unconscious processes that operate within us as cognizers. Perceptual beliefs are a common case of beliefs formed via non-reflective awareness, but many more complex beliefs are also formed in this way. While talking to a friend, I may without the benefit of reflection pick up on changes in his tone of voice, as well as variety of other non-verbal cues in his actions, and come to the belief that he is not being honest with me. So complex beliefs based on substantial evidence may also be formed without engaging in reflection, an important point, given Owens' ultimate contention that reflection itself cannot motivate belief.

Owens makes his technical case against RM by examining the related concepts of justification and knowledge. Turning first to justification, Owens examines two theses regarding what is relevant for justification: evidentialism and pragmatism. Evidentialism, Owens contends, may be congenial to RM, but unfortunately suffers from a fatal flaw. Evidentialism says that the only thing that matters for justification is evidence, but this cannot be true, because evidence itself can never recommend a belief to us,⁹ what is required is some standard of “sufficient evidence” which must be met. However, this standard of sufficient evidence must be determined by something other than the evidence. The primary candidates for this are what Owens unhelpfully chooses to call *pragmatic* concerns, i.e. issues relating to the cognitive limitations of the believer, the relative importance or unimportance of the issue in question, external limitations upon the possibility of inquiry, etc. *Pragmatic* issues are to be distinguished from *practical* considerations, which are part of the pragmatist thesis on justification. Pragmatism is also quite attractive for adherents of RM, because it brings belief closer in line with action, where Owens admits that reflection provides (practically) rational motivation. Pragmatism tells us that *practical* issues like the desirability of a certain belief are legitimate influences upon justification. Owens rejects this belief as obviously false; clearly the fact that it would make me very happy to believe that I am fabulously wealthy has nothing to do with whether this belief is justified.

Having rejected strong evidentialism and strong pragmatism, Owens opts for a moderate evidentialism. His thesis is that *pragmatic* considerations have a legitimate place in justification

⁹ Owens concedes that a case of conclusive evidence may rationally motivate belief purely in virtue of the evidence, but Owens argues correctly that the dearth of examples of conclusive evidence makes this largely irrelevant.

of beliefs, namely in helping us to establish what constitutes sufficient evidence in each case.

This admission of pragmatic elements, however, is no help to the case for RM. Owens argues:

Were Reflective Motivation correct, it would immediately follow that reflection on these pragmatic considerations is a source of rational motivation for belief. But can we really exercise reflective control over belief by thinking about such things? No...
...Ask yourself if it is raining; what comes to mind is evidence for and against rainfall – the sunshine outside versus the watery blobs on the window pane. You don't decide that it is raining after contemplating how little time you've got to decide, how much the issue matters, what the consequences of making up your mind are, and so forth.¹⁰

The intuitive idea is simply grasped. Evidence is what provides a rational motivation for belief, pragmatic factors, though they function legitimately as part of the justification of belief, can provide no such rational motivation. They are part of the reason that I believe in a given situation, but they do not have the ability to motivate belief. Since it is a condition of RM that reflecting on the reasons for belief itself is a source of motivation, then RM must be false. If RM is false, then we lack the reflective control traditionally thought necessary for responsibility for belief.

III.

It is important to remember that Owens' case for his own theory of responsibility is built upon the failure of this intuitive notion of reflective control to remain plausible under analysis. If reflective control fails to explain our control over our beliefs, then we are left with either rejecting the deeply ingrained idea that we are responsible for our beliefs, or pursuing an alternative thesis, such as Owens' contention that responsibility does not require control. But if we can show either that RM as Owens has construed it is unnecessary for epistemic responsibility, or that it is true, then Owens' case loses its main foothold. In this final section of

¹⁰Owens, p. 32.

the paper, I will attempt to prove *both* of these theses, first by arguing that RM as Owens articulates it is unnecessary for control, and then by arguing that we nevertheless may plausibly believe that we possess reflective control over beliefs in the manner specified by RM.

The first point is best made by considering Owens' intuitive argument against RM. As he argues, what motivation could reflecting upon my reasons for belief possibly give me, beyond the motivation that I already have through a non-reflective awareness of certain facts? Even if we concede that the answer is none (something we will question shortly), it is not clear that this undermines our control of belief at all. RM is predicated on a certain conception of control as established by the ability of reflection to positively motivate belief. But why assume that this is the only or even the most plausible notion of control available to us?

For example, we might plausibly assume that reflection has a primarily negative or "executive" function in believing. Like a business executive, we normally delegate the function of rational belief formation to lower levels of cognition, in this case largely unreflective or subconscious cognitive processes, and only exercise actual influence in the case of malfunction. In these cases, we make through reflection the higher order judgment that we have misinterpreted the evidential weight of certain reasons, or failed to see certain connections, or something similar. When this happens, reflection exercises control over these beliefs by causing us to revise our confidence/estimation of our justification for a belief either upward or downward, or to reject the belief outright.

This conception of control is analogous to that of a spillway on a dam. The spillway may generally stay open, allowing water to pass through in normal circumstances, and occupying an essentially passive position. However, the passivity of the normal position of the spillway does

nothing to diminish its control over the water. This is seen the instant that circumstances dictate that the spillway be closed, shutting off the flow of water completely. The spillway clearly has control over the flow of the water, and is thus responsible for it in a straightforward sense, despite the fact that it lacks any positive power, for example, to make the water flow more quickly. The spillway is essentially dependent on gravity for the flow of water to begin and continue, and similarly reflection may be similarly dependent upon the cognitive mechanisms of Owens' non-reflective awareness to generate beliefs for consideration. This fact diminishes the control possessed by the spillway, and reflection, not at all.

Owens' defenders may object at this point, arguing that in our haste to pursue Owens' motivational requirement for reflective control, we have failed to satisfy his epistemic requirement. After all, this requirement says that in order for reflection to exercise rational control over belief, it must accurately reflect our reasons for believing. The type of case mentioned above involves some kind of cognitive malfunction, and this may seem to mean that our reflection is not accurately representing our reasons for belief.

However, a close examination of both the epistemic requirement and the type of example being presented here will show otherwise. The epistemic requirement for reflective control simply demands that our reflection accurately reflect our reasons for believing in the first place. It makes no stipulation that our reasons are given the appropriate evidential weight by the non-reflective processes that may initially form our belief. And is this not often precisely what we determine through reflection? For example, in perusing a normally reliable paper one day I come across a picture of an acquaintance of mine being led away from a grisly murder scene, in handcuffs and covered with blood. I naturally and understandably react with revulsion and horror, and

immediately and unreflectively form the deep conviction that this person is a murderer. Later though, when reflecting upon this belief, I come to see that this one piece of evidence, even though found in a reliable newspaper, is not sufficient to support the strong belief that I've formed. This process need not involve my coming across any new evidence regarding the belief in question, but may simply be the result of my reflective assessment of the evidential relations between my putative evidence and the belief in question. This reflective judgment may lead me to give up my belief, or perhaps simply to suspend it, and perhaps to engage in further inquiry on the matter.

The epistemic requirement for reflective control may ensure that we know our reasons, but it makes no guarantee that my non-reflective belief formation processes accurately reflect appropriate evidential relations between pieces of evidence in my possession. Assessing the true nature of these relations is one of the critical functions of reflection, both to disabuse us of unsupported beliefs, and confirm us in those that are well-supported by evidence. And is this not often exactly what reflection allows us to do, to correct the sometimes faulty reasoning that goes on beneath the surface of our cognitive lives? This reassessment may involve the recognition of new, previously unnoticed evidence, or of unnoticed evidential relations between evidence already recognized. But this need not be the case, as our example shows, the entire process may simply involve a reflective judgment that the evidence in question does not provide the support that was non-reflectively given to a particular belief.¹¹

¹¹ This focus on cases involving only the evidence already in question is intended to head off an additional objection. Someone might otherwise argue that reflection of this sort is not really reflection as Owens meant it, that when I discover previously unnoticed evidence in the course of reflection that this is in fact a form of first-order inquiry, not an example of higher-order reflection. While this objection may be questionable, we have avoided it

Having established that RM is not the only plausible mechanism of reflective control over belief, we still might wonder about Owens' criticisms of it. Owens' contention is that neither reflection on our evidence nor reflection on the pragmatic factors involved in belief can provide rational motivation for belief. Regarding reflection on evidence, our argument just above points us towards a response to Owens. We have established convincingly that reflection can cause us to reassess the significance of an evidence set for a given belief, motivating us to suspend or even give up the belief in question. But if this is the case, then why could the opposite not occur? Our experience doesn't offer up as many ready examples of this type of case, but it certainly is possible that I might, upon reflection, realize that the case made by my evidence is stronger than I had realized prior to reflection. In this case, then, reflection would function as a rational motivation for belief, over and above the motivation established by our non-reflective awareness of the evidence. The fact that these cases involve what might be plausibly called irrationality on the part of the agent (though not a culpable case of irrationality, given the involuntary nature of these non-reflective processes) is no worry for our argument, but instead is simply an acknowledgment that one of the primary functions of reflection is to correct such failures in cognitive processes.

The case for motivation based on pragmatic considerations is perhaps not quite as straightforward, but nevertheless can be made. It is true that pragmatic considerations are not what we think of when attempting to motivate belief in ourselves. However, it does not follow

altogether by sticking with examples which don't involve the introduction of new evidence. Further, it is clear that the simple fact that our examples involve deliberation do not disqualify them from engaging with Owens' position. As we noted early in this paper, Owens clearly thinks of reflection on a deliberative model, as an activity of thinking occurring through time. Reflective judgment may not be an activity, but it is the culmination of reflection, not reflection itself.

from this that they can have no role in motivating belief. Belief is usually understood as a propositional attitude, a stance that a believer takes towards a certain proposition. Owens' comments on this issue seem to fit this standard model. On this model, it is appropriate to think of belief as a state to be reached by crossing a certain threshold, or overcoming a certain barrier posed by epistemic norms. When we cross the threshold, belief is what results. The analogy of someone trying to climb over a wall is apt here. Evidence functions on this model to give us a boost up, to bring us closer to the top of the wall. But if, as Owens argues, pragmatic factors have a function in belief, it is not the same function as evidence. Using our analogy, pragmatic considerations do not raise up towards the top of the wall, they do not give us a psychological and justificatory boost. Instead, pragmatic considerations affect the height of the wall itself. If the matter in question is not particularly important, then the pragmatic considerations function to lower the wall, the barrier to belief, substantially. But if this is so, then "motivation" in this context should not be understood in such a straightforwardly psychological manner. Rather, concerning pragmatic factors "motivation" should be understood in the sense that they move us toward belief, by reducing the barrier imposed by our epistemic norms.

Some of Owens' comments on this matter will help to further elucidate the distinction.

Owens remarks:

Reflective Motivation implies that, if pragmatic considerations provide reasons for belief in p, reflection on these considerations must be capable of convincing us of p's truth, at least in so far as we are rational. Obviously, we can't make explicit everything relevant to the justification of belief or action. But to the extent that our reasons can be made explicit, Reflective Motivation guarantees that reflection on them can assuage doubt, or persuade us to believe and act.¹²

¹²Ibid., p. 34.

Owens says two separate things here, first that RM implies that pragmatic considerations can convince us of the truth of a proposition, and second that they can persuade us to believe and act. Owens seems to think that these properties of pragmatic considerations under RM are equivalent, but this is false. We agree that pragmatic considerations cannot convince us of the truth of a proposition, only evidence, which bears directly on the truth or falsity of propositions, can do that. However, while belief is aimed at the truth, not everything that has bearing on whether or not one believes bears directly on the truth of the proposition in question. This is the implication of conceding (as one should) that pragmatic considerations bear on belief. As my earlier analogy makes clear, movement towards belief can occur in two different ways. Further evidence can build up one's platform, drawing one closer to clearing the wall to belief. But pragmatic considerations can also rationally influence belief, by lowering the barrier to belief based on contextual factors, limitations of the believing subject, etc. And in this way, pragmatic considerations do help "to persuade us to believe and act" and, insofar as they do this, they function as rational motivations to belief.

Owens actually admits that reflection on pragmatic considerations sometimes influence our beliefs, albeit in a negative and roundabout way. "We sometimes engage in internal ratiocination," he says, "about whether we ought to believe what we do, confident that such ratiocination may have some effect on us. And this internal ratiocination often has a pragmatic aspect ('I have not thought enough about this... I made up my mind too quickly')." ¹³ Owens even goes so far to admit that our judgment may affect our beliefs, but only concedes that it may cause us to engage in further "first-order inquiry", which ultimately causes us to give up our belief.

¹³Ibid.

If Owens is conceding that reflection on pragmatics can cause this roundabout effect, then why not also allow for more direct influence on belief? For Owens, the answer is the failure of RM. Having provided a plausible account of how RM is possible, we need abide by no such limitations. A reflection like that which Owens notes above clearly could influence an individual to suspend or even perhaps to reject her belief. And, as we saw in the case of reflection on evidence, it is just as plausible to think of reflection on pragmatic considerations influencing a subject to move towards belief. A reflection that “I’ve reasoned on this matter quite a bit, especially considering that nothing of great consequence hangs on it” could conceivably move a subject to belief, by achieving recognition of the lower requirements of epistemic norms in this instance, and the true relation of her evidence to these norms. If this is true, however, then Owens’ rejection of RM is mistaken. His claim that this reflection *can* cause further inquiry is irrelevant. The question is whether one can give an account of rational motivation through reflection, not whether every instance of reflection is of this type. We have provided just such account.

In summary, we have offered a critique of Owens’ argument against Reflective Motivation and control over belief. The ultimate outcome of this argument is to undermine Owens’ case for epistemic responsibility apart from the notion of control, by rendering the notion superfluous. Owens’ case is built in large part on the purported absence of a plausible model for grounding responsibility in control. Owens articulates an attractive conception of rational control and epistemic responsibility with the intention of invalidating it, but with the failure of his arguments against this model there is little reason to prefer his alternative.